

Mathews Joanna Hooe

**Nellie's Housekeeping. Little
Sunbeams Series**



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Nellie's Housekeeping / Little Sunbeams Series:*

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Joanna Mathews

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I.

HARD AT WORK

"NELLIE, will you come down to the beach now?"

"No!" with as much shortness and sharpness as the little word of two letters could well convey.

"Why not?"

"Oh! because I can't. Don't bother me."

And, laying down the pencil with which she had been writing, Nellie Ransom pushed back the hair from her flushed, heated face, drew a long, weary sigh, took up the Bible which lay at her elbow, and, turning over the leaf, ran her finger slowly and carefully down the page before her.

Carrie stood with one elbow upon the corner of the table at which her sister sat, her chin resting in her palm as she discontentedly watched Nellie, while with the other hand she swung back and forth by one string the broad straw hat she was accustomed to wear when playing out of doors.

"I think you might," she said presently. "Mamma says I can't go if you don't, and I want to go so."

"I can't help it," said Nellie, still without taking her eyes from her Bible. "I wish you'd stop shaking the table so."

"How soon will you come?" persisted Carrie, taking her elbow from the table.

"When I'm ready, and not before," snapped Nellie. "I wish you'd let me alone."

Carrie began to cry.

"It's too bad," she whimpered. "Mamma says, if I go at all, I must go early, so as to be back before sundown, 'cause my cold is so bad. There won't be any time for me to play."

Nellie made no answer, but, having found what she wanted in her Bible, began to write again, copying from the page of the Holy Book before her.

Presently Carrie, forgetting her caution, tossed down her hat, and pettishly plumped both elbows upon the table, muttering, —

"I think you're real mean."

"Stop shaking the table, or I won't go at all," said Nellie, in a loud, irritable tone. "Ask mamma to let Ruth take you."

"She can't spare Ruth, she says. The baby is fretful, and she don't feel well enough to take care of it herself; and I think you might go with me. I haven't been to the beach for four days, because I was sick," pleaded Carrie, wiping the tears from her eyes.

"Well, I'm too busy to go now. You'll have to wait until I'm

ready," said Nellie. "I'll come by and by."

"By and by will leave hardly any time," said Carrie, with a wistful glance out upon the lawn, where the shadows were already growing long.

No answer; only the rustle of Nellie's sheet of paper as she turned it over.

Carrie wandered restlessly about the room for a moment or two; then, coming back to the table, began idly to turn over some loose papers which lay at Nellie's right hand.

Nellie snatched them from her.

"Now, look here," she said, "if you don't go away and let me and my things alone, I won't go to the beach at all. You hinder me all the time, and I won't be so bothered."

"Cross, hateful thing!" said Carrie, passionately. "I don't b'lieve you mean to go at all. I wish I had a better sister than you."

Nellie turned once more to the Bible, but deigned no answer to this outburst.

Carrie looked back from the door, which she had reached on her way from the room, and said in a tone one shade less furious than her last, —

"You're always poking over your Bible now, but it don't seem to teach you to be kind. You grow crosser and crosser every day; and you're not one bit like you used to be."

"Carrie!" called Mrs. Ransom's gentle voice from the next room; and Carrie vanished, leaving Nellie, as she had said she wished to be, alone.

Did her work go smoothly after that?

Not very, at least for a few moments. Perhaps mamma had heard all that had passed, and Nellie did not feel quite satisfied that she should have done so. What had she said to Carrie? She could hardly recollect herself, so divided had been her attention between her little sister and the task before her; but she was quite certain that she had been "cross," and spoken to Carrie in an unkind manner, apart from her refusal to accompany the child, who, she well knew, had been confined to the house for the last few days, and deprived of her usual play and exercise in the open air.

But then Carrie might just as well have waited patiently a few moments till she was ready to go, and not bothered her so. She would go presently when she had looked out three – well, no – five – six more verses, and written them out; and once more she took up the Bible.

But the words before her eyes mingled themselves with those which were sounding in her ears.

"Not like she used to be! Crosser and crosser every day!"

Ah! none knew this better than Nellie herself, and yet she strove, or thought she did, against the growing evil.

Well, there was no use thinking about it now. She would finish the task she had set herself, call Carrie, make it up with her, and go to the beach.

And once more she was absorbed in her work, in spite of aching head and burning cheeks, – so absorbed that she did not

heed how time was passing, did not heed that the six verses had grown into ten, until, as she was searching for the eleventh, the last golden rays of the sun fell across her paper, and, looking up quickly, she saw that he was just sinking in the far west. Too late for Carrie to go out now! The poor child had lost her afternoon stroll. Oh, she was so sorry! How could she forget?

Hastily shutting the Bible and pushing it from her, she gathered up her papers, thrust them into her writing-desk, and turned the key, ran into the hall for her hat, and went in search of Carrie.

Where was she? She had not heard the child's voice since she left her in such a temper, nor had she heard Daisy's. Probably the two little sisters had found some other way of amusing themselves, and Carrie would have forgotten her disappointment. Well, she would be sure to give her a good play on the beach to-morrow.

Where could the children be? For, as Nellie thought this to herself, she was looking in all the places where they were usually to be found, but they were nowhere to be seen. She called in vain about house and garden; no childish voice answered.

"I suppose Carrie is provoked with me, and won't speak to me, and won't let Daisy," she said to herself. "Well, I'm sure I don't care."

But she did care, though she would not acknowledge it to herself; and she sat down upon the upper step of the porch, and watched the last rosy sunset tints fading out of the soft clouds

overhead, with a restless, discontented feeling at her heart. The stillness and the beauty of the scene did not seem to bring peace and rest to her troubled little soul.

And why was it troubled?

Because for days past – nay, for weeks past – Nellie had been conscious of an increasing ill-humor and irritability, – "crosser and crosser every day," – yes, that was it; but why was it? She did not know, she could not help it; she was sure she tried hard enough; and every night and morning, when she said her prayers and asked not to be "led into temptation," she always thought particularly of the temptation to be cross, for that seemed what she had to struggle with in these days.

That, and one other thing.

Nellie tried to put that other ugly failing out of sight, would not believe that she was guilty of it; and yet it would come before her sometimes, as it did now; and as she thought of little kindnesses, even little duties unperformed and neglected, she wondered if she were really growing selfish.

She should so hate to be selfish.

And yet – and yet – people were always asking her to do favors at such inconvenient times, when she was so busy; and somehow she was always busy now. There was so much she wanted to do; so much to accomplish this summer, before she returned to the city and to school; and she did not like to be interrupted when she was reading or studying. It was so hard to put her mind to it again, and she was sure it was right to try to improve herself

all she could.

The click of the gate-latch roused her from her troublesome thoughts; and, looking around, she saw her mother crossing the lawn, Carrie holding her hand and walking quietly by her side, Daisy jumping and skipping before them.

Daisy was always skipping and jumping. What a happy, merry little thing she was! never still one moment, except when she was asleep, and not always so very still then, little roll-about that she was!

But where had they all been?

The toys the children had with them soon answered this question, for Daisy was pulling a wagon which had been filled with stones and shells. The most part of these, however, lay scattered here and there along the way home; for Daisy's prancings and caperings – she was supposed to be a pony just now – had jolted them out of the wagon and shed them broadcast on the path.

Still the few that were left at the bottom of the wagon told whence they had come; and the tiny spade and pail full of shells which Carrie held told the same story.

But how tired and languid mamma looked! how wearily she walked across the lawn!

Nellie ran down to meet her.

"Why, mamma!" she exclaimed. "Have you been down to the beach?"

"Yes, Nellie."

"But, mamma, you look so tired. Didn't you know that was too long a walk for you?"

Nellie, a child grave and wise for her years, always, or almost always, showed a tender, thoughtful care for her mother; and it was sometimes really droll to see how she checked or advised her against any imprudence, even gently reproved, as in the present case, when the deed was done.

"You ought not to do it, mamma, you really ought not."

"I had promised Carrie that she should go this afternoon," said Mrs. Ransom, "and I could not bear that she should be disappointed after being shut up in the house for four days."

"Mamma," said Carrie, "I'm sure I'd rather have stayed home than had you make yourself too tired. I didn't know it was too far for you. I really didn't. Oh, I'm so sorry you said you'd take me! Will it make you ill again?"

"No, dear. I think not. I do not believe it will hurt me, though I do feel rather tired," said Mrs. Ransom, smiling cheerfully down into the little troubled face which looked up so penitently into her own.

Self-reproached, humbled and repentant, Nellie could find no words to say what she would, or rather the choking feeling in her throat stifled her voice; and she could only walk silently by her mother's side until they reached the piazza, where Mrs. Ransom sank wearily into a chair, giving her hat and parasol into the hands of the eager little Carrie, who seemed to feel as if she could not do enough to make her mother comfortable after the

sacrifice she had made for her; and Daisy, who always thought she must do what Carrie did, followed her example.

Carrie brought a footstool, Daisy immediately ran for another, and nothing would do but mamma must put one foot on each. Carrie brought a cushion to put behind her, and Daisy, vanishing into the library, presently reappeared, rolling along with a sofa pillow in each hand, and was quite grieved when she found that mamma could not well make use of all three. Then Carrie bringing a fan, and fanning mamma, Daisy must do the same, and scratched mamma's nose, and banged her head, and thumped her cheek with the enormous Japanese affair which would alone serve her purpose; to all of which mamma submitted with the meekest resignation, only kissing the dear little, blundering nurse, whenever such mishaps occurred, and saying, —

"Not quite so hard, darling."

And meanwhile Nellie, with that horrid lump in her throat, could do nothing but stand leaning against the piazza railing, wishing — oh, so much! — that she had gone with Carrie when she asked her, and so spared mamma all this fatigue. Mamma had uttered no word of reproach; she knew that none was needed just now, although she feared that under the same temptation Nellie would do the same thing again.

But what greater reproach could there be than that pale face and languid voice, and the knowledge that but for her selfishness — yes, selfishness, Nellie could not shut her eyes to it — mamma need not have gone to the beach.

And she knew that it was necessary and right that her mother should be shielded from all possible fatigue, trouble, and anxiety; she knew that they had all come to Newport this summer because the doctor had recommended that air as best for her, and that papa had taken this small but pretty cottage at a rather inconvenient expense, so that she might be quite comfortable, have all her family about her, and gain all the benefit possible. Every one was so anxious and careful about her, as there was need to be; and she had improved so much the last fortnight in this lovely air, and under such loving care.

And now! She had been the first one to cause her any fatigue or risk, – she who had meant to be such a good and thoughtful young nurse.

To be sure, she had never dreamed that mamma would take Carrie to the beach, but still it was all her fault. Oh dear! oh dear!

Carrie and Daisy chattered away to one another and to their mother, while the latter sat silently resting in her easy-chair, thinking more of Nellie than of them, thinking anxiously too.

Suddenly a choking sob broke in upon the children's prattle, – a sob that would have its way, half stifled though it was.

"Nellie, dear!" said Mrs. Ransom. "Come here, my child," – as Nellie turned to run away.

Nellie came with her hands over her face.

"Don't feel so badly, dear. I am not so very tired, and I do not think it will hurt me," said Mrs. Ransom. "I thought I was stronger than it seems I am; but another time we will both be

more careful, hey?"

And she drew away Nellie's hand, and tenderly kissed her hot, wet cheek.

Nellie went down upon one of the pair of stools occupied by her mother's feet, somewhat to Daisy's disgust, who only forgave her by reason of the distress she saw her in, and buried her face on her knee.

She was never a child of many words, and just now they failed her altogether; but her mother needed none.

"What did Nellie do? Did she hurt herself?" asked the wondering Daisy.

"No," said Carrie. "She hasn't hurt herself, but she" – Carrie's explanations were not apt to prove balm to a wounded spirit, and her mother checked her by uplifted finger and a warning shake of her head, taking up the word herself.

"No," she said to Daisy. "Nellie is troubled about something, but we won't talk about it now."

"Yes, we'll never mind, won't we?" said Daisy. "But I'll fan her to make her feel better."

And, suiting the action to the word, she slipped down from her perch beside her mother, and began to labor vigorously about Nellie's head and shoulders with her ponderous instrument.

Somehow this struck Nellie as funny, and even in the midst of her penitent distress she was obliged to give a low laugh; a nervous little laugh it was, too, as her mother noticed.

"She's 'most better now," said Daisy, in a loud whisper, and

with a confidential nod at mamma. "I fought I'd cure her up. This is a very nice fan when people don't feel well, or feel sorry," she added, as she paused for a moment, with an admiring look at the article in question; "it makes such a lot of wind."

And she returned desperately to her work, bringing down the fan with a whack on Nellie's head, and then apologizing with —

"Oh! I didn't mean to give you that little tap, Nellie; it will waggle about so in my hands."

Nellie laughed again, she really could not help it, though she felt ashamed of herself for doing so; and now she raised her head, wiped her eyes, and smiled at Daisy; the little one fully believing that her attentions had brought about this pleasing result.

Perhaps they had.

But although cheerfulness was for the time restored, poor Nellie's troubles had not yet come to an end for that evening.

II.

A TALK WITH PAPA

MR. RANSOM had said that the family were not to wait tea for him, as he might be late; but they were scarcely seated at the table when he came in and took his place with them.

"Elinor," he said immediately, looking across the table at his wife, "I met Mr. Bradford, and he told me he had seen you down on the beach with the children. I told him he must be mistaken, as you were not fit for such a walk, but he insisted he was right. It is not possible you were so imprudent, is it?"

"Well, yes, if you will call it imprudence," answered Mrs. Ransom, smiling. "I do not feel that it has hurt me."

"Your face tells whether it has hurt you or no," said her husband in a vexed tone; "you look quite tired out: how could you do so?"

"I wanted Carrie to have the walk, and I felt more able to go with her than to spare the nurse and take care of baby myself," answered Mrs. Ransom, trying to check farther questioning by a side glance at Nellie's downcast face.

But Mr. Ransom did not understand, or did not heed the look she gave him.

"And where was our steady little woman, Nellie?" he said. "I thought she was to be trusted to take care of the other children

at any time or in any place."

"And so she is," said Mrs. Ransom, willing, if possible, to spare Nellie any farther mortification, "but she was occupied this afternoon."

"That's nonsense," exclaimed Mr. Ransom, with another vexed look at his wife's pale face; "Nellie could have had nothing to do of such importance that it must hinder her from helping you. Why did you not send her?"

"Papa," murmured poor Nellie, "I – mamma – I – please – it was all my fault. I – I was cross to Carrie. Please don't blame mamma."

Nellie's humble, honest confession did not much mollify her father, who was a quick-tempered man, rather apt to be sharp with his children if any thing went wrong; but another pleading look from his wife checked any very severe reproof, and in answer to her "I really think the walk did not hurt me," he contented himself with saying shortly, "I don't agree with you," and let the matter drop.

No sooner was Nellie released from the tea-table than she was busy again over her Bible and the slips of paper, quite lost to every thing else around her. The children chattered away without disturbing her; and she did not even notice that papa and mamma, as they talked in low tones on the other side of the room, were looking at her in a manner which would have made it plain to an observer that she was the subject of their conversation.

By and by Daisy came to kiss her for good-night. She raised

her head slightly, and turned her cheek to her little sister, answering pleasantly enough, but with an absent air, showing plainly that her thoughts were busy with something else.

Daisy held strong and natural objections to this not over-civil mode of receiving her caress, and, drawing back her rosy lips from the upraised cheek, said, —

"No, I shan't kiss you that way. I want your mouf; it's not polite to stick up a cheek."

An expression of impatience flitted over Nellie's face; but it was gone in an instant, and, dropping her pencil, she put both arms about Daisy, and gave her a hearty and affectionate kiss upon her puckered little mouth.

Daisy was satisfied, and ran off, but, pausing as she reached the door, she looked back at her sister and said, —

"You're an awful busy girl these days, Nellie; the play is all gone out of you."

Nellie smiled faintly, hardly heeding the words; but other eyes which were watching her thought also that she did indeed look as if "all the play had gone out" of her. She returned to her work as Daisy left her side, but even as she did so she drew herself up with a sigh, and passed her hand wearily across her forehead.

"It is time a stop was put to this," whispered her father, and mamma assented with a rather melancholy nod of her head.

Not two minutes had passed when Daisy's little feet were heard pattering down the stairs again, and her glowing face appeared in the open door.

"Ruth says she can't put baby down to put me to bed," she proclaimed with an unmistakable air of satisfaction in the circumstances which made it necessary for mother or sister to perform that office for her. "Who wants to do it?" she added, looking from one to the other.

Mrs. Ransom looked over at Nellie, as if expecting she would offer to go with Daisy; but the little girl paid no attention, did not even seem to hear the child.

Mrs. Ransom rose and held out her hand to Daisy.

"Nellie," said Mr. Ransom sharply, "are you going to let your mother go upstairs with Daisy?"

Nellie started, and looked up confusedly.

"Oh! I didn't know. Do you want me to, mamma? Couldn't Ruth put her to bed?" she said, showing that she had, indeed, not heard one word of what had passed.

"Ruth cannot leave the baby," said her mother; "but I do not want you to go unwillingly, Nellie. I would rather do it myself."

"I am quite willing, mamma," and the tone of her voice showed no want of readiness. "I did not know you were going. Come, Daisy, dear."

But she could not refrain from a backward, longing look at her book and papers as she left the room.

She was not unkind or cross to her little sister while she was with her; far from it. She undressed her carefully and tenderly, – with rather more haste than Daisy thought well, perhaps, but doing for her all that was needful; and, if she were more silent

than usual, that did not trouble Daisy, *she* could talk enough for both.

But her thoughts were occupied with something quite different from the duty she had before her; she forgot one or two little things, and would even have hurried Daisy into bed without hearing her say her prayers, but for the child's astonished reminder. This done, and Daisy laid snugly in her crib, she kissed her once more, and gladly escaped downstairs. Daisy was never afraid to be left alone; besides, there was the nurse just in the next room.

"Are you going back to that horrid writing?" asked Carrie, as Nellie took her seat at the table again.

"I am going back to my writing," answered Nellie, dryly.

Carrie looked, as she felt, disgusted. Papa and mamma had gone out on the piazza; but mamma would not let her be in the evening air, and she wanted amusement within; and here was Nellie going back to that "horrid writing," which had occupied her so much for the last three days.

Nellie had plainly neither time nor thought to bestow upon her; and she wandered restlessly and discontentedly about the room, fretting for "something to do."

But a few minutes had passed when a loud thump sounded overhead; and a shriek followed, which rang through the house. There was no mistaking the cause: Daisy had fallen out of bed, as Daisy was apt to do unless she were carefully guarded against it; and the catastrophe was one of such frequent occurrence,

and Daisy so seldom received injury therefrom, that none of the family were much alarmed, save her mother.

Mrs. Ransom ran upstairs, followed quickly by Nellie and Carrie, and more slowly by her husband, who hoped and believed that Daisy had had her usual good fortune, and accomplished her gymnastics without severe injury to herself.

It proved otherwise this time, however; for, although not seriously hurt, Daisy had a great bump on her forehead, which was fast swelling and turning black, and a scratch upon her arm; and she was disposed to make much of her wounds and bruises, and to consider herself a greatly afflicted martyr.

How did it happen? Daisy should have been fastened in her little bed, so that she could not fall out.

"Nellie," said Mrs. Ransom, as she held the sobbing child upon her lap and bathed the aching little head with warm water and arnica, – "Nellie, did you fasten up the side of the crib after you had put Daisy in bed?"

"No, mamma, I don't believe I did," said conscience-stricken Nellie. "I don't quite remember, but I am afraid I did not."

"And why didn't you? You know she always rolls out, if it is not done," said her mother.

"I – I suppose I did not remember, mamma. I was thinking about something else; and I was in such a hurry to go downstairs again. I am so sorry!"

And she laid her hand penitently on that of Daisy, who was regarding her with an injured air, as one who was the cause of

her misfortunes.

"Yes, I am afraid that was it, Nellie," said Mrs. Ransom. "Your mind was so taken up with something else that you could not give proper attention to your little sister. I am sorry I did not come myself to put her to bed."

It was the second time that day that Nellie might have been helpful to her mother, but she had only brought trouble upon her.

She stood silent and mortified.

Mr. Ransom took Daisy from her mother and laid her back in her crib, taking care that she was perfectly secured this time; then went downstairs. But Daisy was not to be consoled, unless mamma sat beside her and held her hand till she went to sleep; so Mrs. Ransom remained with her, dismissing Carrie also to bed.

Nellie assisted her to undress, making very sure that nothing was forgotten this time, and then returned to see if her mother was ready to go downstairs. But Daisy was most persistently wide awake; her fall had roused her from her first sleep very thoroughly; and she found it so pleasant to have mamma sitting there beside her that she had no mind to let herself float off to the land of dreams, but kept constantly exciting herself with such remarks as —

"Mamma, the's a lot of tadpoles in the little pond." — "Mamma, the's lots of niggers in Newport; oh! I forgot, you told me not to say niggers; I mean colored, black people." — "Mamma, when I'm big I'll buy you a gold satin dress." Or suddenly rousing just as her mother thought she was dropping off to sleep, and

putting the startling question, "Mamma, if I was a bear, would you be my mamma?" and mamma unhappily replying "No," she immediately set up a dismal howl, which took some time to quiet.

Finding this to be the state of affairs, and warned by her mother's uplifted finger not to come in the room, Nellie went downstairs again, meaning to return to her former occupation. But, to her surprise, the Bible, which she remembered leaving open, was closed and laid aside, her papers all gone.

"Why," she said, "who has meddled with my things, I wonder?"

"I put them all away, Nellie," said her father.

"I am going to write more, papa."

"Not to-night. Put on your hat and come out with me for a little walk," said Mr. Ransom.

Nellie might have felt vexed at this decided interference with her work; but the pleasure of a moonlight walk with papa quite made up for it, and she was speedily ready, and her hand in his.

Mr. Ransom led her down upon the beach, Nellie half expecting all the time some reproof for the neglect which had caused so much trouble; but her father uttered none, talking cheerfully and pleasantly on other subjects.

It was a beautiful evening. The gentle waves, shimmering and glancing in the moonlight, broke softly on the beach with a soothing, sleepy sound; and the cool salt breeze which swept over them came pleasantly to Nellie's flushed, hot cheeks and throbbing head. She and her father had the beach pretty much

to themselves at this hour; and, finding a broad, flat stone which offered a good resting-place, they sat down upon it, and watched the waves as they curled and rippled playfully upon the white sands.

"Now," thought Nellie, when they were seated side by side, — "now, surely, papa is going to find fault with me; and no wonder if he does. Twice to-day I've made such trouble for mamma, when I never meant to do a thing! I don't see what ailed me to-day. It has been a horrid day, and every thing has gone wrong."

And Nellie really did not know, or perhaps I should say had not considered, what it was that had made every thing go wrong with her for the greater part of the day.

But no; again she was pleasantly disappointed. Papa talked on as before, and called her attention to the white sails of a ship gleaming far off in the silver moonlight, and told her an interesting story of a shipwreck he had once witnessed on this coast.

As they were on their way home, however, and when they had nearly reached the house, Mr. Ransom said, —

"Nellie, what is this you are so busy with, my daughter?"

"What, my writing do you mean, papa?" asked Nellie, looking up at him.

"Yes, some Bible lesson, is it not?"

"Not just a lesson, papa," answered Nellie. "Miss Ashton gave us three or four subjects to study over a little this summer, if we chose, and to find as many texts about as we could; but it is not

a lesson, for we need not do it unless we like, and have plenty of time."

"Then it is not a task she set you?" said Mr. Ransom.

"Oh, no, papa! not at all. She said she thought it would be a good plan for us to read a little history every day, or to take any other lesson our mammas liked, but she did not even first speak of this of herself; for Gracie Howard asked her to give us some subjects to hunt up texts about, and then Miss Ashton said it would be a good plan for us to spend a little time at that if we liked, and she gave us four subjects. She said it would help to make us familiar with the Bible."

"Yes," said Mr. Ransom musingly, and as if he had not heeded, if indeed he had heard, the last sentence of her speech.

"And I have such a long list, papa," continued Nellie, "that is, on the first subject; and on the second I have a good many, too, but I am not through with that. I had very few the day before yesterday; but then, you know, Maggie Bradford came to see me, and she is doing it, too, and she had so many more than I had that I felt quite ashamed. Then the same afternoon I had a letter from Gracie Howard, and she told me she had more than a hundred on the first, and nearly a hundred on the second; so I felt I must hurry up, or maybe all the others would be ahead of me. I've been busy all day to-day finding texts, and copying them."

"Is that all you have done to-day?" asked Mr. Ransom.

Nellie cannot gather from his tone whether he approves or not; but it seems to her quite impossible that he should not consider

her occupation most praiseworthy.

"Oh, no, papa!" she answered. "I have done several things besides. I read nearly twenty pages of my history twice over, and learned every one of the dates; then I studied a page of Speller and Definer, and a lesson in my French Phrase-book, and did four sums, and said '7 times' and '9 times' in the multiplication table, each four times over. 7's and 9's are the hardest to remember, so I say those the oftenest. I did all those lessons and half an hour's sewing before I went to my texts; but I've been busy with those almost ever since."

"And you have had no walk, no play, all day?" questioned Mr. Ransom.

Nellie was not satisfied with her father's tone now; it did not by any means express approbation.

"I have not played any, papa, but I had some exercise; for all the time I was learning my French phrases, I was rolling the baby's wagon around the gravel walk."

"And it was pretty much the same thing yesterday, was it not?" said Mr. Ransom.

"Well, yes, papa," rather faintly.

"Nellie," said her father, "did you ever hear the old couplet, 'All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy'?"

"Yes, papa," answered Nellie, half laughing, half reluctantly, as she began to fear that her father intended to interfere with her plans for study. "But am I 'a dull boy'?"

"Neither 'dull' nor a 'boy,'" answered her father, playfully

shaking the little hand in his. "But I fear there is danger of the former, Nellie, if you go on taking so much 'work' and no 'play.' Miss Ashton did not desire all this, if I understand you, my dear."

"Oh, no, papa! I was just doing it of myself. Miss Ashton only said, if our papas and mammas did not object, she thought it would be wiser for us to have a little lesson or reading every day. But you see, papa" – Nellie hesitated, and then came to a full stop.

"Well?" said her father, encouragingly.

"Papa, I seem to be so far behind all the girls of my age in our class. It makes me feel ashamed, and as if I must do all I could to catch up with them."

"I do not know," said Mr. Ransom. "It seems to me that a little girl who keeps the head of her spelling, history, and geography classes for at least a fair share of the time, and who has taken more than one prize for composition and steady, orderly conduct, has no need to feel ashamed before her school-fellows."

"Well, no, papa – but – but – somehow I am not so quick as the others. I generally know my lessons, and do keep my place in the classes about as well as any one; but it takes me a great deal longer than it does most of the others. Gracie Howard can learn in half the time that I can; so can Laura Middleton, Maggie Bradford, and 'most all the girls as old as I am, whom I know."

"And probably they know them and remember them no better than my Nellie," said her father.

Mr. Ransom was not afraid of making his little daughter

conceited or careless by over-praise; she had not sufficient confidence in herself or her own powers, and needed all the encouragement that could be given to her. Too much humility, rather than too little, was Nellie's snare.

"Yes, papa," she answered. "I suppose I do *remember* as well as any of the rest, and I seldom miss in my lessons; but I don't see why it is that often when Miss Ashton asks us some question about a lesson that has gone before, or about something that I know quite well, the words do not seem to come to me very quick, and one of the others will answer before I can. Miss Ashton is very good about that, papa, and sometimes it seems as if she knew I was going to answer; for she will say, 'Nellie, you know that, do you not, my dear?' and make the others wait till I can speak. But, papa, even then it makes me feel horridly, for it seems as if I was stupid not to be quick as the others, and I can't bear to have them waiting for me to find my words. So I want to study all I can, even out of school and in vacation."

Nellie's voice shook, and her father saw in the moonlight that the eyes she raised to him were full of tears.

"And you think that all this extra study is going to help you, my little girl?" he said.

"Why, yes, I thought it would, papa. I want to learn a great deal, for, oh, I would so like to be quick and clever, to study as fast and answer as well as Maggie, Gracie, or Lily! Please don't think I am vexed if the other children go above me in my classes, or that I am jealous, papa; I don't mean to be, but I would like to

be very wise, and to know a great deal."

"I certainly shall not think you are envious of your schoolmates and playfellows, my daughter, however far they may outstrip you, and papa can feel for you in your want of readiness and quickness of speech, for he is troubled sometimes in the same way himself; but, Nellie, this is a misfortune rather than a fault, and, though you would do well to correct it as far as you can, I do not know that you are taking the right way; and I am sure, my dear, that you have plainer and nearer duties just now."

"You say that, papa, because I was disobliging to Carrie this afternoon, and careless with dear little Daisy to-night, and I know it serves me right; but do you think it is not a very great duty for me to improve myself all I can?"

"Certainly, Nellie, I think it your duty to make the most of your advantages, and that you should try to improve yourself as much as you can at proper times and in proper places; but I do not think it wise or right that my little girl should spend the time that she needs for rest or play in what is to her hard work and study. My child, you are doing now four times as much as you should do, while at the same time you are forgetting or neglecting the little every-day duties that fall to you. Is it not so?"

"I dare say you think so, papa, after to-day," answered Nellie, with quivering voice; "but I can try not to let myself be so taken up again with my lessons, and then there will be no harm in it, will there?"

"Have you felt very well, quite like yourself, during the last

few days, Nellie?"

"Well, no, sir," said Nellie, reluctantly. "Not quite. I feel rather tired every morning when I wake up, and my head aches a good deal 'most all the time. And – and – I *don't* feel quite like myself, for I feel cross and hateful, and I don't think I usually am very cross, papa."

"And the harder you work, the worse you feel; is it not so?"

"Well, I don't know, papa; but you do not think study makes my head ache, or makes me cross, do you?"

"Certainly I do, dear; too much study, too much work, which may make Nell a dull girl, if she does not take care. Your little mind has become over-tired, Nellie; so has your little body; and health and even temper must suffer."

"I'll try not to be cross or careless again, papa," said Nellie, humbly. "And there is no need for me to play if I do not choose, is there?"

"Who gave you your health and good spirits, Nellie?"

"Why, God, papa!"

"And do you think it right, then, for you to do any thing which destroys or injures either?"

"No, papa," more slowly still, as she saw his meaning.

They had been standing for the last few moments at the foot of the piazza steps, where mamma sat awaiting them; and now, stooping to kiss his thoughtful, sensible little daughter, Mr. Ransom said, —

"We have had talk enough for to-night, Nellie; and it is past

your bed-time. Think over what we have said, and to-morrow I will talk to you again. Put texts and lessons quite out of your head for the present, and go to sleep as soon as you can. Good-night, my child."

Nellie bade him good-night, and, kissing her mother also, obeyed, going quietly and thoughtfully upstairs. That was nothing new for Nellie; but her mother's anxious ear did not fail to notice that, spite of the walk and talk with papa, her foot had not its usual spring and lightness.

III.

NELLIE A HOUSEKEEPER

MR. RANSOM acted wisely in leaving what he had said to work its own effect on his little girl. Nellie was such a sensible, thoughtful child – almost too thoughtful and quiet for her years – that she was sure to think it all over, to consider what was right, and, when she had decided that, to resolve to do what she believed to be her duty. She was honest with herself too, not making excuses for her own shortcomings when she saw them, or trying to believe that what she wished was the right thing to do because she wished it. If she saw clearly that it was wrong, wrong for *her*, a temptation and a snare, though it might be right in other circumstances, she would be sure to put it from her, hard as it might be.

And her father thought that it would be easier for her to resolve of her own accord to give up some of the tasks on which her heart was set than it would be to do so at his command. It is generally pleasanter to believe that we are guided by our own will and resolution than by that of another.

Mr. Ransom was right. Nellie did indeed think over in all seriousness the conversation she had had with her father; even more, she went back in her own mind over past weeks and months, and acknowledged to herself that for some time she had

found every thing but study irksome and troublesome to her, that lately even this had lost its pleasure, though she would persevere and felt irritated and troubled at the least interruption to the tasks she set herself. She was forced to see that she did not feel "like herself" either in mind or body; that after hours of study her head ached and throbbed, she was weary and cross, finding every thing a burden, and having no wish or energy for play or exercise. It had been especially so for the last two or three days, ever since she had worked so hard over her "Bible subjects;" and honestly, though unwillingly, with many tears, Nellie made up her mind to do what she saw to be right, and give up at least a portion of the tasks she had undertaken.

"For I do see I'm growing cross and hateful," she said to herself. "I can't bear to have the children come and ask me to play, or to do any little favor for them, and I don't like it very much whenever mamma wants me to help her. I know I *felt* provoked when she asked me to roll the baby's wagon this morning, though I don't think I let her see it. I believe I don't feel so happy or so good, or even so well, as I used to do, and I don't know – I'm afraid it is so much reading and studying makes it so. I think I'll have to make up my mind not to know as much, or to be so quick and clever as Maggie, and Gracie, and some of the others."

But this was a hard resolve for Nellie, and she fell to sleep in no happy frame of mind.

She slept later than usual the next morning, for her mother,

remembering how dull and languid she had seemed, would not let her be awakened; and Mrs. Ransom and the children were just finishing breakfast when she came downstairs.

"Why, where's papa?" asked Nellie, seeing his place was vacant.

"A telegram came this morning which called him to town very unexpectedly," said her mother. "He went in and kissed you as you lay asleep, and left his love and good-by for you, and told me to tell you he hoped to see his own old Nellie back when he comes home in a week's time."

Nellie knew what that meant, but she was sorry that papa had gone, – sorry, not only that he should have been obliged to leave home sooner than he had expected, but also that she could not now talk more with him on the matter of her studies.

However, there was her dear mother: she would listen to her, and give her all the advice and help she needed.

The children asked permission to leave the table, which was granted; but Mrs. Ransom herself sat still while Nellie took her breakfast, talking cheerily to her, and trying to tempt her very indifferent appetite by offering a little bit of this or that.

"Nellie," said her mother, when they were alone, "I was thinking of asking you how you would like to be my little housekeeper."

"Your housekeeper, mamma!" echoed Nellie, pausing in the act of buttering her biscuit, and looking at her mother with surprise.

"Yes," answered Mrs. Ransom, "or rather suppose we should be housekeeper together, you being feet and hands, and I being the head. Is that a fair division, think you?"

Nellie colored and laughed.

"Why, yes; but do you think I could, mamma?"

"I think there are a hundred little things you might do if you would like," said her mother. "I'll give you the keys, and you may make the store-room and sideboard your especial charge, keeping them in perfect order, giving out what is needed, seeing that the sugar-bowls, tea-caddy, cracker-basket, and so forth, are kept full, taking my orders to the cook, and other little things which will be a great help to me, and which will give you some useful lessons. What do you say?"

"Why, I'd like it ever so much, mamma, but" —

"Well, but what?" said Mrs. Ransom, as Nellie hesitated.

"Mamma, I think I'm rather stupid about such things, and I might make you trouble sometimes."

"Not *stupid*, Nellie; and, if you are willing to learn, I shall be willing to put up with a little trouble now and then, and to excuse mistakes. If you undertake it, I believe you will be faithful and painstaking, as you are about every thing, and that you can really be a great help to me. Will you try it for a week, and see how you like it? By the time that papa comes home again, you will be accustomed to it, and he will not be apt to suffer from the little slips you may make at first."

"Yes, indeed, mamma; and, if you are not tired of such a funny

housekeeper as I shall make, I don't think I shall be tired of doing it. Mamma, *do* you think I could learn to make some cake? those ginger-snaps papa likes?"

"I do not doubt it," said Mrs. Ransom, smiling back into the face that was eager and bright enough now.

"Mamma," said Nellie, "did papa tell you what we were talking about last evening while we were out walking?"

"Yes, dear, he did; and he said he thought our Nellie had sense enough to see what she ought to do, and courage and strength of mind enough to make any sacrifice she felt to be right."

"Courage, mamma?"

"Yes, dear, it often needs much courage – what is called moral courage – to resolve to do what we feel to be a duty, especially if it calls for any sacrifice of our pride or vanity, or of the desire to appear well in the eyes of others."

Nellie knew that she was thinking of such a sacrifice, and it was rather a consolation to have mamma speaking of it in this way.

"Moral courage" sounded very fine.

But she sat silent, slowly eating her omelet and biscuit, and feeling that she had not quite made up her mind how far the sacrifice must go, or how much of her work she should decide to give up. But one thing she had fully resolved, – that her studies should no longer interfere with what papa called "nearer and plainer duties," or cause needless injury to her health and temper. She would help mamma, play with the children, walk and run as

other little girls of her age did, and try hard to put from her all rebellious and impatient feelings at not being quite so clever as some among her schoolmates.

"Mamma," she said, after another pause, during which she had finished her breakfast, — "mamma, how much do you think it would be wise for me to study every day?"

"Well," said Mrs. Ransom slowly, and as if she knew that she was about to give advice that would not be quite agreeable, "if you wish to know what I think *wisest*, I should say give up study altogether for at least a fortnight."

"For a whole fortnight, two weeks, mamma?" echoed Nellie, in dismay. She had expected that her mother would say she might well study two hours a day, hoped for three, wished that it might be four, and had resolved to be content with the allowance proposed; but to give up her books altogether for two weeks! "It seems such a waste of time for such a great girl as me, mamma," she added.

"Well, my great girl of ten years, suppose we say one week then," said Mrs. Ransom playfully. "Keep on with your practising as usual, and with your half-hour of sewing these with your new housekeeping duties will take up a good part of the morning without much 'waste of time,' I think; the rest of the day I would give entirely to play and amusement. If at the end of a week we do not find that you are feeling better and happier" —

"And not so cross," put in Nellie, with rather a shamefaced smile.

Her mother smiled, too, and took up her speech. "Then we will agree that my plan was not needful, and that all this constant poring over books does not hurt your health, your temper, or your mind."

"Yes, mamma," said Nellie, with a sigh she could not suppress, though she did try to speak cheerfully. Then she added, "O mamma, I should so like to be a very clever, bright girl, and to know a great deal!"

"A very good thing, Nellie, but not the first of all things, my daughter," said Mrs. Ransom, putting her arm about the waist of her little girl, who had risen and come over to her side.

"No, mamma," said Nellie softly, "and you think I have made it the first of all things lately, do you not?"

Before Mrs. Ransom could answer, sounds of woe came from the piazza without, Daisy's voice raised in trouble once more.

Tears and smiles both lay near the surface with Daisy, and had their way by turns. One moment she would be in the depth of despair, the next dimpling all over with laughter and frolic; so that Nellie did not fear any very serious disaster when she ran to see what the matter was.

The great misery of Daisy's life was this, – that people were always taking her for a boy, a mistake which she considered both unnatural and insulting, and which she always resented with all her little might.

Nellie found her sitting at the head of the piazza steps, crying aloud, with her straw hat pressed over her face by both hands.

"What's the matter, Daisy?" asked her sister.

"Oh! such a wicked butcher-man came to my house," answered Daisy, in smothered tones from beneath her hat.

"What did he do? What makes him wicked?" asked Nellie.

"He swore at me," moaned Daisy; "oh! he swore dreadful at me."

"Did he?" said Nellie, much shocked.

"Yes," said Daisy, removing the hat so far that she was able to peep out with one eye at her sister, "he did. He called me 'Bub,' and I'm not a bub, now."

Nellie was far from wishing to wound Daisy's feelings afresh; but this mild specimen of *swearing* struck her as so intensely funny that she could not keep back a peal of laughter, — a peal so merry and hearty that it rejoiced her mother's heart, who had not heard Nellie laugh like that for several weeks.

Daisy's tears redoubled at this. She had expected sympathy and indignation from Nellie, and here she was actually laughing.

"You oughtn't to laugh," she said resentfully; "it is very naughty to swear bad names at little girls, and I shan't eat the meat that bad butcher-man brought."

Nellie sat down beside the insulted little one, and, smothering her laughter, said coaxingly, —

"I wouldn't mind that, Daisy. Here, dry your eyes."

"Yes, you would," sobbed Daisy, taking down the hat, but rejecting the pocket handkerchief her sister offered; "I have a potterhancher of my own in my pottet;" and she pulled out

the ten-inch square article in question, and mournfully obeyed Nellie's directions.

"He called me a fellow too, and he ought to see I don't wear boys' clothes," she added.

"How did he come to be talking to you?" asked Nellie, trying to keep a grave face. "What were you doing?"

"I was very good and nice, just sitting on the grass, and making a wreaf of some clovers Carrie gave me," explained Daisy, piteously, "and he brought the meat in, and said, 'Good-morning, bub; you're a nice little fellow!' and I'm not, now."

"Here he comes again," said Nellie, as a jolly, good-natured-looking butcher's boy came around from the other side of the house.

"I shan't let him see me," cried Daisy, and, scrambling to her feet, she rushed into the house before the disturber of her peace came near her again.

A moment later Nellie heard her rippling laugh over some trifle which had taken her attention, and she knew that the April shower was over, and sunshine restored.

This little incident had so diverted Nellie's thoughts, and amused her so much, that for the time she forgot the subject of the conversation with her mother, which had been so abruptly broken off; and when she returned to her, she laughed merrily again as she related the cause of Daisy's trouble, and her indignation at having been taken for a boy.

Mrs. Ransom did not return to it. She thought that enough

had been said, and she agreed with her husband in thinking that Nellie would feel a certain satisfaction in believing she exercised her own will and judgment in the matter.

"Here are the keys, dear," she said, when she and Nellie had laughed over Daisy's tribulations; "and it is time Catherine had her orders for the day. Go first to the kitchen and tell her" – and here Mrs. Ransom gave Nellie the necessary directions, which she in her turn was to repeat to the cook. Then she was to ask the woman what was needed from the store-room, and to give out such things.

"What's Nellie going to do?" asked Carrie, who had come in, and stood listening while her mother gave Nellie her directions.

"I'm going to be mamma's housekeeper," said Nellie, feeling at least a head taller with the importance of all this responsibility.

"Oh!" said Carrie, looking at her with admiration, and quite as much impressed as she was expected to be.

"You can come with me, and see me, if you want to," said Nellie.

"And can I help her, mamma?" asked Carrie.

"Yes, if Nellie is willing, and can find any thing for you to do," answered Mrs. Ransom.

Thoroughly interested now in her new undertaking, Nellie had for the time quite forgotten lessons, "Bible subjects," and other tasks, till Carrie said, —

"What are you going to do, Nellie, when you have finished keeping house?"

"I think it will take me a good while to do all the housekeeping," replied Nellie. "When that is finished, I will see. Oh! I'll go down to the beach with you, Carrie, if mamma says we may."

Carrie looked very much pleased.

"Then you're not going back to that old Bible lesson this morning?" she asked.

"Why, Carrie! what a way to speak of the Bible!"

"Oh!" said Carrie, rather abashed, "but I didn't mean the Bible was old, Nellie; only the long, long lessons you have been studying out of it are so tiresome, and make you so busy."

Nellie understood by this how much Carrie had missed her company since she had been so taken up with her self-chosen task; and again she felt that she had been rather selfish in letting it occupy so much of her time.

Here Daisy met them, and, asking where they were going, was told of Nellie's new dignity. Of course she wanted to "help" too; and, permission being given, she marched first into the kitchen, and informed the cook, —

"Me and Carrie and Nellie are going to keep the house."

Nellie gave her orders with great correctness, Daisy repeating them after her, in order that the cook might be sure to make no mistake, except when Nellie told what was to be done with the meat, when she declared she should not "talk about the meat that wicked butcher brought," and turned her back upon it with an air of offended dignity.

Her resolution held good throughout the day, for at dinner she positively refused to eat of either the meat or poultry brought by the "swearing butcher-man," and even held out against the charms of a chicken's wish-bone which mamma offered.

Next to the store-room, where the two younger children looked on with admiring approbation, while Nellie gave out to the cook such articles as were needed for the day, and then saw that tea-canisters, sugar-bowls, cake-basket, &c., were all in proper order. The filling of the cake-basket and sugar-bowls was a particularly interesting process, especially when Nellie, following mamma's daily practice, bestowed "just one lump of sugar" on each of her little sisters, taking care to select the largest, and then sweetening her own labors with a like chosen morsel.

It was great fun also to ladle out rice, break the long sticks of macaroni, and, best of all, to weigh out the pound of raisins required for the pudding.

Daisy, however, permitted herself some liberties under the new reign which she would not have ventured upon under her mother's rule; and, not considering herself obliged to obey Nellie, was decoyed away by the cook under the pretence of shelling peas for dinner. Having opened about five pods, little white teeth as well as her ten fingers assisting at the operation, and letting about every other pea roll away, she concluded that she was tired of helping Catherine, and went back to Nellie, who was fortunately by this time quite through with her arrangements in the store-room.

"Mamma," said Nellie, when she had returned to her mother and reported how successfully she had fulfilled all her orders, – "mamma, I do not think the store-room is in very good order."

"I know it is not, dear," replied Mrs. Ransom, "and I have been wishing to have it properly arranged, but have not really felt able to attend to it."

"Couldn't I do it, mamma?" asked Nellie, full of zeal in her new character.

"It would be rather hard work for you; but some day next week we will go there together and overlook things; after which I will have it dusted and scrubbed, and then you shall arrange it as you please. The people who hired this house before we had it were not as neat as my Nellie, I fear. But I am thankful to find that there are no mice about; I have not heard one since we have been here."

Mrs. Ransom's dread of a mouse was a matter of great wonder to her children, who could not imagine how she could be so afraid of such "cunning little things;" and, although she really did try to control it, it had the mastery over her whenever she saw or heard one, and was a source of great and constant discomfort to her.

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