

Elizabeth's Story, 1848 (Secrets of the Manor)

By Adele Whitby

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Discover the chilling secrets surrounding Maggie O'Brien's disappearance from Chatswood Manor in the third book of an irresistibly entertaining historical fiction mystery series.

Elizabeth and Katherine Chatswood are on the verge of turning twelve years old, which means that the grandest birthday ball in all of England is just a few weeks away! Chatswood Manor is bustling with activity, but in the midst of all the excitement, an Irish refugee named Sean O'Brien shows up in search of his long lost wife Maggie, who was employed at Chatswood Manor many years ago. Mr. O'Brien is turned away by Chatswood's stern butler, but not before Elizabeth and Katherine hear his story. Through Mr. O'Brien they also find out about the potato famine in Ireland, and are shocked and saddened to hear that so many people are suffering in a place that's not that far away. The twins vow to not only help Mr. O'Brien find Maggie, but also to somehow help the people of Ireland.

But how are two young girls in a manor home in England going to help starving people in Ireland? After their papa tells them it's not their problem to worry about fixing, they have no choice but to come up with a very ambitious—and very top secret—plan. Meanwhile, as they investigate Maggie's disappearance, they uncover some startling clues, which lead them to discover even deeper mysteries hidden within Chatswood Manor.

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Elizabeth's Story, 1848 (Secrets of the Manor) By Adele Whitby Bibliography

- Rank: #704992 in Books
- Brand: Whitby Adele
- Published on: 2014-08-26
- Released on: 2014-08-26
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 7.63" h x .50" w x 5.13" l, .0 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 160 pages

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Editorial Review

About the Author
Adele Whitby wishes she lived in a grand manor home with hidden rooms and tucked-away nooks and crannies, but instead she lives in the next best thing—a condo in Florida with her husband and their two dogs, Molly and Mack. When she's not busy writing, you can usually find her reading and relaxing on the beach under a big umbrella. She loves getting lost in a good story, especially one set in a faraway place and time.

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Elizabeth's Story, 1848

I rolled over and stretched, enjoying the coziness of my silk down comforter. A housemaid had already been in to build up my fire, the gentle warmth it gave off welcome on these chilly June mornings. I could almost hear the house, Chatswood Manor, waking with me, ready to greet another day.

I knew that downstairs, servants were going about their morning routines, quietly bustling about, opening curtains, building fires, dusting, and cleaning. Our cook, Mrs. Fields, was no doubt scolding the kitchen maids to work more efficiently to whip eggs or slice bread for our breakfast, and Mr. Fellows, the butler, would be instructing the footmen on their tasks for the day before reading the newspaper and finishing his own breakfast in the servants' dining room. Mr. Fellows made a point of talking to Papa about the news of the day every morning when he served our meal in the family dining room.

Early morning was my favorite time of day. For a few moments every morning, when my mind was no longer asleep but not quite fully awake, I could almost forget that Mama had died just a few weeks ago.

But then, as always, I remembered. That now-familiar sinking feeling crept into my chest and settled in my heart. Next came the sting of tears behind my eyelids.

I sat up and reached for the silken bellpull that would call my lady's maid, Essie Bridges.

I promised myself that I would stop this, I thought, wiping my eyes. And more important, I promised Katherine. We made a vow to be strong for each other, and for Papa.

It was as if Katherine, my twin, could read my thoughts. At that moment, she walked through the dressing closet that connected our two bedchambers and leaned against the wall, a sleepy half smile on her face. Her eyes, too, had a trace of tears.

Katherine and I were so nearly identical that only Mama could tell us apart in an instant. The only obvious physical difference between us was in our hair: Katherine's had a lovely natural wave while mine was stick straight. I envied Katherine that wave she had in her hair, while Katherine envied the fact that I was a half inch taller than she and five minutes older. I teased her that I would gladly give her my half inch in height if she would give me her wavy hair.

"I just heard Papa's valet in the hall instructing Mrs. Cosgrove to meet us in the library after breakfast. We're going to discuss the guest list for the birthday ball," Katherine said. "We'd better ring for Essie."

“I was just about to,” I said, reaching again for the bellpull. The pull was connected to a bell in the servants’ hall downstairs, where our ladies’ maid, Essie, would hear it and come to our aid. Essie had been with Katherine and me since we were very young. We loved her dearly. It was Essie who helped to dry our tears after Mama died and Essie who always knew just what to say when we were feeling down or scared. She wasn’t a blood relative, of course, but she was as much family to us as we were to each other.

I can still remember the first time Katherine and I met Essie. Essie has told me that I was too little to really remember all of these details, but I swear I do! Katherine and I were puzzling over the alphabet in the nursery, trying to put our blocks in the correct order, when Essie came in, a bright smile on her pretty face. Immediately, I knew that she was different from all of the other servants I was used to seeing. There was something very special about her. She crouched down next to us and told us her name was Essie Bridges and that she was going to help take very good care of us. Then she attempted to help us with our letters, but as it turned out, she didn’t know them either. Later, after Katherine and I were taught to read and write by our tutors, we taught what we had learned to Essie. She resisted at first, telling us it wasn’t a good use of her time and that our parents weren’t paying her to learn; they were paying her to care for us. But Katherine and I insisted! We kept after her until she relented. It didn’t seem right to us that Essie couldn’t enjoy reading books as we could. She was a quick study—I daresay she learned even more easily than Katherine and I had. But then again, perhaps she had better teachers!

While we waited for Essie this morning, Katherine plopped onto my bed to talk about our birthday, which was just over two weeks away. We had had parties before, of course, but for our twelfth birthday, Papa was throwing us a true birthday ball with more guests than we could count, a full orchestra, and beautiful custom-made dresses to wear. We had even been taking lessons with a dancing master.

This party was going to be the most spectacular social event of the season, perhaps even the year! In getting ready for the ball, it was as if Papa’s estate, Chatswood Manor, and all of its inhabitants were shrugging off our sadness about Mama and beginning to live again.

“I can’t wait to waltz with someone other than Mr. Wentworth,” Katherine said.

We were giggling and whispering about dancing with boys when we heard a quiet knock on the door.

“Come in, Essie,” I called.

“Good morning, Lady Elizabeth. Good morning, Lady Katherine,” Essie said, walking quickly into the room and smiling at us as she did each and every morning. “What are you girls giggling about?” she asked us in a mock-serious voice.

“Nothing!” Katherine and I said in unison.

“Now, I’m quite sure I don’t believe that!” Essie replied, her grin widening. “Something tells me you were whispering and giggling about your party! Am I right?”

Katherine and I nodded. “We’re going over the guest list with Papa and Mrs. Cosgrove after breakfast this morning,” I added.

“I’ve a list of questions for you from Mrs. Fields and Mrs. Cosgrove,” Essie replied, digging through the pockets of her apron until she found a small piece of paper. “We can go through some of them while I get you girls dressed and ready for the day. Beginning with what kinds of flowers you’d like.”

“Blue hydrangeas,” Katherine said.

“Red roses,” I announced at the same time.

Then we laughed. Katherine’s favorite color was blue and mine was red. Of course we each wanted the flowers to be in our own favorite color.

Essie laughed along with us as she opened the doors to my armoire. She was used to us saying opposite things. It happened almost as often as we said exactly the same thing! Essie liked to say that she never knew what to expect from us.

I figured that made us exciting to be around!

“What would you like to wear today, Lady Elizabeth?” Essie asked. I had worn almost nothing but black over the past several weeks, but yesterday Katherine and I asked Essie to pack our black dresses away. It was time to bring color back into our lives. It’s what Mama would want.

I pointed to a purple day dress, still not ready to wear anything too brightly colored. “That one,” I said.

Essie laid the dress across my red chair, and I suddenly remembered a lesson about colors that my art teacher had shared some time ago. “Red and blue combined make purple,” I said to Katherine. “What if we decorate the ballroom with purple flowers?”

“Splendid idea!” Katherine cried. “Violets and pansies are purple,” she mused. “I love those.”

“And hyacinth and irises, too,” I added.

“There’s a good compromise, then,” Essie said. “I love it when you girls work together to solve problems.”

“It probably won’t be so easy to compromise on a cake,” Katherine replied teasingly as she headed into her own room to choose a dress.

I held my arms up for Essie to pull my silk nightgown over my head and then stepped into my underclothes and my petticoats before she carefully lowered the purple dress over my head and shoulders.

While Essie fastened the buttons that ran the length of my back and tied my sash, I pinned my chatelaine to the front of my dress. I wore the silver brooch always. The charms attached to it chimed like little bells—a notebook and pencil, a paint box, and a tiny tear catcher.

It was good to be wearing something other than black. I felt the familiar tug on my heart, remembering Mama, but I shook it off and thought about something happier—cake.

“How about an all chocolate cake?” I shouted to Katherine.

“Lady Elizabeth, it’s not ladylike to shout,” Essie reminded me.

“Sorry, Essie,” I said in a much more appropriate tone.

“You always want all chocolate,” Katherine shouted back. “I want a lemon cake with Mrs. Fields’s creamy

ivory frosting."

Instead of yelling back and upsetting Essie with my unladylike behavior, I followed the sound of my sister's voice. A wonderful idea had formed in my mind. Essie trailed behind me, brushing my hair and pulling it back from my face with pretty silver combs.

"Two cakes!" I announced when I reached my twin's bedchamber. "A chocolate cake for me and a lemon cake for you."

"That idea might be even more splendid than your idea about purple flowers!" Katherine exclaimed. Then her brow furrowed. "But do you think Mrs. Fields will mind? Two cakes is twice as much work."

I hadn't thought of that, but Katherine was right. Was it fair to ask Mrs. Fields to bake not one but two birthday cakes for us? Was it dreadful of me to even have suggested it?

As if sensing my panic, Essie smiled at me reassuringly. "I agree it's a splendid idea!" she said brightly. "You turn twelve only once! I think Mrs. Fields will be happy to make as many cakes as you'd like."

"Oh, Essie, do you really think so?" Katherine asked.

Essie nodded. "I'm sure of it. It brings her such pleasure to make you girls happy. She'll be pleased to see you smiling again after everything you've been through these past months. . . ." Essie's voice trailed off and she cleared her throat. She didn't have to finish. We knew what she meant.

We were all quiet for a moment, remembering Mama. Seeing the tears forming in Katherine's eyes, I quickly changed the subject. "Do you know if all the responses have arrived?" I asked Essie.

"I know that Lord and Lady Tynne have sent word that they'll be here, along with your cousin Maxwell, of course."

At the mention of Cousin Maxwell, Katherine and I both began to giggle.

"I had a feeling that was one reply you'd be happy to hear of," Essie said with a smile. "He is a handsome young man; I'll give you that," she said.

"I wonder if he's gotten even more handsome—and taller—than when we saw him last," Katherine said. She turned her back to us so that Essie could fasten her buttons, but not before I saw a hint of pink washing over her cheeks.

"Handsome?" I asked, considering Cousin Maxwell's looks. "Maybe a little, but I think Edward Smythe is even more handsome. And Charles Clarkson as well." I twirled on my tiptoes like a ballerina. "I want to dance with all the boys," I announced.

Katherine burst into giggles again. We hadn't done very much dancing with boys, at least not yet.

Essie didn't share our giggles this time. "It's best you remember that one day Lord Maxwell will be your husband, Lady Elizabeth."

I wrinkled my nose.

“He’ll inherit this house and become the Earl of Chatswood himself one day,” Essie reminded me.

It was true. By law, Papa’s title and estate would be inherited by his closest male heir, and that was my thirteen-year-old cousin, Maxwell. It was Papa’s and Mama’s dearest wish that their eldest daughter would marry him one day. Being five minutes older than Katherine made me the eldest daughter. I sometimes thought it was a pity that Katherine wasn’t born first. She seemed to think it romantic and exciting that it had been decreed I would one day marry Maxwell. I wasn’t sure how I felt about it. Maxwell was a perfectly fine young man, but I thought it would be more exciting and romantic to wonder about whom my husband might turn out to be.

Katherine and I had made many plans over the years about what kind of man she would marry. Sometimes I suggested she marry a sea captain or the son of a mysterious foreign count. Other times we plotted to marry her off to Prince Albert, even though he was a few years younger than we were, so she would one day be Queen of England.

“You’ll have to curtsy when you greet me and call me Your Majesty,” she had said, laughing.

“And you can make me the very first female knight,” I had responded.

Mostly we wanted to be sure that whoever he was, her husband’s estate would be near enough to Chatswood Manor to allow us to visit whenever we had a fancy to do so. I couldn’t imagine not seeing my dear twin sister every single day! Katherine felt exactly the same way.

“I know I’ll marry Maxwell one day,” I told Essie with a sigh. “But that’s ages and ages away. First I want to do lots and lots of dancing, with lots and lots of boys.”

As soon as Katherine’s dress was fastened and her hair done, we went to join Papa for breakfast. No one was about, so I ran down the stairs, something that would have drawn a frown from Mr. Fellows. Our butler was more of a stickler for proper behavior than even Papa was, and now that Katherine and I were young ladies, we were told that it was more becoming to walk than to run. Still, sometimes I just couldn’t help myself.

We joined Papa at the table and exchanged good mornings while Thomas, one of the footmen, poured our tea. A moment later he came to our sides with a platter of eggs and sausage, from which we served ourselves. A plate of hot buttered toast sat on the table, along with a bowl of Mrs. Fields’s delicious marmalade.

Mr. Fellows came in with the morning’s post and a letter opener on a silver tray. There was an air of excitement in his normally dignified and measured step as he leaned down to whisper in Papa’s ear.

Papa’s eyes flashed, and he took up the envelope on the top of the pile. “Girls, this is exciting news,” Papa said. “Buckingham Palace has responded to your birthday invitation.”

I gasped. “Queen Victoria?”

“Is she coming to our ball?” Katherine asked, her voice a high squeak.

“Let’s see,” Papa said, opening the envelope.

I could tell that Mr. Fellows was doing his utmost not to read over Papa’s shoulder.

“Her Royal Highness Queen Victoria congratulates Lady Elizabeth and Lady Katherine on the occasion of their twelfth birthday,” Papa read. “The queen finds herself unable to travel so soon after the birth of Princess Louise but thanks you for the invitation.”

I sat back with a sigh of relief. “I’m sure I’d be terrified if the queen came to Chatswood Manor,” I said.

“Me too,” Katherine agreed.

Papa smiled at us and then eyed Mr. Fellows. Our butler seemed more than a little disappointed.

“Fellows, you’d like a visit from the queen, I think,” Papa said.

Mr. Fellows nodded in his dignified way. “A visit from Her Majesty would bring great honor to Chatswood Manor,” he said.

Papa laughed. “And a great deal of terror to the young ladies within.”

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