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Aunt Eliza's Bitter Dose.

By Elizabeth Price.

It was a pleasant place, with warm rugs, sleepy hollow chairs, a low table piled with magazines, sunny windows and dainty curtains. An ideal room for real home comfort. Yet the lady sitting at her sewing had a careworn face, and the girl who entered dressed for the street wore a discontented line between her eyes. "Adele, if it will not be inconvenient I wish you'd match this sample for me at Taylor's," the mother said. "I can not finish Amy's dress without more of the trimming, and I am very anxious to get it done for her this week."

The discontented line deepened. "Of course I'll get it, mamma, if you need it; but as for convenience, it will be very much out of my way. I was not going to Taylor's, and I already have as many errands to do as I can accomplish before the hour for my French lesson."

"Never mind, then, daughter. Perhaps I can go down town myself after a while."

"In this cold, and for only one item. No, indeed. Give me the sample, and I'll manage it somehow. If I am late for my lesson I'll be the only loser," and the little silk fragment was dropped into the handsome purse. Mrs. Townsend said "Thank you," but a faint sigh accompanied the words, and she turned to Aunt Eliza's cheery presence with a distinct sense of relief.

"Adele is so much occupied, Aunt," she said, half apologetically. "I don't know of another girl so busy, and she is so methodical that it annoys her a little sometimes to have her plans disturbed."

"So I see," was Aunt Eliza's reply, as she watched the little, graceful figure of her great-niece passing out of sight.

Aunt Eliza was a newcomer to the Townsend home. Several years had passed since her last visit to her favorite nephew, but a frequent interchange of letters had kept her in touch with his family, and the children had been taught to regard her with great affection and respect. One week before this story opens, the day for a long promised visit had arrived, and with it the Auntie herself, old in years and weak in body, but sweet and wise and wholesome from the opening and mellowing processes of seven decades of life. Through the pleasant hours of that wintry afternoon the "Niece Mary" chatted cosily, enjoying every moment of the time, joined now and then by the children.

It was almost dusk when Adele returned. "I couldn't help being late, mamma," she explained, drawing her chair to the glowing grate. "I had no end to the trials and hindrances. By the way, Aunt Eliza, I bought a bunch of violets for you; but the clerk at Taylor's looked at them so wistfully I couldn't resist giving them to her, and I hadn't time to go back for more."

"Yes, mamma, I got your silk, but it cost me over an hour of my precious time. Taylor's were out of it, and I had to go clear down to Jones' before I could match it."

"One sorry you took so much trouble. You should have let it go," said the mother, gently.

"No, indeed, mamma, not when I knew you needed it. I'd have gone all over town but I'd have got it. But I had the satisfaction of letting the clerk at Taylor's know what I thought of such careless shopkeeping."

"How many irresponsible people there are in the world any way! A child came into Jones' for a dime's worth of something her mother wanted in a hurry, and after they had the goods cut and wrapped she discovered she had lost her money. She cried distressingly and said she would be dreadfully punished for it. Oh, yes, of course I paid the dime for her, but I gave her a good scolding for her heedlessness. I only hope she'll profit by it."

"Oh, Adele, I'm glad you've come!" and the door opened to admit, first a tumbled head and then a boyish figure with an armful of books. "I don't understand this algebra any more'n a rabbit, and I've waited but fourteen hours for you to show me about it," and Walter deposited his burden on the table with a bang.

"Dear me, Walter, I wonder if you ever will get old enough to study alone. There really is no sense in your depending on me as you do. You ought to be made to use your own mind."

"I do use it, Sister—all the mind I've got. Maybe it's overworked that ails it. I'm wearing it out," and Walter laughed mischievously.

"Not much danger of that, you indolent boy. You love your ease too well to overtax your mental powers. You'd rather let me do the work, while you reap the benefits," and Adele loosened her wrap and unpinned her hat.

"Don't bother your sister, Walter. She has been out all afternoon, and is tired. I'm sure you can get your lessons if you try hard enough," said Mrs. Townsend, looking worried.

"Oh, no, mamma. If he had got confused over his algebra he will never straighten it out alone, and will get zero marks at school tomorrow. I'll help you,

Walter; but I do hope that I'll some day see you able to study alone. Bring your problems here."

For the next half hour the room was silent except for Adele's explanations and Walter's questions. Then Mr. Townsend came home, and books were put away.

"How cosy this is," exclaimed the father, sinking contentedly into his comfortable chair. "No place like home, is there, wife? How are you tonight, Aunt Eliza? Adele, did you mend that rip in my dressing jacket today?"

"Yes, sir. It was more than a rip, however. The lining was badly worn, and had to have a new piece set in. It took me over an hour to fix it, and as that was all the leisure time I had today, I haven't read a word in the new book you brought home last night. Here it is."

"What, the book? Oh, no; my jacket. Very well done, daughter. I couldn't have patched it up better myself. You may read two hours tomorrow, to make up." And Mr. Townsend laughed cheerily as he slipped into the neatly-mended garment.

Adele did not smile. "I shall have no time tomorrow," she remarked. "I missed my French lesson today on account of mamma's shopping and Monsieur Le Graf told me I could make it up tomorrow, as he happens to have a little leisure. That, in addition to my other duties, will keep me busy all day."

"You can read this evening, then. Read aloud, and we will all enjoy it. I know aunt will be pleased. I remember her of old. Wouldn't you like it, wife?"

"Very much, if Adele isn't too weary. My eyes get so tired by night that I can scarcely use them after the lamps are lighted."

"No need for you to use them, Mary, with all these young eyes to act as substitutes. Is there, daughter?"

"Oh, no; of course not, father. Though I especially dislike to read aloud. I never seem able to get much out of a story that way," said Adele, knitting her brows annoyedly.

"Never mind, daughter. It doesn't matter in the least." This from the patient mother.

"Certainly I shall do it, mamma. Your sight must not be overtaxed," was the reply.

Mr. Townsend looked at his wife, then reached for her hand. "It will do her good, Mary. She'll soon learn to be interested. I wonder we haven't pressed her into such service much oftener. There is the supper bell. Let's go. This frosty air sharpens one's appetite."

"Adele made the dessert. How nice it looks!" said Mrs. Townsend a few moments later, pointing to the mould of gelatine quivering on the sideboard.

"Yes, Hannah insists that she can't do it as well as I. I told her plainly that such talk was nonsense, and that it was only lack of inclination on her part and not lack of ability," and Adele served salad with an air of having once done her duty, in plain speaking.

"Sister, will you curl my hair after supper?" asked Amy, presently. "I am going to Ada's party to stay till nine o'clock; and you fix so much nicer than nurse does."

"I suppose I can," was the rather ungracious reply. "It seems very strange, however, that nurse, who has had so much practice, can not make your hair presentable."

"Nurse can surely do it this time, Amy. Sister has so much to do." And Mrs. Townsend smiled reassuringly into the anxious face.

"Oh, no! I'll do it. It doesn't take long; but when people have servants, I think they should be required to do their own work, and ours are not. Aunt Eliza, it is a positive shame the way our hired help impose on their good-natured employers. I should never endure it if I were at the head of affairs."

"No, Adele; I am sure you would not," was the old lady's reply. "To me the servants seem models of faithfulness, but perhaps I am mistaken in them."

Through the long evening, Adele read aloud. The story was excellent, and the girl was equal to its demands, as her clear well-modulated voice fell pleasantly on the ears of her little audience. When at last the book was closed, Mr. Townsend looked rested and alert, and his wife's careworn expression had almost disappeared. "A first-class tale, wasn't it, Mary?" he said, heartily.

"Yes, indeed, and very well rendered. I don't know when I've had such a treat."

Adele yawned behind her hand. "I'm glad you both enjoyed it. That is more than I can say myself. Oh, I've no fault to find with the story; but, as I told you, it ruins a book for me to have to read it aloud. I think I'll bid you all good night now. I'm tired."

"By the way, Mary, I've a message for Judge Wells that must be given him tonight. I had almost forgotten it. If you and Aunt will excuse me, I'll go at once and attend to it. I'll not be out long," and Mr. Townsend speedily departed.

The ladies sat silent a while, watching the cheerful fire. Then Aunt Eliza spoke. "Is she always like this, Mary?"

"Like what, aunt? Who?"

"Adele. Is she always so disagreeable?"

"Why, aunt? I—do you find her so?"

"I assuredly do, Niece Mary. I have always heard so much of Adele's helpfulness and varied capabilities that I am totally unprepared for what I find to be the most prominent trait in her character."

"Oh! But, aunt, Adele has the kindest heart in the world; and as for helpfulness, I don't know how we should get on without her. She fills in the gaps in every department of our home life."

"I acknowledge that, my dear; and far be it from me to underestimate her real value. But she has acquired a habit which is destroying much of her usefulness and all of her charm. I knew as soon as I saw you, Niece Mary, that you had some kind of a thorn in the flesh; but I was surprised when I discovered that it was Adele. Why, Mary, it is enough to kill you, covering her rudeness, excusing her ungraciousness, shielding Andrew and the children from her sharpness, yet all the time trying to believe that all is as it should be."

Mrs. Townsend smiled wanly. "I didn't realize that I was displaying my burden so conspicuously. I have tried to shield Adele from reproof and criticism, and perhaps it was wrong, for I'm afraid her habit of sharp speech is growing upon her. But she is such a good child in so many ways. She does everything we ask of her, and does it well."

"So I see, my dear. She reminds me of the old-fashioned way of administering medicine, only that she reverses the usual order. Instead of wrapping her quinine in jelly, she coats the jelly with quinine; and however sweet the morsel, its taste is ruined to the unlucky recipient. You must forgive my plain speech, my dear. I love you and the child, and I have hesitated to express myself; but I feel it to be my duty, for your sake and hers."

"Just take today, for example; and today seems to me to be no exception to the rule. Your shopping, Walter's algebra, Andrew's mending, Amy's curls, Hannah's dessert, and the reading this evening; not to mention Taylor's clerk and Jones' disconsolate little customer. All these were promptly helped, but in each case the kind act carried a sting that spoiled its sweetness."

"This unhappy trait in an otherwise admirable character is injuring you all. It should be stopped, before the other children contract it. Pernicious habits are very contagious, Niece Mary, and more to be dreaded than smallpox. Adele complains over every duty, though fully intending to perform it thoroughly. Don't ignore it longer, my dear; but open her eyes to see the wrong, that she may correct it. Let her continue to fill her present place in her home—a helpful, interested daughter and sister—but fill it graciously and sweetly, and the entire atmosphere of the house would be changed."

Out from the darkened parlor adjoining the sitting room Adele glided noiselessly. She had come down for a forgotten book, and had heard Aunt Eliza's opening remark about herself. In all her nineteen years of life it had never occurred to her that she could be considered "disagreeable." She had prided herself on her ready performance of every duty, however distasteful, had honestly felt that her parents were to be congratulated on so faithful and capable an elder daughter. Therefore it is not surprising that she lingered, listening with a horrid fascination to the remainder of the conversation, quivering with anger, waiting eagerly for the mother's defense which did not come. Afterward, alone in her room, she faced the accusations, at first with bitter denial, but little by little the light began to dawn. Slowly she recalled the circumstances of the day that Aunt Eliza had mentioned. It was true that each act of helpfulness had been bestowed with a sharp word. It was queer that she hadn't remembered till now how faithful Hannah's face, glowing with the pleasure of paying her young mistress a compliment, had suddenly grown hard and grim under the severe reprimand; how the clerk at Taylor's—a frail young girl—had dimpled with pleasure over the violets, only to lay them aside with a gesture of despair at a threat to report to headquarters her inattention to the condition of her stock.

Mother's patient eyes, father's generous ignoring of her selfishness, Walter's and Amy's persistent loyalty in spite of many rebuffs; all these passed in accusing review before her, and she could not deny their charges.

The house was dark and quiet long before the battle was fought out. But at last she fell upon her knees and prayed for forgiveness for the past, and wisdom for the future from Him who giveth "liberally and upbraideth not."

Adele held an animated conversation with herself next morning as she dressed. "It isn't going to be enough to simply mend my ways," she told her reflection in the mirror. "There must be some attempt at reparation, though I'm afraid I'll never get caught up. First of all I've got to own to Aunt Eliza that I eavesdropped, and thank her for a dose that was quinine all through and hadn't an atom of jelly about it. Next, there is Hannah, and all the rest. I needn't discriminate, for it must be a wholesome process."