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by Coryphasia

Summary

The night after the Embassy Ball, Eliza Doolittle walked out on Henry Higgins and disappeared. Three years later, she returns to see if wrongs can be made right.

Notes

This fic is based on the 2018 staging of "My Fair Lady" at Lincoln Center. A couple things to note from this staging:

1) The actors who play Henry Higgins are the correct age according to Shaw's play (late 30s). You should not be envisioning a 56-year-old Rex Harrison.
2) The final scene is staged uniquely. Higgins listens to the phonograph of Eliza's voice, and he is obviously devastated by hearing himself insult her. She comes in, they have the famous exchange ("I washed my face and hands before I come, I did./Eliza! Where the devil are my slippers?"), but instead of staying, Eliza goes to him, cradles his face for a moment, then runs out of the house.

Where the musical is silent on some matters, I have relied on the source material, Pygmalion, for more context. The calligraphy section is based entirely on Shaw’s epilogue to the play. In the play, Eliza is a linguistic and musical savant who picks up languages and the piano with breakneck speed. She is, to say the least, an exceptional woman . . . one who should not be resigned to marrying a fop like Freddy Eynsford-Hill and running a little shop. And thus the inspiration for this fic.
September 1911

He sat for quite a long time after she departed. He found he could not bring himself to move from his armchair, lest she reappear a second time, ready to . . . .

To what? He could not begin to finish the thought. What did he want Eliza Doolittle around for? To fetch and carry for him, as she had alleged? Much as he found her useful in that regard, he had a small army of servants at his command who did perfectly well at all that. To have fun, as he'd told her in his mother's drawing room? To simply go on as they had before, plugging away at phonetics and tricking the unsuspecting gentry?

He could not think what he wanted Eliza home for. Henry Higgins only knew what he was trying to prevent from happening, whether that was marrying Freddy or apprenticing herself to Zoltan Karpathy. He could play those scenarios out in his mind, and they gave him a sick, roiling feeling in the pit of his stomach. She mustn't go off with those other men and leave him behind in his big, empty house. It was an untenable proposition.

For four days, he believed she would return at any moment, and, consciously or not, did not leave the house for those four days so that he would not happen to miss her return. Pickering watched him cautiously over cups of tea and copies of The Times. Never once did either man say Eliza's name. They spoke of nothing much, but the entire house was gripped in a queasy state of unease as the Eliza-less hours ticked by.

The tension was broken five days after the ball by a letter addressed to the Colonel, which he read silently to himself after it was delivered by Mrs. Pearce.

Dearest Pickering,

Forgive the tardiness of this letter, but I had to hire a man to take it down for me, as I cannot write well enough to satisfy my own scruples.

I thank you from the bottom of my heart for the kindnesses you have shown me these past six months. I have found that the true difference between being a flower girl and being a lady is not how one speaks or dresses, but how one is treated by others. And yet you have treated me as a lady from the moment I set foot in the house on Wimpole Street. Had you not, I do not know if I could have found the strength to strike out on my own.

I do not wish for you to worry about your Eliza. I have always been a good girl who knew just enough to survive, and six months in the lap of luxury has not changed that. I shall be all right. Please do not search for me.

I wish you all the best, sir.

Yours etc.,

Eliza Doolittle

Colonel Pickering read the letter quickly once, then a second time more slowly. He felt Higgins' eyes boring into the back of his head, and knew he had a duty to his friend to tell him the truth.

He folded the letter and tucked it into his own valise. “She is not coming back, Higgins.”
The professor startled as if a gunshot had woken him from a dead sleep. “What's this? What nonsense is this?”

“Higgins, old chap, I hate to be the bearer of bad news.”

“Give me that letter at once! Not coming back, indeed!”

The colonel shook his head. “No, no, that won't do at all. You'll have to take my word for it this time.”

Higgins leapt to his feet and strode towards Pickering's valise with the obvious intent of taking the letter. Pickering vacillated a moment, then plucked it from the case himself and handed it to Higgins. “You are only making yourself miserable.”

Higgins ignored the spoken warning and snatched the letter from the colonel's grasp. His eyes darted about on the page, almost as if he had lost the power to read at all. He held the letter and stared at it for an indecent amount of time, then handed it back to Pickering and sank to the floor with a groan that startled his friend.

“Pickering, what is this? Why has she done this? Why do I—” Here he clasped the letter to his breast and fell silent, apparently unable to articulate, for once in his life, precisely what he wished to express.

“Higgins, answer me this. When I return to India, will you be this disconsolate?”

Higgins stared at Pickering. “Good God, man, no.”

“If I were to take a bride, even at my late age, would you shut yourself inside the house for days on end?”

“Pickering, you know I shouldn't do anything of the sort, what are you driving at?”

Pickering, who was certainly no ace at social graces, was at least savvier than his grieving friend. “Perhaps you ought to think about why a woman has left you in all this state, a state you cannot imagine entering into should a man such as myself do precisely the same thing. Why can't a woman be more like a man, indeed.”

As it happened, Pickering didn't leave for India immediately. He dared not, not while Higgins was in a state of mourning obvious to everyone aside from himself. His staff tried to coax him to eat, but he only picked at tea trays occasionally. He continued to shut himself within the house, opening his mail only to glance at the signature and toss each letter aside. He was often seen scratching away at stray pieces of paper or bound blank books, but he sent no post himself.

After a month or two, he began attending church again, and a couple of weeks after that, he resumed his habitual Sunday dinners with his mother. His mother was a woman of great intelligence who never breathed a word about Eliza Doolittle, only read her son's face and measured how far along in his grief he was.

About this time, Colonel Pickering felt it was time for him to be returning to his piece of the Empire in India. He had learnt Higgins' phonetic alphabet, and even to distinguish a dozen more vowel sounds than he had before. Moreover, he could sense that his friend would certainly survive this blow, with or without his fellow linguist. So without much fanfare, he booked passage to India, informed Higgins he'd be sailing in a week's time, and packed his things. They took one last trip to the opera together, shook hands heartily, and promised to write each other. Then the colonel was gone, and Higgins was alone in his grand London home, with only ghosts for company.
Higgins was in his study when he heard the ringing of the doorbell, and Mrs. Pearce's footsteps going to answer it. Two minutes later, she was in the doorway with a strange expression on her face.

“Sir, there's someone here to see you.”

He glanced up from his papers, frowning. It wasn't like Mrs. Pearce to fail to introduce a guest.

“Well? Out with it, woman.”

But the housekeeper shook her head and stepped aside, and that's when he saw her.

She was sun-browned, and her clothes were not as fine as they had been the day she had left him. Her beauty had only grown, or perhaps he had misremembered how beautiful she was. He stood up, knocking over his fine Georgian chair and scattering his papers, but he noticed neither. For once, the reverberating man was silent.

“Professor Higgins,” Eliza said, extending her hand to him.

He paused just long enough to wonder if she had married, and realized addressing her formally was the quickest way of determining this. He kissed her hand and looked into her eyes from above her hand. “Miss Doolittle?”

Mrs. Pearce silently made her exit. Eliza flushed. “Yes, well, you may call me Eliza, as you always have, sir.”

“And may I ask what manner of circumstance has dropped you into my lap on this fine summer day?”

“That tale will be a while in the telling,” she said, and he listened with every ounce of his skill and detected a slight shift in her vowels, one that was almost impossible to credit.

“You've been on the Continent,” he said, amazed. “Every street corner in London, I looked for you; asked for you at every flower shop north of the Thames. And you've been in Europe the entire time.”

She said briskly, “I should have known there is no tale I can tell you that you have not already discovered for yourself. Shall I remove myself, sir, since I have not been invited to sit?”

He was unpleasantly reminded of their parting, and of her letter to Pickering. He scowled. “Eliza, this is your house as much as it is mine. Have a seat, if you like.”

She started at this a little. “My house! When I haven't set foot in it in nearly three years!”

“Yes, you little fool! Whether or not you choose to live in it, this will be your house until the day I die and it is passed along to one of my undeserving nephews. I hope we are at least clear on that.”

They had been in the same room hardly five minutes, and they were already hot under the collar and glaring at each other. Eliza seemed to make a concerted effort to calm herself, and she settled on a loveseat in the corner of his study, the only other seating in the room aside from the toppled chair.

“Professor Higgins --”

“That's quite enough of that; you may call me Henry henceforth.”

“I certainly shall not, particularly not before you know why I am here.” She looked pointedly at his
“You have guessed correctly that I have not been in the British Isles these past few years. Can you
guess more than that?”

Higgins had been straining to categorize every sound that had come out of her mouth since she arrived. “I can guess the Mediterranea, but no closer than that, particularly as you are all too
conscious of your own accent and have been no doubt guarding it jealously all these years.”

“Well done, sir,” she smiled. “I have been a housemaid for Major Pennington and his wife as they have been quartered in Malta.”

“Malta!” he exclaimed. “Now there's a linguistic hodgepodge if ever you saw one. Conquered again
and again, people coming and going – it's a wonder I was able to glean anything from your speech at all. But a housemaid, Eliza? You speak like a queen!”

“That is partly why I have returned, Professor Higgins,” she continued. “I was able to act as the second-in-command to the housekeeper of the Penningtons' house, but I could never have risen any further than that.”

“And why is that?” he queried.

“I cannot write,” she said simply. “I cannot sum. I can read, but not well. To rise any further than I have already, I must have a more thorough education than one solely in elevated speech.”

“And you believe I can teach you those things.” It wasn't a question, but a note of incredulity played in his voice.

“I am well aware you could teach me all of those things, should you choose,” she shot back.

“And why else have you returned, Eliza?” There was something pulsing in his chest, a sort of feeling of hope, or a sense of reaching but not grasping. His heart thudded once or twice, then resumed normal operations.

She looked at him strangely. “Do you read the news at all, Professor?”

He cocked his head a bit. “I don't make a habit of it, no.”

“Europe is at a boiling point. The Archduke of Austria is assassinated, and it is common knowledge that blood will be spilled before much longer. I thought I would try to reach the land of my birth before ports were shut down altogether.”

“War! Piffle. It's the twentieth century! We've put those old ways behind us with Napoleon and his ilk.”

But Eliza was shaking her head. “I heard enough in the house in Malta. And I had to act quickly. So I bought passage on the first ship I could and didn't concern myself overmuch with how I would survive once I returned, with no letters of reference and no place to live in London.”

“Nonsense,” Higgins said at once. “Stuff and nonsense. This is your home in London, Eliza.”

“And am I to work in your house? Join your retinue of maids?”

He almost snarled at her, but took a deep breath and spoke in a slightly more measured fashion. “Once again, Eliza, you willfully misunderstand the character of our relationship. You are my friend,
and you will not pick up a feather duster within this house so long as I draw breath.”

“And will you take me on as a student in all the things I mentioned?”

“All those and more,” he replied without hesitation. “Reading, writing, and sums, to be sure, but also
history, economics, and the natural sciences. And . . .” He seemed to be considering something.
“You will have to have lessons out of the house twice a week.”

“Why is that?” she asked, in honest curiosity.

Now he did hesitate, but not for long. “My French is abominable; you ought to learn it from a native.
And I thought perhaps you would like a music lesson. What do you think, singing or piano?”

“Professor, I cannot pay –”

“And that is the last I want to hear from you about money, do you understand me? For the love of
God, Eliza, I have more money than I ought, and no one to spend it on. This is not charity. Spending
money on your education means more to me than money for my clothes or other upkeep.”

“Then I must thank you,” Eliza said graciously, and extended her hand again. Unthinkingly, Higgins
bent to kiss it again, and this time, less stunned than the first, he felt the warmth of her hand penetrate
the cool of his lips. How he wanted to remain pressed against that brown hand for the rest of the
afternoon. But he withdrew as she said, “You are the only true friend I have. I should have known I
would find refuge on Wimpole Street.”

“Always,” he said, and found he could say no more.

“Would you mind terribly if I retreated to my room until dinner? I am fatigued from the journey, and
I should like to have a bath.” This last part, she smiled at, and he found himself smiling as well. No
longer was she a sheltered girl who had never washed head to toe.

“By all means,” he said, and stood as she rose and left the room.

Eliza had left her meager possessions in the front hall, but when she returned there, they were gone,
no doubt whisked away by one of the many housemaids whose jobs she now knew well. She
climbed the stairs to her old room slowly, looking at the art on the walls and remembering every
painting and sketch as she encountered it. Her friend had not redecorated in three years, at least.

Had she been expecting him to have done so? Had she imagined him tearing the house down when
he realized she was not coming back? Well, and so what if she had. She had heard the relief in his
voice when she had walked in the door that last time three years ago, stopped the phonograph, and
spoken her own old line. He had desperately wanted her to stay. And she had known she had to go.

At the top of the stairs, she turned right and was confronted with a closed door and her luggage piled
in front of it. This was already a tad odd; a good housemaid (she knew now) would have placed her
luggage within her room, perhaps even unpacked it for her.

The reason became clear when she picked up her bags and opened the door. It was just as she had
left it that night in September of 1911. Her bed was unmade; one drawer of her dresser was unevenly
open; a book she had been making her way through was open on the desk, a paperweight holding it
open.

A housemaid appeared in the door then. “Miss Doolittle? Beg pardon, miss, I'm Isobel. I'm here to
help you with your bath.”
“Thank you, Isobel. Can you tell me, before you draw the bath, have you been inside this room before?”

Isobel looked away. “Not me, miss. Only Hannah, the head housemaid, comes in here, and only to dust, as you can see. They do say –” She stopped short.

Eliza was gentle in her prodding. “Yes?”

Isobel glanced around to ensure she was not being overheard. “They do say the Professor comes in here from time to time. Maybe looking for something.”

Or maybe dreaming of another time, the new houseguest thought. “Very well, thank you, Isobel. I have been looking forward to this bath since I rounded the tip of Spain.”

Isobel looked stymied by this assertion, but knew a request for a bath when she heard it. “Yes, miss. I’ll call you in when the water’s ready.”

Eliza nodded and sat down on her unmade bed. Whatever she had expected, it was not this. She had sooner expected him to have erased every trace of her.

Some time later, Isobel called her into the bathroom, and Eliza asked Isobel to put fresh sheets on her bed and make it up. When Isobel looked frightened by the directive, Eliza said, “If you like, you may ascertain that Mr. Higgins approves the request.” The servant girl nodded, and Eliza was left alone in the first long hot bath she’d had in years. It wasn’t that she had never bathed in the Penningtons' house in Malta, but they had been quick, tepid affairs, and only when absolutely necessary.

She dozed in the bath and dreamt in fits and starts, but didn't remember anything when Isobel rapped on the door an hour later. “Miss? It's getting on dinner time, you ought to get dressed.”

Isobel helped Eliza into a gown that Eliza recalled leaving in her closet because she thought it was too grand for the life she would soon be leading. It wasn't her Embassy ballgown, but it was still on the fancier side of acceptable for anything short of that sort of affair. Apparently her closet had been left just as untouched as the rest of her bedroom.

When she was presentable, Eliza descended to the front room, where Mrs. Pearce smiled at her and told her dinner was waiting for her. And indeed, when Eliza continued on to the dining room, she found Higgins waiting for her, reading a book in the dim evening light, which he quickly set aside.

“Ah, Eliza, there you are, splendid. Perkins, let us begin.”

One of the manservants helped Eliza to her seat, which was at Higgins' right hand. Eliza found herself relieved she was there, rather than at the foot of the table, which would have felt slightly chilly and formal. She also unexpectedly found herself nervous in a way she hadn’t been when she had entered the house.

As the servants laid out the meal, Higgins delved right into the topics still hanging between them. “Well, then, Eliza, you must tell me how you found yourself in Malta of all places.”

Eliza took a deep breath. “Before all that, I must give you the conditions of my stay here.”

“Conditions!” Her mentor chuckled. “Of all the obstinate girls at Covent Garden, I think I found the most pigheaded.”

Eliza had had three years to prepare herself for this conversation, and it was this fact that saved her. “Professor, first I must ask you – what is your opinion of me?”
This silenced the man for a moment. Then he said, “That you are a diamond of a woman brought up in a barnyard. I believe you to be among the cleverest of people I’ve met, certainly cleverer than half the fellows I knew at Oxford. And you also utterly infuriate me with your contradictions and seccies.”

Eliza nodded slowly. “That is a good beginning, to be sure.”

“And what is your opinion of me?!” he rejoined.

Eliza hadn’t been expecting this, hadn’t expected him to care a jot about her opinion of him. She spoke slowly, carefully: “You are the most intelligent person I have ever known. Also the most honest, loyal, and generous. And I cannot decide whether you are the most heartless man I’ve met, or the one most affected by feelings. Perhaps both.”

He was about to react, stung by her final statement, but she held up a hand. “Whatever you are about to say, sir, allow me to forestall it. I elicited your opinion of my person so that I could illustrate a point. I do not believe you truly think me a ‘hussy’ or ‘guttersnipe’ or ‘fool.’ And so I must ask you refrain from calling me names so long as I live under your roof.”

Higgins drew breath to respond, then sighed. “That part of my conduct I cannot rationally defend. Though I warn you, Eliza, if you act foolishly, I shall certainly tell you so.”

Eliza smiled. “I expect nothing less. My other condition is this: I do not wish to be paraded about as a curiosity this time. No bragging of your guttersnipe turned governess.”

“No indeed, for there is no wager to be won, is there? Pickering swanned off to India almost the moment you sailed off to Malta, and I hear from him only twice a year or so.”

Eliza ignored his cavalier tone and pressed on. “So you agree to my conditions, do you?”

“I do, Eliza, and I have one of my own.”

“Oh!” Eliza put her fork down and held Higgins' gaze. “Please, what is it?”

He stared right back at her, his eyes burning. “I am entitled to an apology, I believe, for the manner of your final departure.”

“An apology!” she exclaimed.

Higgins made as if to speak, then saw the manservants standing at attention and pretending not to hear. “Perkins, Frobisher, leave us, please. If I catch anyone listening at keyholes they will be dismissed without references.”

The servants scurried out and the door to the kitchen snapped shut. Now it was Eliza and Higgins alone in the dining room, and Eliza felt her stomach clench.

Higgins pushed his plate out of the way and leaned across the table until his face was nearly over Eliza's plate. “Listen to me, you foolish girl, and I will call you foolish because you richly deserve it: I thought you were dead. I wasn’t sure of it, of course, and I could never prove you hadn’t run off to Scotland with some chap. But when years went by with no word from you to me, or to Pickering? What was I to think, Eliza? What in God's name was I to think? The night after the Embassy Ball, you came here, to this house you were living in, and you found me listening to your voice, and you –” His voice broke, then he cleared his throat. “You touched me, and I thought we understood each other. Then you up and disappeared, and by God, Eliza, I looked everywhere. I even asked your father! That worthless man. Of course he had not an inkling of a notion of your whereabouts. I gave
you up for dead, and locked your bedroom up, and yes, I would like an apology for the years of ugly feelings that your disappearance engendered.”

Eliza drew in a long shuddering breath. “I certainly am sorry that you ever believed such a terrible thing,” she began. “But sir, you must understand why I left you. Perhaps that ought to have been my first condition.”

“More conditions! Well, out with it, then. Why would you leave when we'd come to a complete understanding? You and I, we had such fun.”

“I have given much thought to this, whenever I was chopping onions or scrubbing stairs,” Eliza began pensively. “Housework was drudgery, but my mind was free as a wild bird. When I sold flowers, I had to watch the fine people walking past and choose whom to appeal to. In the Penningtons' house, I only had to do as I was told, and that left my mind free to wander. And so often, my friend, it wandered to you.” She caught him in her gaze, and he, who had been fidgeting and scowling, softened and stilled as she pinned him with her eyes.

“I believe the problem that we laid bare at your mother's house is that you treat others as you would like to be treated, and believe that to be the right and proper thing to do. But I do not wish to be treated thus, and you believed me weak or womanly for demanding to be treated as I wish to be treated. I suppose I am womanly, but I am certainly not weak. The Golden Rule is all right as far as it goes, but I ask more of you. I ask you to treat me with more care, to notice my feelings and right the ship if you feel it straying off-course. That is what I asked of you three years ago, and you laughed at me. I wonder if time has softened your resolve, and whether I can trust you to listen to me now. If not, I believe I can still stay with you and learn from you; it is what I came to London for. But we can never be lifelong friends if you do not hear me now.”

“The Sermon on the Mount isn't good enough for Eliza Doolittle!” exclaimed the linguist. “Shall we write a fifth Gospel, do you think?”

Eliza turned her face away. “I should like to finish my dinner before it grows cold.”

“If I am following your final condition, then I ought to notice your feelings and change my behavior, is that it?” He stared at her as she ate. Though she hated herself for it, tears gathered in her eyes. She did not allow them to spill over.

“All right, then, Eliza. I've upset you with my sarcasm. You want better than a Golden Rule, you want your Diamond Rule, which perhaps is only right for the diamond of Tottenham Court Road. The Diamond Rule makes me a slave to your whims and emotions, but damn me, if it keeps you in this house, I suppose I'll do it. Three years without your company has robbed me of my resolve, perhaps even my principles.” He reached over and touched her arm just above the elbow. “Don't cry. You are a quick study, but I am old and slow. I shall improve with time. Stay and teach me to treat you better. Is that a fair bargain? I'll impart to you my Oxford education if you teach me how to behave like the sort of man you think I ought to be.”

Her tears did spill over then, and she looked back at him. “Oh, Henry Higgins. I don't know who is being swindled in this bargain, but it suits me.”

“Good. I shall fetch the servants to bring us pudding, then to bed with us. Bright and early tomorrow morning, we begin with handwriting.”
December 1914

It was a Thursday night, Christmas Eve, and while Higgins attended a late church service, Eliza was at home copying out a verse of a poem of Keats' for Higgins' Christmas present. She was writing in her best Italian script, which was still not quite as beautiful as her teacher's, but was certainly passable.

. . . . quiet coves
  His soul has in its Autumn, when his wings
  He furleth close; contented so to look
  On mists in idleness - to let fair things
  Pass by unheeded as a threshold brook.

She had wondered when she chose the verse whether the professor would be insulted by the implication that he was in the autumn of his life, but she rather thought Higgins was not the kind of man to mind that sort of thing.

Of course she had had to borrow pen and paper from the gift's recipient, but Higgins had drilled it into her over and again: this was her house. The writing supplies in it, as well as the books, were hers to use as she liked, so long as she put the books, pens, and ink back where she'd found them. Higgins would be delighted by her quoting of Keats and know that that was the true gift, that she'd pawed through all his Keats collections and found something worth putting into calligraphy.

If Eliza were being honest, it had been difficult: she either found that she couldn't much understand what Keats wrote about, or if she did understand it, it was the sort of subject matter to make her blush and turn the page as quickly as possible. Keats wrote a lot about breasts and moaning and kisses, and Eliza was in no state to read about all that.

She had just finished the “mists” in the fourth line when the doorbell rang. She rose to answer it, thinking it might be Higgins' mother, who was likely to visit some time tonight or tomorrow. But Mrs. Pearce got there first, and Eliza stood in a corner where neither the visitor nor Mrs. Pearce could see her eavesdropping on them. It was not her finest hour, she admitted to herself, while pricking up her ears to hear the conversation.

She could not make out the words, but the visitor's voice gave her a jolt of recognition: no voice that she knew, exactly, but a familiar accent, as familiar to her as the columns of the Royal Opera House. And Mrs. Pearce responded kindly, “That's ever so thoughtful of you, dearie. He's in church right now, but I shall hang it up and let him know you brought it.”

The Cockney voice asked a question, and Mrs. Pearce responded again, “How kind of you to ask, but she's not receiving visitors. How did you get here tonight?”

An inaudible answer, then Mrs. Pearce again: “Oh, no, that won't do. Come with me, I'll call you a taxi and give you the fare. Come along now.”

She heard their footsteps leaving the house, and Mrs. Pearce locking the front door as she exited. Eliza crept out of her hiding place and into the foyer, where a small holly wreath graced the marble table there. She stared at it in utter incomprehension until Mrs. Pearce returned minutes later.

“Who brought the wreath?” she asked the housekeeper, who had blanched when she saw Eliza standing in the front hall.
“A friend of Mr. Higgins,” Mrs. Pearce said quellingly.

“Is this friend of my acquaintance?” Occasionally Higgins' few colleagues in the field of phonetics would come for tea.

“No, miss.” And that was that. Mrs. Pearce took the wreath gently and went outside to hang it on the front door, then swept back to the kitchen without another word to Eliza.

Eliza went to bed that evening before Higgins returned home. When she awoke the next morning, it felt like Christmas, a quietly joyful feeling. It was a Christmas at war for Britain, but the holiday spirit prevailed nonetheless.

She wore a dressing-gown downstairs for breakfast, as she had done as a child, when her mother was alive and her father was not quite so dependent on the barkeep for his good moods. As she waited for Higgins to descend, she mindlessly practiced her calligraphy. *A quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog. Eliza Doolittle. Much have I travell'd in the realms of gold. What is more gentle than a wind in summer? A quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog. Eliza Higgins.*

As she lifted her pen to write again, she saw the last phrase, livid in rich black ink on beautiful creamy paper. She had only one instinct, and she followed it immediately: she took the scrap of practice paper and tossed it into the fire, where her words were quickly consumed by flames.

In another moment, she heard Higgins' footfalls on the stairs, and she sat down and composed herself. He came into the drawing room where she sat and took in her Christmas-morning appearance. He grinned. “Eliza, what a state you're in.”

He himself was dressed quite casually, but not to her level. “It's Christmas morning,” she said defiantly. “This is how one dresses for Christmas morning.”

“Are you quite sure you want my mother to see you like that?”

Eliza instinctively drew her collar tightly around her chin, despite the fact that her gown revealed nothing more below her chin than the hollow of her neck. “What time is she expected?”

“You may relax; she won't be here till teatime. Meanwhile, let's have breakfast. We can be awful and have it here instead of the dining room. The staff have the morning off, but they'll have left us some pastries. I'll make tea – or would you prefer coffee?”

Eliza indicated tea; Higgins disappeared into the kitchen, and Eliza remained in the drawing room as he brought out first a tray of scones and crumpets, then a few minutes later, a pot of hot breakfast tea.

“One can't be an ogre and keep one's staff hard at work on Christmas morning,” he explained as he poured her cup. “I'm not quite as helpless as I seem, though I find it easier to let my help do all this nonsense most of the time.”

She thanked him, and alternated between blowing on her tea and buttering a crumpet until she was satisfied with both and began enjoying her breakfast. When she was nearly finished, she wiped her hands on the linen napkin Higgins had given her. “So long as we're alone in the house . . . .”

Higgins' eyebrows nearly hit the ceiling. “I cannot imagine what could follow that remarkable clause.”

Eliza blushed. “I have your Christmas present. I think I can better bear to give it to you now than under the watchful eye of Mrs. Pearce.”
“Ah! Eliza, I hope you did not put yourself out to buy me some hideous new cravat.”

Eliza was a bit stung. “How ill do you think I know you, sir, that I would ever make you a present of such frippery?”

“Quite right, quite right,” he replied with equanimity. “So where is my present, dear girl?”

Eliza went to her hidey-hole in the study where she had concealed her piece as she had worked on it and brought it out. She had not had the means to frame it, but she had affixed it to a thick sheet of fancy cardboard so as to make it able to be displayed. She had not wrapped it, and so she had to hold it behind her back as she reentered the drawing room.

Higgins watched her as she returned, her stocking feet padding noiselessly through their house, her dressing-gown speaking more of her life above stairs than Higgins had allowed himself to imagine. It was easy, too easy, to imagine that she was his young bride, trying to surprise her beloved husband on their first Christmas together.

Still and all, she was his dear friend, and diligent pupil, and that ought to satisfy him. And satisfied he was when she ceremoniously presented him with the verse of Keats she had laboriously copied out for him.

He smiled when he read it. “‘The Human Seasons.’ A lovely choice, Eliza.” He read it to himself silently, then reread a piece aloud: “‘to let fair things/Pass by unheeded as a threshold brook.’ Just so. My lot in life, just so.” He smiled again, a little ruefully, Eliza thought. “Now it's time for me to return the favor.”

Into his pocket he reached, and out with a box his hand emerged. It was not the first piece of jewelry he’d purchased for her; she still had the ring he'd bought her in Brighton three years and a lifetime ago.

But still, the breath caught in Eliza's throat. It was just the two of them in the house together. She felt the morning might go anywhere.

He opened the box, and inside was a necklace. The pendant was a rounded rectangle of gold, in the center of which was set a small, brilliant diamond. Around the small stone, the gold was worked in filigree. Eliza reached out to touch her gift, trembling all the while. As she picked it up and held it closer to her face, she saw that the filigree had little letter “E”’s worked into the pattern.

“Ohhhh,” she breathed, incapable of language.

“I thought it only appropriate for you, who have been so diligent in training me in your Diamond Rule.”

“It's beautiful, Professor. I thank you from the bottom of my heart.”

“Let me put it on for you,” Higgins offered, and he stood and walked behind her to take the piece from her hands and clasp it around her bare neck. Eliza closed her eyes and tried to note: as he brushed her hair away, was his hand lingering longer than it strictly needed to? Did his fingers rest on her shoulders for a moment too long?

He came around to sit down again, and smiled approvingly at his gift. “Lovely.”

“I shall never remove it,” promised Eliza.

“Capital. And now we are all out of gifts, little flower girl.”
“It’s Christmas,” Eliza offered. “Will you read me some Dickens? A Christmas Carol?” Eliza’s uncle had seen it done on the stage once, and he had used to tell her the story on the rare occasion he saw her in midwinter.

“Dickens? That old scribbler for the hoi polloi?”

“Please?” she begged, and Higgins relented. He hunted in his library till he’d found the offending tome, then opened it up and began to read in his grandest, most literary voice: “Marley was dead: to begin with. There is no doubt whatever about that . . . .”

Eliza closed her eyes and reclined in her chair. She listened intently as Higgins plowed through the tale of Jacob Marley’s ghost, affecting voices for all the men in the tale (Nephew Fred, she realized with a jolt, sounded a lot like Freddy Eynsford-Hill). When he’d finished the first stave, he begged off continuing. “Later, Eliza, I promise. But I require true sustenance before I introduce the Ghost of Christmas Past. And the staff will be returning in about an hour to whip up Christmas dinner and serve it to us and Mother. I think you ought to get dressed.”

Eliza saw the sense in this and ran off to put on a nice homey gown for the occasion. Higgins took advantage of her absence to pour himself a sherry. There was one thought echoing through his mind, and he couldn’t turn it off – how could he ensure that all his Christmases were just like this one?

He’d spent almost the last two decades using Christmas morning as a time to catch up on his correspondence and relearn how to use his own stove. And then this morning . . . this morning a beautiful woman had arisen before him, had made him a gift by the labor of her own two hands and blushed to give it to him; this morning he’d made tea and crumpets for two and read a Christmas story to a rapt audience of one. Never mind that it was Dickens when he’d rather have read her Milton. If Higgins had learnt anything in the last five months, it was that if he wanted to keep Eliza, he had to cede a little ground to her sensibilities. (And as it happened, Higgins was quite enjoying this morning’s reading. It wasn’t Paradise Lost, but he wasn’t sure that Satan’s fall to Hell was the proper topic for the day of the birth of the Savior.)

Now the question he couldn’t stop asking himself: how could he keep Eliza by his side forever? The obvious answer, marriage, was apparently repugnant to her: “I wouldn’t marry you if you asked me.” She had said those words precisely to him the day before she left him. And so he would never ask, because what lay on the other side of a proposal sure to be turned down was desolation. How could she share a house with a man she knew wanted to marry her? It was preposterous. So she must never know.

His only option, so far as he saw it, was to educate her in every corner of human knowledge. Certainly it had taken him the first twenty-three years of his life to receive his formal education; perhaps he could keep her at Wimpole Street for a decade, if he went as far as to dig up his old Latin textbooks.

Even as he thought it, he knew how ridiculous it was. Eliza was twenty when they met, twenty-three now, and every English girl with any beauty to speak of was married by twenty-five. It had taken her no time at all, three years prior, to attract Freddy Eynsford-Hill to the point where the fool would’ve married her without ever having had a real conversation with her. How long would it take this time for her to catch another man’s eye?

Some voice deep inside Higgins reminded him that he didn’t own the girl. She was free to fly away, and he was free to turn her out at any time. He sipped his sherry. It was a pretty pretense, that they were equally yoked in this endeavor. But of course it was a monstrous falsehood, because while she thought of him as her teacher and friend, he thought of her as the only love of his lonely life.
A half an hour passed; Higgins finished his drink and disposed of the evidence of his empty glass. Eliza finally emerged from above stairs, clad in a simple, warm gown, a pair of slippers, and his Christmas gift to her. The gold in the pendant winked at him in the lamplight.

He rose and offered her his arm as she reached the foot of the stairs. “Come, Eliza, I think I can manage one more stave before dinner.” She grinned, and they returned to the drawing room arm-in-arm, where Higgins picked the book back up and began: “When Scrooge awoke, it was so dark that looking out of bed, he could scarcely distinguish the transparent window from the opaque walls of his chamber . . . .”

Eliza listened, and not long after he began, the house regained its normal background noise of servants going about their business. At first it was only the kitchen servants, returned early to roast the turkey; later some of the rest of the retinue appeared to straighten up the house before Mrs. Higgins’ appearance. It would not be a full complement today; some of them had the day off altogether. But Christmas dinner was sacred, and neither Higgins nor Eliza had the slightest idea how to pull that together.

At four o’clock on the dot, Mrs. Higgins arrived in her private car, wearing a hat with a jaunty sprig of holly atop the crown. As she was greeted at the door by Eliza and Higgins together, she hugged and kissed them both. “Henry, what a handsome little wreath on your door. It’s not like you to decorate! Eliza, was that your doing?”

Eliza blinked. In the quiet satisfaction of the morning, she’d utterly forgotten what she’d overheard last night. “No indeed, ma’am,” she said quickly.

Higgins’ expression turned briefly sour. “It was a gift,” he said shortly.

Mrs. Higgins, ever perspicacious, did not press the matter further. “Well, it is handsome, no doubt about it. Is dinner ready?”

Eliza briefly weighed the benefits of pushing Higgins further on the wreath, then decided she wanted to hear the end of Scrooge’s story more than she wanted an answer this very day. There were days—weeks—months, even, stretching out before her, in which she could ask Higgins anything, and he might storm about and lecture her, but eventually she would learn what she wished to know.

The two Higginses and one Doolittle sat for Christmas dinner at a quarter past four, and it was exactly the sort of feast Eliza had used to dream about when she was selling flowers in the midwinter: turkey, Yorkshire pudding, boiled potatoes and Brussels sprouts, and piles of hearty bread. At some point during the meal, Mrs. Higgins remarked upon Eliza’s necklace: “I don’t believe I’ve seen that piece before, my dear. Did some besotted young chap bestow it upon you in lieu of an engagement ring?”

Higgins nearly choked on a potato; Eliza managed to keep her composure as she dabbed her mouth with a napkin before responding. “No, ma'am, your son was kind enough to make a present of it for Christmas.”

“Henry, I’ve never known you to exhibit such taste. Surely you must have had assistance.”

“The clerks at the shop around the corner were more than willing to help me part with my money,” her son said sardonically.

“Why a diamond and not a pearl?” Mrs. Higgins pressed on. “Pearls are ever so much the rage. The Queen Mother is never seen without pearls.”
Eliza smiled down at her plate. “It is a longstanding matter of sport between myself and Eliza,” Higgins replied waspishly. “Eliza knew precisely what I meant by it.”

“Is that so?” Mrs. Higgins asked, and Eliza knew she could not fail to answer. “Quite so, ma'am,” she replied.

“And where is my Christmas gift, I ask you?” demanded the professor's mother, and Higgins smiled.

“Mother, when have I ever failed to purchase you a token of my affection?” He rose, went to his study, and came back with a wrapped object that was obviously a bottle of wine. “True Madeira, perhaps the last we're likely to get off those islands before the war is over.”

“How kind of you,” she said, motioning for a housekeeper to take the bottle on her behalf. “Heaven knows I will be sorely in need of a calming draught many a night before the hostilities are over. But let's have no more talk of these things tonight.”

And so they spoke instead of art and music and theater, and when Eliza told the matron that Higgins had been reading the story of Scrooge to her, Mrs. Higgins clapped her hands and insisted on being audience to the next stave, so poor Higgins was prevailed upon to read more, though at least by this time he was well sated.

As Higgins painted with his voice the image of the Cratchits' own Christmas dinner, Mrs. Higgins carefully, minutely turned to watch Eliza listening to her son. There was such a look of joy and adoration on that young face that it took the matron's breath away. It was if she had turned to look at a bud and caught the moment it had burst into flower.

As the evening wore on, Mrs. Higgins proclaimed her exhaustion and asked if she might return the next day, for Boxing Day.

“I'm afraid we won't be able to feed you, Mother,” Higgins said apologetically.

“Nonsense! Henry, there was enough food on the table to feed us all twelve times over!”

“Yes, and so it ought not to be left to rot in this little household. I instructed Mrs. Pearce to distribute it amongst the staff. They'll have taken it home to their own families by now.” He saw Eliza's look of curiosity and turned towards her, though he still addressed his mother. “You may blame Eliza; her choice of reading material has had dire consequences.”

“Well, Eliza dear, I am very cross with you now,” but Mrs. Higgins' tone belied her words. “Now, if you'll be so good, dear, I need a word with my son alone.”

Eliza nodded. “I am knackered. Mrs. Higgins, it was lovely to see you,” and here she paused to embrace the older woman. “Professor, I shall see you tomorrow morning.” With that, she disappeared above stairs.

“What's all this, then, Mother?” Higgins said, a trace of irritation evident in his voice.

“Henry.” Mrs. Higgins shook her head. “Henry, please tell me you understand what you're doing to that girl.”

“I am educating her,” Higgins said severely. “What's the matter, Mother, you think a woman oughtn't learn sums and Latin?”

“Don't be ridiculous,” she snapped back. “Her education is another matter entirely, one I'm strongly in favor of. I mean the rest of it.”
“What rest of it?”

“She lives in your house, acts as the mistress of it; you buy her a diamond necklace for Christmas; you come running to her every time she calls.”

Higgins was positively fuming. “And because she's of inferior birth, she's not –”

“Henry, please do me the favor of not putting opinions into my mouth that I have never expressed once in my many decades of life. I am saying, the girl's completely in love with you, and just what do you plan to do about it?”


“For reasons obscure even to me, the woman who birthed you, you seem utterly blind to this simple fact. I have never seen a woman more devoted to any man.”

“That is – that is simply the right and proper regard that a – a gifted student shows her mentor!” he stammered.

“You're a fool, my sweet boy,” Mrs. Higgins said kindly. “I hope I will live to see you realize the error of your ways. And now, happy Christmas” – here she kissed him on the brow – “and good night.” With that she was gone.

Higgins found himself very quickly pouring himself another glass of sherry and nursing it while sitting in the dark, empty study. The servants had gone for the night, back to their own families with the leftovers of the Higgins-Doolittle Christmas dinner. Higgins hoped it was appreciated, but that was not the matter his mind was stuck on. No, as usual, his beloved mother had a talent for cutting him to the quick.

And what if she's right? asked the small voice of Hope within his breast.

Higgins felt as if he were stuck between Scylla and Charybdis, if both of those things were far more pleasant than they had been for Odysseus. His preferred path was to suffer his love in silence, but that way led to losing her eventually, just not now. If he declared himself, then if luck were on his side, he would have her forever . . . but if, more likely, it were not, he would lose her now for good.

He wished he were the sort of man to risk it all on the off chance that he would obtain his heart's true desire, but he had always been a guarded, careful fellow. He preferred to dream up ways to keep her at Wimpole Street. He thought up, then immediately dismissed, a plan to get his mother to do the work of figuring out whether Eliza Doolittle's declaration against marriage to him still stood. No, this was between himself and Eliza . . . and he was taking the coward's way out.

He nursed that same sherry long into the night, long after Eliza lay herself down in her bed and hugged her knees to her chest, full of a feeling she could put no name to, a feeling that exploded out from her heart and fizzled in every appendage. By the time Higgins ascended the stairs, Eliza was asleep and dreaming.
March 1915

It was a blustery early-spring Thursday afternoon, and Eliza Doolittle was quite put out. Thursdays were meant to be her piano lessons, but when she had arrived at the home of the instructor, Mrs. Davies, she had been turned away. Mrs. Davies was not well-off enough to have a housekeeper, but a friend of hers answered the door and shooed Eliza off. “Your teacher has influenza, and a young thing like you oughtn’t be anywhere near her. Go home, and ring before you come next week.” With that, the door was shut in Eliza's face.

Eliza didn’t know what to do with herself; she hadn't brought any money for shopping, only enough for cab fare. She shook her head in annoyance and decided to walk home. It was only a mile or so, and she was wearing her sturdiest, most sensible shoes, mostly because she hated losing footing on the piano pedals when she wore her more ladylike footwear.

So she ambled towards Wimpole Street, walking along the edge of Hyde Park then striking out towards Marylebone. The wind was strong but did not handicap her stroll. It was dry, at least, and not especially chilly.

Normally she was gone for over an hour for her piano lessons, and she knew Higgins jealously guarded the time without her – she was never permitted to skip a lesson or switch to another day – so she took her time on the walk, but still, she was home a quarter-hour or so before she ought to have been by rights.

She used her key on the front door and slipped in as quietly as humanly possible. She had no wish to disturb her teacher during one of the two hours of weekly private time he clung to. But she heard voices – a multitude of voices! – resounding in the study, and her curiosity got the better of her within moments. She slipped into the drawing room, took a seat noiselessly in an overstuffed armchair where she could hear the voices clearly but they could not see her, and listened.

“Now, Jane,” Higgins' voice rang out. “Give us an example of 'shall' in the second person.”

“Which one's that, again?” came a woman's voice, and Eliza's breath caught in her throat. The Cockney accent! Was this the girl who'd come on Christmas Eve?

“Second person is 'you','” Higgins explained patiently. “Let's hear it, 'You shall . . . .”

Jane groaned a bit. “You shall . . . you shall eat dinner.”

“Not a very strong example, Jane,” Higgins chastised. “Remember, 'you shall,' or 'he shall,' is only to be used when you are not sure it will happen, but you very much wish it to. Anyone else? Yes, Marta?”

Another voice, but with the same accent. “You shall be safe,” she hazarded.

“I like that better,” said Higgins. “It's not black-and-white, but I do like that better. How about we get an example from Lisbet before we move on?”

A third voice: “You shall not go to war.”

“Ah,” Higgins said. “Well, a universal sentiment these days, I think. Now, we are almost out of time, but Marta, it's your week to recite Shakespeare. Try to drink in his language, ladies. He is the pinnacle of achievement in our common tongue. Marta? Sonnet 40.”
“Oh, please, Mr. Higgins, can you do it line-by-line with me? I'm ever so nervous.”

“Nervous!” scoffed Higgins. “You need confidence! You ought to hear my Eliza reciting poetry. That lass has confidence in spades. I swear she would make the poets themselves weep.”

Eliza, rapt in her secret spot, froze at the mention of her name.

Jane’s voice piped up teasingly. “If Mrs. Higgins recites so pretty, when do we poor girls have a chance to hear it?”

“Now, ladies, you know my Eliza is terribly busy. Marta, don't think I've forgotten you. Begin: *Take all my loves, my love, yea, take them all . . . .*”

Eliza was frozen in her chair, wondering if the roiling in her breast was terror or something else. Higgins was teaching Cockney girls the basics of proper English speech . . . and those girls believed Eliza was the mistress of the household; to be plain, that she was married to their teacher. And Higgins was not disabusing them of this notion.

She sat silently till poor Marta struggled through *Lascivious grace, in whom all ill well shows, Kill me with spites; yet we must not be foes.* Then she silently rose and slipped outside the house again, waiting for the girls to show their faces.

It wasn't long before the trio burst out of the house chattering and laughing. Eliza made as though she were walking up the sidewalk when she was surprised by them. “Ladies!” she called out. “Are you Professor Higgins' students?”

The three of them looked askance at her, but when she added, “I am Eliza,” they cried out and surrounded her like ants swarming to a candied fruit.

“How do you ladies normally find your way back home?” she asked them.

“We ain't going home, ma'am,” Jane explained. “We're on our way to our work. Covent Gardens, selling things.”

“Of course,” Eliza said graciously. “Allow me to hail a taxi and ride with you. I have so many questions, but I have no intention of making you late for work.”

The Covent Garden girls shared a slightly perplexed look, but accepted Eliza's largesse without comment. She was able to snag a taxi quickly, and the four women piled into the back and gave the driver their direction. Eliza's appearance made the transaction go much smoother than it might have otherwise.

As they settled themselves, Eliza took in the three girls: they all had the rangy look of young people not well-fed enough to put any real flesh on their frames. Marta was a little prettier than the other two, with dark hair, rosy cheeks, and a sweet smile. Jane and Lisbet were a little closer to Eliza's memory of the girls of Covent Garden, all suspicion and sharp edges. Eliza made a mental note to not say anything so definitive that it might conflict with whatever Higgins had already told them. “I apologize for not being present during your lessons, ladies,” Eliza began. “I hope they have been fruitful for you thus far.”

“I think I talk a little more proper now,” Marta offered. “Course, I have to really think about it. If I don't set me mind on it, I talk just like I did a year or two back.”

Eliza wanted to commiserate – even now, it took some effort for her to sounds as she did – but thought better of it. “So you have been taking these lessons for a number of years?”
“Lisbet's been at it longer than either of us, ain't that right, Lisbet?” offered Jane.

The quiet girl nodded.

“And how long is that, Lisbet?” prompted Eliza.

“Going on three years,” she said softly. And in fact, her accent was not as harsh as her compatriots'; she said “three” with a proper “th” rather than an “f” sound.

“Three years!” exclaimed Eliza. “Goodness, that is incredible dedication. Were you his first weekly student?”

“No ma'am, but I knew her. The first was Helen Smith, and she works in a dressmaker's shop now.” That last was said with a considerable amount of pride.

“And how long did Helen have to study?”

Lisbet frowned and started counting on her fingers. “Lessee, ma'am . . . I know she started 'round Christmastime, the year the king was crowned.”

“That was 1911,” Eliza supplied. She remembered it vividly. It had been mere days after her failure at the Ascot races. Higgins and Pickering had taken her to Brighton to get her mind off it. She'd seen the ocean for the first time. Higgins had bought her a little gold ring that fitted her pinky finger perfectly. And the papers had been full of sketches of the grandeur of King George's coronation. Pickering had bought a paper from the newsman around the corner from their hotel, and she and Pickering had gone over the paper with a fine-toothed comb for any stories about the coronation. Higgins had sat in a corner and complained bitterly about the “needless expense” of “royal frippery.”

“All right, 'round Christmastime 1911, then,” Lisbet agreed. “The Professor graduated her summer before last. We had a special cake at teatime, and Helen cried. 'Course, that was well before you and the Professor was married.”

Eliza had no intention of lying outright, but she was not going to correct their misapprehensions.

“Yes, we were not married at that time.”

“We've all wanted to meet you ever so long, ma'am,” Marta broke in. “One day we show up for our lessons and we see a lady's things all over the house! We ask the Professor and he just smiles all secret-like and says, 'Those are my Liza's.'” Her impression of Higgins was shockingly skillful, and Eliza suspected the girls of teasing him behind his back when they walked to and from lessons. “But we ask when was we gonna meet you, and he just frowns and says 'My Liza is a very busy lady.'”

“Did he tell you anything about where I am during your lessons?” Eliza asked, and at the trio of shaking heads, she decided the truth was easiest. “I think the Professor didn't want to embarrass me. The truth is that my education is far from finished, and so I am often out at lessons. Today was supposed to be my piano lesson, but my teacher canceled it unexpectedly.”

Jane laughed. “We'd cooked up so many barmy tales!”

“You must have thought I was imaginary!” said Eliza smilingly.

“Oh, no, ma'am,” Marta rejoined, quite seriously. “I never seen a man so sweet on his wife. I knew you was real, I just thought maybe you had a harelip or were a hundred years old or somesuch!”

They all laughed at that, the relieved laughter that results from a longstanding confusion being resolved. In the same moment, the taxi driver barked out, “The Theatre Royal!”
“Thank you, driver. Would you be so kind to let these ladies out and return me to Wimpole Street?”

“If you like, ma'am,” the driver shrugged. A fare was a fare.

“It was lovely to meet you all,” Eliza said to the students. “I hope to see you again soon.”

“You shall see us again soon,” Marta said sweetly, and Eliza didn't let on that she'd heard that part of the lesson. The girls piled out of the car, and the driver swung the wheel to take Eliza back home.

Eliza had very little time, on the drive home, to decide what to do with this information. She couldn't even decide how to feel about it. Certainly she felt deep admiration for Higgins' devotion to these girls; it had been over three years and he was taking in students . . . was it once a week or twice? Eliza suddenly suspected her French lessons also had the purpose of removing her from the house. At least she had an explanation for the holly wreath now; it was the obvious gift of a gaggle of grateful flower girls.

But Higgins had been lying to her all these months, at least a lie of omission; moreover, he'd misrepresented her position in the household to all his students. And Eliza was slightly suspicious of Higgins' motives in taking the students in the first place.

*You don't own him*, some rational voice inside her reminded her. Ah, yes, now she recognized that ugly feeling in the pit of her stomach: it was jealousy. Had Higgins been trying to replace her? She had left, and three months later he took on students who superficially resembled her. Granted, none of them had lived in his house, or Lisbet would have mentioned it. But he'd gone and sought out more flower girls to convert into duchesses – or at least store clerks – and what possible reason could he have for that?

Eliza realized with a sudden feeling of dread that she couldn't confront Higgins with the information before she had a firmer grasp on her own feelings. If she came to him all in a tizzy about his taking on female students while she was away, Higgins' obvious rejoinder would be that she hadn't been there, and what was it to her? And even though he was omitting the fact from her right now, he could rightfully say it was none of her business. What should Eliza care if he had six dozen flower girls lined up for language lessons? She had no exclusive claim on his time and scholarship.

But she did care, she did. Higgins was *hers*. He was *her* teacher, and *her* . . . her mind refused to fill in the blank.

What did it mean to want to marry somebody? Eliza had imagined it would go much like it had with Freddy Eynsford-Hill: a man would write her pretty letters and call her “darling,” and she would smile coyly and allow her hand to be kissed, and . . . that was about where her imagination stopped.

That was not her relationship with Henry Higgins. They quarreled over the meanings of Miltonian verse; they buried themselves in Latin dictionaries; they passed books back and forth while insisting the other read this paragraph or that so that they could debate the merits of the argument. Sometimes Higgins called her a silly girl; sometimes he called her the cleverest girl in Marylebone. He gave her everything she needed, but without ever making a show of generosity; the things she needed were simply there when she needed them, without a word passing his lips about their cost or inconvenience.

She had long thought he probably loved her, in one way or another; whether as the dearest friend of his acquaintance, or the way a man might love his wife, Eliza wasn't sure. Now there was only the question of how she felt about him, and determining that was like trying to grasp at shadows.

The car let her off at Wimpole Street, and she walked inside slowly. Higgins' voice called out to her
immediately: “Eliza! You're late!”

“My apologies, sir,” she said mechanically, only half paying attention to her surroundings. She hung up her cloak and put her handbag on the table in the foyer, barely seeing or hearing anything except the churning of her own mind. When she advanced further into the house, she saw that Higgins was sitting with a cake on a tray before him.

“You almost missed your own birthday,” he scolded.

She blinked, completely taken aback. March 11th it was, and sure enough, that was her birthday. She must have made mention of it at some point, and Higgins had made a point of remembering it.

“You're twenty-four!” he said in a jolly tone of voice. “Come, have some cake.” He took a match out of his breast pocket, struck it, and lit the one candle atop the cake.

Eliza gazed at Higgins' face in the candlelight. She sat across from him slowly, almost moving as if she were in a dream, or underwater.

“Goodness, you're dull this evening,” he teased her. “How was your lesson?”

“Perfectly well, thank you,” she lied. What was it she wanted to ask him? What question would reveal her own heart to her?

“Here's to another year older and wiser, Eliza,” Higgins said grandly as he portioned out her cake.

Eliza picked up her fork, then set it down again. “Professor, have you ever thought about marriage?”

Higgins stopped dead in the middle of his enthusiastic digging into the birthday cake. “You mean . . . generally speaking?”

“If you like, yes.”

“I was . . . .” He stopped, set down the knife, and rested his elbows on his knees. “I was engaged once.”

Eliza's heart skipped a beat. “Engaged!”

“The girl's mother was a dear friend of my mother's. The girl's name was Rose. She was pretty enough, and I knew my mother wanted me married and settled. So after a few family dinners, I proposed to Rose, and she accepted.”

Eliza's heart was in her throat. “And then what happened?”

“Then I got to know the girl,” he scoffed. At Eliza's severe look, Higgins straightened up and addressed the question seriously. “Eliza . . . she and I were not great friends, as you and I are. I barely knew her. I knew she came from a good family and had good manners, but after we became engaged, I began taking her to the theater and lending her books, and she had no interest in any of it. She would ask for my opinion on this or that, then utterly ignore it, as if she only wanted to stroke my ego by asking.”

“How did you break it off?”

Higgins looked even more uncomfortable. “Eliza, this does not paint me in the most flattering light.”

“Tell me the truth,” she commanded, the cake utterly forgotten.
“I cannot lie to you,” he said miserably. “I did not break it off. I just treated her more and more coldly until the notion of marrying me was noxious enough to her that she broke it off herself.”

Eliza nodded. “That was cowardly.”

“I admit the incident does not cover me in glory. Why did you ask about marriage?”

“I . . . I was wondering how we might continue my studies, were you to marry.”

Now it was Higgins’ turn to look blinkered. “No, no, Eliza, that is not going to happen. I have resigned myself to a bachelor’s life.”

“What if you met the perfect woman?”

“Quiet coves/His soul has in autumn,” he quoted to her. “I don't believe myself in any danger.”

“So you are absolutely determined never to marry?” she insisted.

Higgins looked at her long and hard. She was flushed, almost on the verge of tears. “I shan't say 'never,'” he responded gently. “But this will be your home so long as I live.”

She bowed her head and attended to the sad, neglected piece of birthday cake. She took a bite and barely tasted it.

“Eliza?” he ventured. “May I give you your gift?”

“I am not so churlish as to refuse a gift because I raised an impertinent line of questioning.”

He blew out a loud sigh. “All right. Just a moment.” He left and returned momentarily. “I don't believe you've ever read a novel, is that correct?”

Eliza took a moment to think about it. “I suppose I haven't. This house is not teeming with them.”

“No, I find the form distasteful as a rule,” Higgins said, a little snottily. “I do not tend to fill my mind with invented happenings when I always have more to learn about the world as it truly is.”

“And yet you love verse,” Eliza countered.

“That, Eliza, is the mark of a true gentleman. But no matter: I do not read novels, but I thought you might enjoy the genre.” He placed into her hands a wrapped book, and she opened it.

“Emma, by Jane Austen,” she read off the cover. She looked up at him. “What is it about?”

“I suppose it is about what all of Aunt Jane's novels are about, which is clever young women finding husbands.”

“Ah, is that a hint for me? Ought I to put more time into seeking out a husband?”

“Certainly not!” Higgins exploded. “It would put an end to everything we have built here. Is that what you want?”

Eliza shook her head quickly and suppressed an urge to take him by the shoulders and shake the truth out of him. “Thank you for my gift. It is much appreciated.”

“Come, let's go into dinner. I hope the cake has not spoilt your appetite.”
In point of fact Eliza didn't much feel like eating anything, but she ate enough to be polite.

Over the next few days she devoured *Emma*, and hung on every word of the climax:

> And, after proceeding a few steps, she added—“I stopped you ungraciously, just now, Mr. Knightley, and, I am afraid, gave you pain.—But if you have any wish to speak openly to me as a friend, or to ask my opinion of any thing that you may have in contemplation—as a friend, indeed, you may command me.—I will hear whatever you like. I will tell you exactly what I think.”

> “As a friend!”—repeated Mr. Knightley.—“Emma, that I fear is a word—No, I have no wish—Stay, yes, why should I hesitate?—I have gone too far already for concealment.—Emma, I accept your offer—Extraordinary as it may seem, I accept it, and refer myself to you as a friend.—Tell me, then, have I no chance of ever succeeding?”

She pictured the scene in her mind. Of course she put herself and her dearest friend into the roles tailor-made for them. And she closed her eyes and imagined what she would say, if Higgins asked her, “Have I no chance of ever succeeding?”

Infuriatingly, Austen gave her no script, only, *She said enough to shew there need not be despair.* But Eliza rather thought that it was not enough to alleviate despair. Rather, she would tell him that she never wanted to spend a day without him. That sometimes on colder nights she wondered what it would be like to be warmed by his arms rather than by the fire. That sometimes when he screwed up his mouth in utter disregard for her Latin translation, she wanted to soften that mouth with a kiss. That if she never again saw another human being’s face aside from his, it would be quite all right.

Eliza took the feeling she had for her professor and finally labeled it what it had always been, from the moment she had danced with him around the study upon her correct pronunciation of “The rain in Spain stays mainly in the plain”: love.

It is one thing to feel love, and another thing entirely to admit it to oneself. Eliza took the flower in her heart that she’d learned to call love and cradled it to her breast, not allowing it to be trampled by the daily work of memorizing her times-tables, never bringing it to the dinner table with the object of her affection. At night before she fell asleep, she whispered to the flower within her that she would not allow it to go without sunlight forever, but that she needed more time. Time to be sure that if she were to make a declaration herself, and she were rejected, that she could stand on her own two feet—because if she told Higgins she loved him and he merely patted her on the head and called her “old chum,” she would not sleep another night in the house on Wimpole Street.

And so she waited, and learned, and waited.
Higgins ought to have been responding to his ever-precarious stack of correspondence. A few professors had questions about his Universal Alphabet, and if Higgins had one professional goal, it was to spread the Higgins Universal Alphabet far and wide within the field of phonetics.

But he was wasting his time, as he did so often nowadays, daydreaming about Eliza Doolittle. It had been a little over a year since she had come back to him, and her education was now eminently respectable, if a bit patchy in places (Higgins' own grounding in philosophy, for instance, was shockingly bare). She really did have the most remarkable ear, and her French was almost natively fluent. (She had admitted to him at one point that she had learned quite a bit of Maltese, and he had listened in astonishment as she rattled off some basic sentences in a language that was like nothing he had ever heard before. He researched later and discovered it was a mishmash of Arabic and Sicilian, of all things.) Her piano teacher was ready to graduate her, saying Eliza had nothing left to learn; Higgins was trying to decide if she should move on to a different musical instrument or to another subject outside the home entirely. Needing to conceal his speech students was becoming a chore.

And why did he need to conceal them? At first because he did not want to explain to her why he had taken them on; now because the concealment had gone on too long to end it. He had been hoisted on his own petard; he freely admitted it. And he just kept plowing forward, because he could not think how to deviate from the path he'd blazed for himself.

He had taken on the speech students because he had missed Eliza, had wanted Eliza, and this had been the closest he could come in her absence. It was as simple as that. He had thought there might be a facsimile of her soul somewhere undiscovered in Covent Garden, and had quickly realized the folly of this dream. But then he had continued on because the girls were so eager to learn, so grateful, so hardworking, he felt he couldn’t let them down.

They saw him as a benevolent father-figure; he charged them for lessons, but only so much as they could afford any given week, and so quite often a girl approached him at the start of the lesson with only a bronze farthing, and he accepted it as graciously as if it’d been a silver half-crown. He fed them a hearty tea with the excuse that lessons occurred at his teatime and he wouldn't move his own teatime for all the cream in Devonshire. He often suspected it was the only substantial meal any of them ate all week. He'd graduated a few girls, and occasionally his students would report back to him how well they were doing. One had even married a gentleman! He cheered on their deception and looked forward to the day when no one in Britain could tell a well-born person from one born into the gutter.

Eliza herself was a perfect example of why gentility of birth was such a poor predictor of inner nobility. She would have been a first-rate student at Oxford, except for the fact that she had had no formal education to speak of. And the only reason she had no such education was that she was born a bastard daughter to a scoundrel of a father who could not care for his offspring.

The notion had been growing in Higgins' mind for some time – Eliza would go to Oxford, his own alma mater. Somerville College, the most prestigious of the girls' colleges, was the likeliest candidate. But he had not broached the subject with her, because he had no blueprint for how she could attend university sixty miles to the west of London and still be his daily companion in all things. And he feared if he put the choice to her, she would rightfully choose her betterment over his desire to see her face morning, noon, and night.
So he was daydreaming about his truest wish: that they would marry and go to Oxford together. He would visit Balliol, his own dear college, and bring Eliza round to all his old professors. He could do his own work as well in Oxford as in London; he'd collected an enormous number of phonograph records of various British accents, and was working towards a complete transcription of representative speech in his Universal Alphabet.

And Eliza would be ensconced in the nurturing breast of a women's college, where she could find her intellectual equals among her sex, and learn whatever she chose. He thought she might enter his field of phonetics, but he longed to see her in full control of her curriculum, rather than absorbing whatever scraps of his own long-ago education he had retained.

He was stupidly going through his mental inventory of properties in Oxford he might like to rent for them while she studied when Eliza burst in the front door. Higgins almost felt guilty, as if she'd heard his thoughts and had returned from her morning walk to disabuse him of his silly fancies.

She stormed into his study brandishing a newspaper, waving it about wildly. “Professor, how old are you??”

He was so taken aback by the question that he didn't answer immediately. She repeated herself quite agitatedly. “Professor! What year were you born in, what is your age??”

“I – I had my 42nd birthday in January.” He didn't even like to say it aloud, conscious as he was of her mere twenty-four years.

The look of wild desperation on Eliza's face broke at this statement, and she sank to her knees, dropping the newspaper on the floor beside her. She buried her face in her hands and said over and over, “God forgive me, God forgive me, God forgive me.”

He was deeply alarmed by this display, and he abandoned his chair to join her on the floor. “My dear girl, what on earth can you have done that you would need God's forgiveness for?”

He had to gently pry her hands from her face in order to continue their conversation at all. Her face was wet with tears, and her expression was unreadable. “God forgive you what, Eliza?”

“I prayed,” she whispered. “I prayed to God that they might take anyone to war, anyone at all, from the young boys on the street corners to Prince Henry, so long as you were safe. And God has spared you, my Henry, and I am glad of it, God forgive me, I am glad of it!”

Higgins, who had no sense of what she meant, picked up the newspaper and saw the front story: all men aged 18 to 41 were to be registered with the British government for voluntary service now, and, should not enough men step forward for voluntary service, for a draft later. By the accident of having been born in 1873 rather than 1874, he was not going to be swept up in this madness.

He scooped Eliza up off the floor and sat her in his loveseat, then sat beside her, holding her hands so she would not cover her face again. Eliza was nearly gasping with sobs now. “I ought to be like those women handing out white feathers to every man not in uniform, I ought to impel you to rush down to the recruiting office and offer yourself up to the Army, but I cannot, God forgive me, I cannot. The very thought – the very thought! My dear Henry! You cannot leave me, promise me!”

Higgins, who had about as much interest in joining the Army as he did in becoming a dance-hall proprietor, could have easily promised her that he would not voluntarily enlist. But instead he said, “Eliza, what did you call me?”

She looked at him, her face shining with tears. “Professor?”
“No indeed, you called me your Henry.”

She looked away, though he still had her hands within his own. “Forgive me. I meant nothing by it.”

“Damn and blast, Eliza!” he thundered. Shocked, she looked back to him. “I want you to have meant something by it. Let us put an end to this foolishness now. Tell me what you meant.”

“My feelings will come as no surprise,” she sighed, and fireworks began to go off in Higgins' heart. “You must know, you must, that I have loved you from the start.”

“I must know!” he exclaimed. “Dearest Eliza, I ’must know’ nothing of the sort. You left me and never seemed to care whether I could do without you!”

“I left,” she said, her voice growing a little stronger, “so you would learn I was perfectly serious about not being mistreated, and so I would learn that I can stand on my own two feet.”

“If you can stand on your own two feet, why on earth would you wish to be yoked to an old bachelor such as myself?”

Eliza searched his face and seemed to find what she was looking for, because she smiled. “I am afraid my heart does not much care what my feet can or cannot do.”

“Why did you never tell me?” he beseeched her.

“I could not bear the thought of telling you and having you pat me on the knee and tell me that I was a silly, foolish girl.”

“Oh! But you are a silly, foolish girl,” he rasped, and drew her to him in an instant. He captured her in his arms, and breathed in the scent of her hair. She squirmed to free her arms, and when she succeeded, she took hold of his face and pressed her lips to his.

He drew her sideways onto his lap, and she left off kissing him so she could bury her face into the crook of his shoulder. “Oh, Henry, tell me you love me.”

“You wicked, heartless girl, I have loved you since the moment you declared that you would not feel alone without me. Is that perverse? As soon as you did not need me, I found I needed you. You broke my heart when you left, and it only mended itself when you returned.” He kissed her ear, her jaw, her neck. “I must marry you at once, my Eliza.”

“You should've asked me a year ago,” she whispered.

“I had a beautiful rare bird who deigned to eat from my hand. If I brought out a gilded cage and beckoned her into it, I felt sure she would fly away. Especially as the bird had chirped at me before to tell me it would never live like that.”

“When did I say such a thing!”

“The morning you left me. At my mother's house. You said you would not marry me if I asked you.”

She pulled back from his shoulder so that she could look him in the eye. “Yes, I would have refused you had you asked me in that moment. I loved you, but I hated myself for loving someone who took so little care with me. The only way through was out. And then to return and see if you had changed.”

“No one has ever succeeded in changing me, my Liza, but then again I’m not sure anybody has ever
really tried. To all the world I was an incorrigible, smug intellectual who hid away from all society. And then you came and exposed me for what I am – just another human being with a human soul, created to need the companionship of other, compatible human souls. You laid me bare with the most compatible human soul in the world – yours, dear Eliza.”

“Ask me to marry you, ask me properly.”

“I shan't ask you,” he said recklessly. “I insist upon it. You say I have your heart; there can be no other remedy.”

“You obstinate prig.” she said, her voice low and shining, and she took his face again to kiss him.

Bright and early the next morning, they went to the church and declared their intentions. A month later, after the banns had been read on three successive Sundays, they were married without much fanfare or frippery, with only Mrs. Higgins (who was secretly delighted by the whole affair) in attendance. They sent an announcement to Pickering, and put a notice in the paper to say that lately Miss Eliza Doolittle, daughter of noted philosopher Alfred Doolittle of Lisson Grove, was wed to Professor Henry Higgins of Marylebone.

At some point during their engagement, Higgins told his fiancée about his speech students, and why he’d taken them on, and she’d put a fingers over his lips and told him she’d met the Thursday students already, and found them delightful, and that he was a gem of a man to have helped so many girls for so long. He was, somewhat ironically, struck speechless by this. They made plans for her to sit in on the Monday and Thursday lessons both, after they were married, so she could be properly introduced as Mrs. Henry Higgins.

For a wedding gift, Eliza rendered Shakespeare's Sonnet 91 (“...Thy love is better than high birth to me./Richer than wealth, prouder than garments' cost. . . .”) in the finest Italian hand anyone ever saw. She even had it framed for him, and he hung it in his study right above his desk, where he smiled up at it every five minutes for months afterwards.

For Eliza, her husband had a letter, though not from himself, and not from Pickering. “I wrote to Emily Penrose at Somerville College and explained the curious nature of your education,” Higgins explained to Eliza. “She is Principal there. She would like you to come to Oxford at your earliest convenience to sit for the entrance examination, if you are amenable to attending university, Eliza. And if you are admitted, we will decamp to Oxford after Christmas.”

Eliza took the letter in trembling hands and, with one motion of her hand, unfolded the first chapter of her future.

Chapter End Notes

It's been such a pleasure getting this out of my brain and onto the screen for anyone to read. I'm sure the number of you reading this is very small, but every Kudos left is much appreciated.

If there is any interest, I might begin researching a sequel to this. Though Higgins would've been spared in the eventual 1916 draft, he would've been caught up in a later draft that extended to men in their early 50s. I'm contemplating how that would have affected them while Eliza worked on her studies at Oxford. Nothing definite yet, though.
I cannot recommend strongly enough getting to NYC to see My Fair Lady at Lincoln Center. It plays through April 2019. It is an absolutely exquisite production.

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