‘Nothing particular “now-a-day” as people say.’ (Eglantyne, aged 10)

‘I have a fever for dolls’, wrote nine-year old Eglantyne Jebb in 1886. In her diary she unleashed a flood of concerns about Alice, Emmie, a Scotch doll, her half-a-head doll and Old Lady Waxface, whom ‘Father cannot bear’. These were only a few of the handed-down and borrowed dolls whose misadventures Eglantyne described in detail in her diary. Like other late-Victorian girls, Emily, Louisa (Lil), Eglantyne and Dorothy Jebb were encouraged by their parents and governesses to record their activities and thoughts in diaries because it was believed that writing in a diary served an important pedagogical purpose. Not only was it a good method of introducing young girls educated at home to the mechanics of language; it was the foundation of more complicated feminine accomplishments like the writing of letters, poetry and short stories which would be enjoyed by people outside of the family circle. Anthony Fletcher says that late-Victorian girl’s diaries are important ‘reflective exercises in self-scrutiny’. The historical significance of girls’ diaries, letters and compositions, according to Carolyn Steedman, lies in what they reveal about what girls were taught, and by whom, and what they actually learned. Eglantyne loved to write, and throughout her life the written word was her favourite method of communication about personal and political matters. This chapter shows that there is nothing in her girlhood diaries, letters and vignettes to suggest that she was more likely than any of her sisters to follow in her mother’s footsteps and through philanthropy become the ‘saviour’ of unwanted, neglected and abandoned children. Yet the Jebb sisters’ girlhood writing reveals a great deal about the complicated family dynamics and how their relationships with their father, mother, Aunt

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Louisa and each other influenced the decisions Eglantyne made as she travelled from girlhood to young womanhood in the decades of the 1880s and 1890s.

Eglantyne was born in 1876. She was Arthur and Tye’s fourth child. She had periwinkle eyes and red-gold hair and her mother’s diary