

A CHRISTMAS NEEDLE

My wife passed this story along to me after she heard Eileen Campbell tell it at the last quilt guild meeting. Eileen said Eliza Spalding was her second cousin and that she found Eliza's story in a family tree album.

Pastor Arnie

Some in Forest Glen wore silk, lace, and the splendor of European passage. Others wore the look of frayed cotton and tired leather. The dichotomy of wealth expressed itself just as clearly in the physical structures within town and the surrounding countryside.

Eliza stared out a window with a frosted frame. Once a month, she and her mom went into town to stock up on needed supplies. Should there be any question, Eliza wore a frayed cotton dress. The fall harvest had ranged from bleak to depressing, if one could see any nuanced difference. Now,

on her “one day”, the December weather blew bitter cold to add to the bleakness. Nevertheless, they would bundle up and drive their aging car into town. The falling snow had subsided by the time they began the trip, but it had accomplished its winter task of hiding the drive and roadway. Her mom had a plan, though. She waited at the end of the driveway for another vehicle to come by, and then she followed the ruts the other car had cut.

The car radio played the Christmas classic of ‘Jingle Bells’, and Eliza sang along, but her mom seemed oblivious to the fun of their sleigh. They eventually made it into town without any accident. Finding a parking spot on Main Street about halfway between the grocery store and the dress shop, they stepped up onto a freshly salted sidewalk. Eliza slowly walked towards the dress shop, while her mom walked towards the grocery store. When Agatha Spalding turned around, she saw her daughter standing in front of the big dress shop window. Agatha managed a weak smile and nodded at Eliza.

Mrs. Tanner, the dress shop owner, saw Eliza outside and invited her to come inside the store.

The lady always liked to see Eliza. Perhaps she saw a little of herself in the girl when she was that age. The wonder of fabric and beautiful dresses as a teenager led to the shopkeeper's present career.

“They're beautiful, aren't they, Eliza?”

“Yes. One day, I will make one for myself.”

“Do you like to sew, Eliza?”

“I'd like to learn,” answered Eliza. “I'm saving for some fabric, thread, and a needle.”

Eliza's mom opened the dress shop door and waved to Mrs. Tanner. “Come on, Eliza. We need to get our supplies and head home before the next snowstorm moves in.”

“Goodbye, Eliza,” said Mrs. Tanner.

“Goodbye,” replied Eliza.

The two shoppers and their supplies made it home with fresh snow catching a ride down their driveway. The two weeks that followed brought snow every day, keeping everything pristine white around the house. The path to the barn succumbed to the wear of traffic, turning an ugly mix of dingy clay and snow.

Two days before Christmas, Eliza's dad came through the backdoor with a freshly cut fir from the back ridge of the farm. He promised his wife that no critters came along for the ride inside the branches of the tree. Eliza and her little sister, Emma, loved to help their mom decorate the tree with homemade ornaments from years past. There wouldn't be many presents under the tree, but the ones there would be carefully wrapped and given with love.

On Christmas morning, Eliza and Emma sat at the foot of the Christmas tree waiting for their mom and dad to join them. Eliza saw two packages with her name on them, and she eagerly awaited her turn to open them. Her first present had a tag that said, "Merry Christmas from Dad, Mom, and Emma. When she opened it up, she found a box of a dozen different spools of thread. Thanking her parents and her sister, she knew she grew one step closer to her dream.

Her second package didn't have a giver's name, and when she looked at her parents, they had puzzled looks on their faces. They knew they only had the one gift for their daughter, so the second

present came as a mystery. Eliza opened it and found a small, but extremely elegant case. Inside the case, a gold needle lay on a red velvet bed. She felt warm tears moving down her cheeks.

“Thank you, Mom and Dad. It’s beautiful.”

“We’re glad you like it, Eliza,” said her mom. “But we didn’t give it to you. We don’t know where it came from.”

A week later, Eliza and Emma received a large package in the mail. In the lower left corner of the package, it said, “Merry Christmas”. The package bore the return address of Mrs. Sarah Falcon. In the box, they found a note from their Aunt Sarah apologizing for the late arrival of their Christmas gifts. Emma clutched a plush doll, and Eliza held two yards each of four different fabrics. The very next day, the budding young seamstress began planning her first dress.

Eliza’s mom helped her lay out a simple pattern for her dress. Then the young girl began sewing. The gold needle sparkled in her hand and the stitches flowed remarkably smooth and elaborate, especially considering her limited experience.

When she finished the dress, she put it on and showed her mom.

“It’s absolutely beautiful, Eliza,” said Agatha. “I ... I... I marvel at your gift. You did far better than anything I could have ever done.”

The next month, when they went into town for supplies, Eliza wore her dress. She walked into Mrs. Tanner’s dress shop to show her what she had made. When Mrs. Tanner came up to her, Eliza turned around just like she imagined a model would do in a fancy fashion show.

“You made this, Eliza?” asked Mrs. Tanner.

“Yes. I got a needle, some thread, and some fabric for Christmas.”

“It’s beautiful. I’m glad you came in to show it to me.”

Mrs. Tanner looked closer at the stitching and piecework of the dress. Then she got a gleam in her eye.

“Eliza,” said Mrs. Tanner. “If I gave you the thread and fabric, would you make a dress for me?”

“Why ... why, yes ... I’d love to.”

A week later, she returned to Mrs. Tanner's shop with the completed dress. The shopkeeper stood in awe of the skill that the young girl possessed. She paid Eliza a fair price and made an arrangement with her where she could make as many dresses as she wanted.

Word soon got around town of Eliza's talent. Orders for all kinds of other sewing projects began coming to the Spalding's door. Eliza completed all the work on time with exquisite quality. The golden needle in her fingers moved effortlessly through the fabric with precision. As word spread to other neighboring towns, some began calling her artistry the work of 'Eliza's Golden Magic Needle'. After a while, Eliza herself began to believe she may have a 'Magic Needle'.

Everyone she created projects for praised her work, except for one woman up on Cabot Ridge in Barry County. This woman lived in a dark house almost engulfed by the surrounding forest. Just as the forest seemed to consume the dark little house, so the darkness of jealousy seemed to consume who lived inside. Regina Hawksworth paid a visit to Eliza and asked her to make her a quilt. Eliza

agreed, and when Regina returned the next month, Eliza presented her with the quilt. Regina said she loved it, but she asked if she could add a little more lace to the border. Eliza said she could easily do it right then. Regina watched Eliza open the cabinet door and pull out the case with her ‘Magic Needle’.

When she finished adding the lace, Eliza gave the quilt to Regina.

“Thank you so much,” said Regina. “I, uh ... um ... was wondering when you might be going into town again? I just needed one small thing, and I hate to ask, but if I gave you the money now, could you pick it up for me?”

“Sure. We should be going next Tuesday.”

When the day came for Eliza and her mom to go into town, Regina watched them leave from the distant woods. Then she snuck up to the house and went inside. Opening the cabinet door, she found the case with the golden needle and took it. When she got home, she immediately started a sewing project. After cutting the fabric and piecing it, she picked up the needle and began stitching, expecting the same exquisite work as Eliza’s. But her stitches

were irregular and wandering. In fact, her work was worse than anything she had ever done before. In a fit of jealous anger, she threw the gold needle and case into the river that flowed along Cabot Ridge.

When Eliza got home, she went to work on another dress. Ready to sew, she opened the cabinet door and discovered that her needle was gone. She looked everywhere, but she could not find it. Devastated, she didn't know what to do. After three days of seeing her daughter in such a depressed state, Agatha decided they should make a special trip into town to buy another needle. When they got home, Eliza took the needle and tried to thread it with some dark blue cotton thread. But her hand shook so badly, it took ten tries before she got it. How could she ever do such quality work without her golden magic needle? Finally, she took a deep breath, and began to stitch. The young woman found that her work was just as beautiful with the needle she bought from the store. Yes, Eliza learned that her golden needle wasn't really 'magic'. The skill that God had given her came from within. Did the golden needle that

mysteriously showed up under the Christmas tree give her the confidence to blossom? Possibly so.

Meanwhile, later that week, a heavy-set, elderly man with a full white beard fished something out of the river downstream from Cabot Ridge. Appearing to be a small case of some sort, the man put it inside his red sack, went back to his waiting sleigh, and headed over the mountain.