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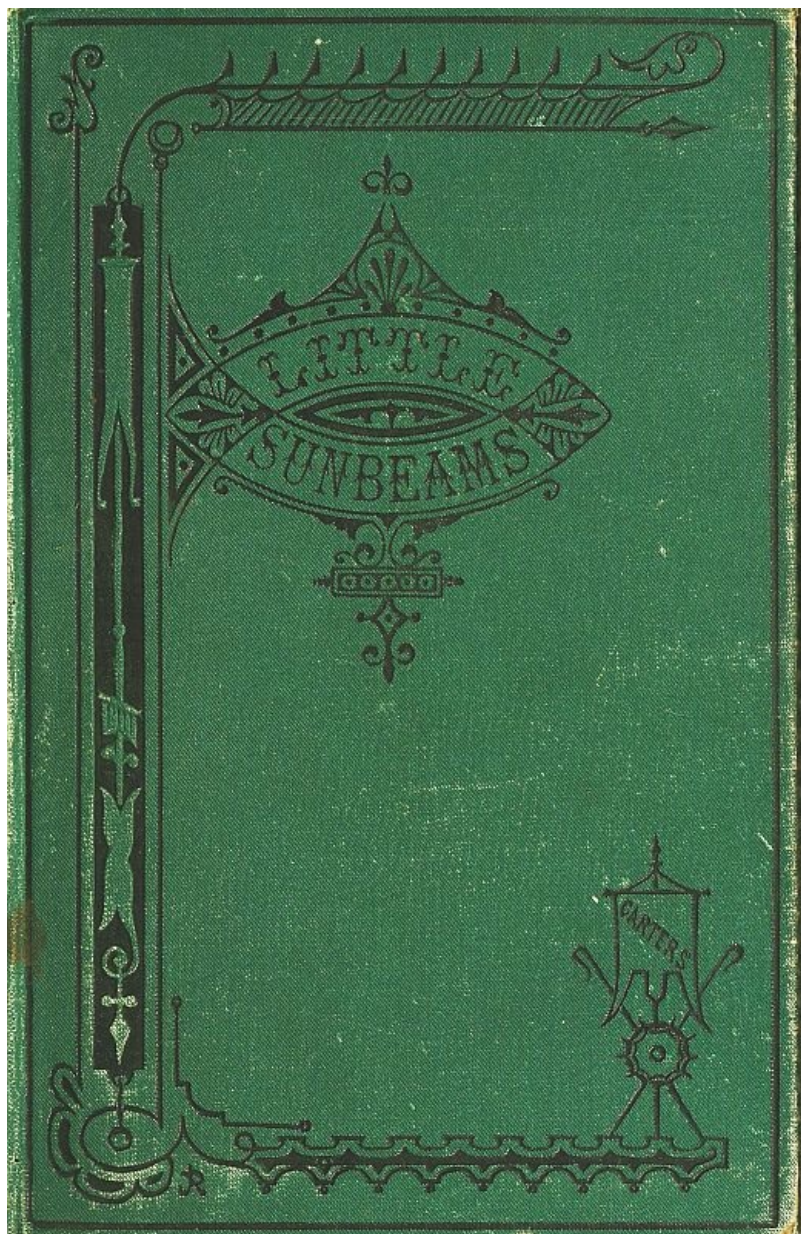
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***LITTLE SUNBEAMS.***

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# VI. NELLIE'S HOUSEKEEPING.

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By the Author of this Volume.

[2]

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# NELLIE'S HOUSEKEEPING.

[3]

"Be good, sweet child, and let who will be clever:  
Do noble things, not dream them, all day long;  
So shalt thou make life, death, and that vast for ever.  
One grand, sweet song."—KINGSLEY.

BY  
JOANNA H. MATHEWS,  
AUTHOR OF THE "BESSIE BOOKS" AND THE "FLOWERETS."

NEW YORK:  
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## NELLIE'S HOUSEKEEPING.

### I.

#### *HARD AT WORK.*

"**N**ELLIE, 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. [10]

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." [11]

"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. [12]

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? [13]

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. [14]

"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. [15]

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. [16]

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. [17]

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 reprov'd, 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." [18]

"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.

[19]

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.

[20]

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.

[21]

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?"

[22]

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."

[23]

"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—

[24]

"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.



[25]

## II. *A TALK WITH PAPA.*



R. 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."

[26]

"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?"

[27]

"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.

[28]

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."

[29]

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.

[30]

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.

[31]

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.

[32]

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. [33]

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. [34]

"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. [35]

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. [36]

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. [37]

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.”

[38]

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."

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"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."

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"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."

[41]

"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'?"

[42]

"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."

[43]

"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.

[44]

"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.

[45]

"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."

[46]

"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?"

[47]

"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?"

[48]

"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?"

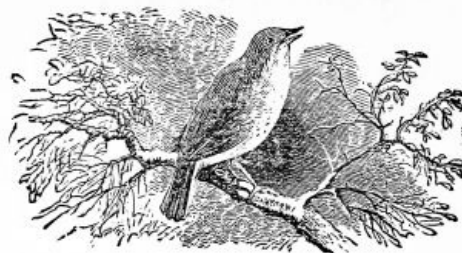
"No, papa," more slowly still, as she saw his meaning.

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.

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### III. *NELLIE A HOUSEKEEPER.*



**M**R. 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.

[51]

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.

[52]

"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."

[53]

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.

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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?"

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"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."

[56]

"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?"

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"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.

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"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"—

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"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.

[60]

"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.

[61]

"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.

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"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." [63]

"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. [64]

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. [65]

"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!" [66]

"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. [67]

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. [68]

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.

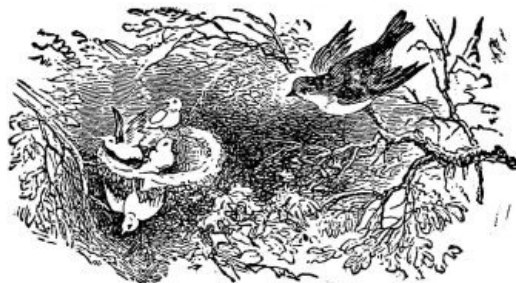
"Mamma," said Nellie, when she had returned to her mother and reported how successfully she had fulfilled all her orders,— "mamma, I do not think the store-room is in very good order."

"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." [69]

"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.



[70]

#### IV. A COURTSHIP.

"WILL you come to the beach now, Nellie?" said Carrie.



"Yes, if mamma has nothing more for me to do," said Nellie; and mamma telling her that there was nothing at present, they were soon ready and on their way; Daisy also being allowed to accompany them on promise of being very, very good and obedient to Nellie.

Nellie, wise, steady little woman that she was, was always to be trusted to take care of the other children, and to keep them out of mischief, so long as she gave her mind to it; and her mother had no fear that it would be otherwise now, after the lesson of last night. Poor Nellie! the sight of that black bump on Daisy's forehead was sufficient reminder in itself, even had she not formed such good resolutions. *She* felt it, I believe, more than Daisy did. [71]

An unexpected pleasure awaited Nellie and Carrie when they reached the beach, for there they met, not only the little Bradfords, whom they now saw frequently, but also Lily Norris and Belle Powers, who had come to pass the day with their friends, Maggie and Bessie.

Daisy and Frankie Bradford, who were great cronies and allies, were soon busily engaged in making sand-pies, and conveying them in their little wagons to imaginary customers who were supposed to live upon the rocks.

Nellie had brought her doll with her. This was a doll extraordinary, a doll well known and far famed. It had been presented to Nellie by old Mrs. Howard, as a reward for her kind and generous behavior to her little grand-daughter Gracie, at a time when the latter had fallen into trouble and disgrace at school. To the young residents of Newport, the chief claim to distinction of the Ransom family lay in the fact that in their midst resided this wonderful creation of art. Mr. and Mrs. Ransom enjoyed the glorious privilege of being "the father and mother of the girl that has the doll." Nellie herself was considered the most enviable of mortals, while her brothers and sisters shared a kind of reflected glory. To meet Nellie when she had her treasure out for an airing was an event in the day; and frantic rushes were made to windows or down to gates and palings when the announcement was made,—"The doll is coming!"

[72]

It was impossible that Nellie should not be gratified by all this flattering homage to her darling, and she received such tributes with a proud but still generous satisfaction, for she would always take pains to walk slowly when she saw some eager eye fastened upon the doll, or carry it so as to afford the best view of all the beauties of its toilet; and, choice and careful as she was of it, she was always ready when she met any of her young friends to allow them to take and nurse it for a while.

[73]

Of late, however, even this doll had been neglected and put aside in the press of work which Nellie had laid upon herself; and this was the first time in several days that she had appeared in public. So Nellie was eagerly welcomed, partly on her own account, partly on that of her daughter; and after the latter had been duly admired, and ah'ed and oh'ed over to the heart's content of her mamma and the spectators, she was intrusted to Belle's tender care for a while, Lily having the promise of being allowed to take her afterwards.

Nellie was never a child who cared much for romping play or frolic; quiet games and amusements suited her much better; therefore her playmates were rather surprised when, having seen her doll safe in Belle's keeping, she proposed a race down the length of the beach, to see who could first reach a given rock she pointed out. For Nellie, like many another little child—ay, and grown person too—when they mean to turn over a new leaf, was now disposed to run into the opposite extreme, and to strive to make up for lost time by taking an amount of play and exercise to which she was not accustomed at any time.

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Maggie and Lily readily agreed to her proposal, though they were rather surprised at it, as coming from her; but Bessie declined, not being fond of a romp, and Carrie, too, chose to stay with Bessie and Belle.

Nellie, however, soon found that strength and breath gave way, unaccustomed as she had been for weeks past to a proper amount of exercise; and she was forced to sit down upon a stone and watch Lily and Maggie as they sped onwards towards the goal.

They flew like the wind, and it was hard to tell which was there the first, for they fairly ran against one another as they reached it, and, laughing and breathless, turned to look back for Nellie, who smilingly nodded to them from the distance.

[75]

Meanwhile Bessie, Belle, and Carrie were amusing themselves more quietly.

"Do you think your mamma would let you come to our house this afternoon?" said Bessie to Carrie. "Mamma said we might ask you."

"Oh, yes! I'm sure she would. She quite approves of your family," answered Carrie.

"I should think she might," said Belle.

"Mamma thought we'd all like to have a good play together," said Bessie. "And, besides, we have some new things to show you, Carrie. We have some white mice that Willie Richards gave us; and they are just as tame, as tame."

"Oh! they're too cunning for any thing," said Belle. "They hide in your pocket, or up your sleeve, or in your bosom if you'll let them, and eat out of your fingers, and are not one bit afraid."

"How did you tame them so?" asked Carrie, who was extremely fond of dumb pets of all kinds.

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"We did not do it," said Bessie. "Willie Richards did it before he sent them to us; but white mice can be tamed very easily. Harry says so."

"Gray mice can be tamed too," said Belle.

"Why, no!" said Carrie. "They always scamper away from you as fast as they can go."

"Not always," said Belle, with the air of one who had good authority for her statement. "Not always, do they, Bessie? For there's a little mouse lives in our parlor at the hotel in New York, and he's just as tame as he can be, and he comes out every evening to be fed."

"And do you feed him?" asked Carrie.

"Yes," said Belle. "Every evening I bring a piece of bread or cracker or cake from the dinner table for him, and when papa and I come in the parlor he is always on the hearth waiting for us. Then papa sits down by the table, and the mousey runs up his leg and jumps on the table, and then he takes the crumbs I put down for him. Oh, he's so cunning, and his eyes are so bright! And he even lets me smooth his fur with my finger."

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"How did you make him so tame?" asked Carrie.

Belle colored and hesitated, looking down upon the doll in her arms, and seeming as if she would much rather not tell the story; but Carrie, who was not very quick to see where another's feelings were concerned, repeated her question.

"Well," said Belle, slowly at first, and then, as she became interested in her own story, with more ease, "he used to run about the room, but was not one bit tame, and papa told the waiter to set a trap for him. And the man did; and one morning when we went in the room the little mouse was caught. And he looked so cunning and so funny, peeping through the bars of the trap, that I felt very sorry about him; and, when the man was going to take him away to drown him, I cried very hard, and begged papa to let me keep him in the trap. And because I felt so badly papa said I might, but I must feed him, so he would not starve; and he very 'spressly told me I must not lift the door of the trap, for fear the mouse would run out. Papa thought I would soon grow tired of him,—he said so afterwards; but I did not, and I grew very attached to that mouse, and he to me. But—but"—Belle's voice faltered again, and she looked ashamed—"but I disobeyed my papa, and one day I opened the door of the trap a te-en-y little bit, just a very little bit; but the mouse ran out just as quick, as quick, and scampered away to the fireplace where his hole was."

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"Did your papa scold you?" asked Carrie, as Belle paused to take breath.

"No," answered Belle, remorsefully, "he didn't *scold* me, but he looked very sorry when I told him. He always looks sorry at me when I am not good, but he never scolds me, and that makes me feel worse than if he was ever so cross to me."

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"Well, what about the mouse?" asked Carrie.

"That very evening I was sitting on papa's knee, talking to him," continued Belle, "and what do you think? why, the first thing I saw was the mouse on the hearth looking right at me. I had a maccaroon, and papa crumbled a little bit of it on the floor, and the mouse came and eat it. Then he played about a little while; we kept very still, and at last he ran away. But the next night, and every night after that, he came; and at last one evening, first thing we knew, he jumped on papa's foot and ran up his leg; and now every evening he does that, and sits on the table till I feed him."

"How cunning!" said Carrie. "I wish I had one; but I'd rather have a white mouse."

"The white mice are prettier, but then they are stupider than Belle's mouse," said Bessie. "They don't do much but eat and go to sleep. I don't think they are so very interesting."

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"There's Daisy crying again," said Carrie. "Daisy, what's the matter now?" raising her voice.

Daisy only cried the louder, and the three children ran forward to where she sat upon the sand, the picture of woe; while Frankie, busily engaged in piling sand pies into his wagon, remained sublimely indifferent to her distress. Nellie, Maggie, and Lily came running back also to see what was the matter.

"What *are* you crying for, Daisy?" asked Nellie. "Frankie, do you know what is the matter with her?"

"He told me he'd marry me if I let him mix the pies," sobbed the distressed Daisy; "and now he won't."

"Now, Daisy, you ought to be ashamed to say that," cried Frankie, stopping short with a pie in each hand, and looking with a much aggrieved air at his little playmate. "Yes, I did promise to marry her if she'd let me make the pies," he continued, turning to Nellie, "and so I will; but I promised three other girls before her, and so I told her she'd have to wait till they were all dead, and she wouldn't have patience, but just went and cried about it. I can't help it if so many girls want to marry me," added the young sultan, tenderly laying his sand pies in the wagon.

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Daisy had ceased her cries to listen to Frankie's statement of the case; but her spirits were so depressed at once more hearing this indefinite postponement of her matrimonial prospects that she broke forth into a fresh wail of despair.

"Oh, Daisy!" said Nellie, "what shall we do with you: you're growing to be a real cry-baby."

"Yes," said Master Frankie, seeing his way at once to a peaceful solution of his difficulties. "And I shall never, never marry a cry-baby. You'd better hurry up and be good, Daisy."

At this terrible threat, Daisy's shrieks subsided into broken sobs; and Frankie, touched by the extreme desolation of her whole aspect, farther consoled her, by telling her if she would dry her eyes and be good, he would let her "make two mixes, and marry her besides." At which condescension on the part of her chosen lord and master, Daisy was in another instant beaming with smiles, and thrusting her dimpled hands into the wet sand; and the older children left her and Frankie to their play.

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All but Bessie, that is, who lingered behind to give her brother a little moral lecture.

For Bessie's sense of justice had been shocked by Frankie's arrangements, and the hard bargain he had driven with the devoted Daisy, who upon all occasions submitted herself to his whims, and let him rule her with a rod of iron. Moreover, Bessie considered his gallantry very much at fault, and thought it quite necessary to speak her mind on the subject.

"Frankie," she said with gravity, "you are selfish to Daisy, I think. You ought to let her make half the pies."

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"I'm letting her do two mixes," said Frankie; "and, besides, she said I needn't let her do any if I'd marry her. That's fair."

"No, it's not. It's not fair, nor polite either," said Bessie, reprovingly. "You oughtn't to make it a compliment for you to marry Daisy. It is a compliment to you."

This was a new view of the subject to Frankie, and, as he stood gazing at Daisy and considering it, Bessie added,—

"Anyhow, you ought to let her do half. You're not good to be so selfish."

Daisy meanwhile had been balancing in her own mind the comparative advantages of the present and the future good, and came to the conclusion that she had made a foolish choice, and that the mixing of sand pies was more to be desired than the promise, whose fulfilment seemed so far distant; and now, with a deprecating look at Frankie, she made known this change in her sentiments.

"I b'lieve I'd rafer mix half the mud than be your wife, Frankie," she said. "I'll just 'scuse myself and do the pies."

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"Oh! I'll let you do half," said Frankie, encouragingly, "and marry you too, Daisy. I really will."

But Daisy, before whom Bessie's words had also placed the matter in a new light, now felt the advantage of her position, and was disposed to make the most of it, as she found Frankie inclined to become more yielding.

"I'll see about marrying you," she said coquettishly, "but I *will* do half the pies."

"Yes, yes, you shall," replied Frankie, now extremely desirous to secure the prize the moment there seemed to be a possibility of its slipping through his fingers; "and you'll really marry me, won't you, Daisy?"

"Maybe so," said Daisy, a little victorious, as was only natural, at finding the tables thus turned.

"Ah! not maybe, Daisy. Say you truly will, dear Daisy, darling Daisy. You shall mix all the pies, Daisy, and I'll be your horse, too."

[85]

"I'll tell you anofer time," said Daisy, much enjoying the new position of affairs.

"Ah! no, Daisy," pleaded the now humble suitor: "if you'll promise now, I'll—I'll—Daisy, I'll give you my white mice."

Daisy plumped herself down upon the sand, and gazed at Frankie, astounded at the magnitude of this offer, in return for the promise which, in her secret soul, she was longing to give.

"Maybe your mamma won't let you give 'em away," she said at length; and then, with relenting in her generous little heart, she added, "and I wouldn't like to take 'em from you, Frankie: it's too much."

"Yes, yes, mamma would let me," said Frankie, eagerly. "Bessie has a pair, and Maggie a pair, and I a pair; and mamma said that was too many, and she won't mind one bit if I give you mine. And I don't care for them at all, Daisy, they're such stupid things. I'd just as lieve give them to you."

"Well," said Daisy, shaking her curls at him, "then I'll promise; and I only want to mix half the pies, Frankie, I wouldn't do 'em all, oh! not for any thing."

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This amicable agreement being sealed with a kiss, and peace thoroughly restored, Bessie left the two little ones to their "mixes," and went back to the others, whom she entertained with an account of Frankie's complete defeat and submission. They rather rejoiced at it, for the way in which Frankie usually lorded it over the submissive Daisy did not at all agree with their ideas of propriety.

"But do you think Frankie really means to give the white mice to Daisy?" asked Nellie.

"Why, yes," answered Bessie, "he *promised*, you know."

"But," said Nellie, doubtfully, "I do not think mamma would like Daisy to have them."

"Oh! she needn't mind," said Maggie. "Our mamma did say she was sorry Willie Richards had sent three pair; and Frankie has not really cared for his since the first day. They're too quiet for him. Daisy might just as well have them."

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"But I don't know if mamma would care to have them in the house," said Nellie. "She is so afraid of mice."

"What, a grown-up lady afraid of white mice!" said Lily.

"Well, she's afraid of *real* mice," said Nellie, "and I'm not sure she wouldn't be of white ones."

"Pooh! I don't believe she would be," said Carrie. "I wish we could have them."

"I shouldn't think your mother would mind *white* mice," said Belle: "you can ask her."

"You're all to come to our house this afternoon, you know," said Maggie, "and then you can see them; and bring Daisy too, Nellie: we want her."

After a little more talk and play, the children separated, Nellie going home with her sisters, and promising to come over to Mrs. Bradford's house as early in the afternoon as possible.

"What makes you go home so soon?" asked Carrie, supposing that it was those "horrid lessons" which took Nellie away. [88]

"I thought mamma might have something else she wanted me to do," said Nellie, "and we have been down on the beach a good while."

"What makes you do the housekeeping," asked Carrie,—"just to help mamma, or because you like to?"

"Mamma asked me to do it to help her," said Nellie, without a thought of her mother's real object in proposing the plan, "but I do like to do it, it is real fun."

"I'd like to do something to help mamma," said Carrie.

"Me too," put in Daisy.

"I think you both could do something to help her, if you chose," said Nellie, with a little hesitation; for she was a modest, rather shy child, who never thought it her place to correct or give advice even to her own brothers and sisters.

"How can I?" asked Carrie, and,—

"How could I?" mimicked Daisy, looking up at her sister as she trotted along by her side. [89]

"Well," said Nellie, "I think you, Carrie, could be more obedient to mamma."

"I'm sure I do mind mamma," said Carrie, indignantly. "I never do any thing she tells me not to."

"No," said Nellie, "you never do the things she tells you you must *not* do, and you generally do what she says you *must* do; but—but—perhaps you won't like me to say it, Carrie, but sometimes you do things which mamma has not forbidden, but which we both feel pretty sure she would not like; and then, when she knows it, it makes trouble for her."

Carrie pouted a little, she could not deny Nellie's accusation, but still she was not pleased.

"Pooh!" she said, "I don't mean that. I mean I want to do some very great help for her, something it would be nice to say I had done."

"You're not large enough for that yet," said Nellie, "and I don't believe you could help her more than by being good all the time." [90]

"Then why don't you be good all the time?" said Carrie, not at all pleased. "I shouldn't think it was a great help to mamma to let Daisy fall out of bed."

Nellie colored, but made no reply.

Not so Daisy, who at once took up arms in Nellie's defence. Seizing upon her hand, and holding it caressingly to her cheek, she said to Carrie,—

"Now don't you make my Nellie feel bad about it. That falling out of bed wasn't any thing much; and my bump feels, oh! 'most well this morning. I b'lieve it feels better'n it did before I bumped it. Nellie, what could I do to help mamma?"

"If you tried not to cry so often, Daisy, darling, it would help mamma. It worries her when you cry, and sometimes you cry for such very little things."

"Does she think a bear is eating me up when she hears me cry and can't see me?" asked Daisy, whose mind was greatly interested in these quadrupeds. [91]

"No," said Nellie, "'cause she knows there are no bears here to eat little girls; but it troubles her to hear you cry. Besides, you are growing too big to cry so much, and you don't want people to call you a cry-baby, do you?"

"No, I don't," answered Daisy, emphatically, "'cause then Frankie won't marry me. And I don't want to t'ouble mamma, Nellie. But how can I help crying when I hurt myse'f?"

"Oh! you can cry when you hurt yourself," said Nellie, "but try not to cry for very little things; and we'll all see what we can do to help her. I believe I have been selfish in reading and studying all the time lately, and not thinking much about other people, especially mamma, so I will give up my books for a while, and try to help her about the house; and Daisy will try not to cry so much; and—and Carrie will be careful not to do the things mamma would not like her to do; will you not, Carrie?" [92]

Carrie made no answer; she was not mollified by Nellie's taking blame to herself for her own short-comings, but only resented the gentle reproof she had herself received. Perhaps one reason



was that she felt she deserved it.

But pet Daisy took hers in good part.

"I will," she said, clapping her hands, and looking as if tears were always the farthest thing possible from her bright face, "I will try. I won't cry a bit if I can help it, but just laugh, and be good all the time, unless I hurt myse'f, oh! very, very much, indeed. Nellie," pausing in her capers with an air of deep consideration,— "but, Nellie, if somebody cut off my nose, I ought to cry, oughtn't I?"

"Oh, yes! certainly," laughed Nellie.

"And if a bear *did* come, I could sc'eam very loud, couldn't I?"

"Yes, whenever that bear of yours comes, you can cry as loud as you please," answered Nellie. [93]

"Oh! he's not mine," said Daisy. "He's a black man's, I b'lieve. I 'spect he's an old black Injin man's. There's mamma on the piazza, an' there's two ladies come to see her."



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## V. **WHITE MICE.**



HE ladies with mamma proved to be two aunts who had come to pass a part of the day with her.

They had brought pretty gifts for each one of the children: a series of books for Nellie,—for they knew her tastes; a wax doll for Carrie; and a doll's tea-set for Daisy. So it was no wonder if the white mice were for the time forgotten in the children's delight over their new treasures.

Carrie's doll was the handsomest one she had ever owned; not by any means equal to Nellie's nonpareil, it is true, but she was more than contented with it.

Nellie was equally pleased with her books; but after looking at the pictures, and seeing "how very interesting" the series looked, she resolutely put them away, and devoted herself to the entertainment of her aunts, believing that as "mamma's housekeeper" a part of this duty devolved upon her. Moreover, she found that her "help" was needed by her mother in certain little preparations for this unexpected company. Perhaps in her new zeal she did more than was needful, and might have left some things to the servants; but her mother was so glad to see her occupied and content without her beloved study books, that she put no check upon her. [95]

Carrie, too, being very anxious to carry out her new resolution of making herself of use to mamma, was very busy, and more than once had her fingers where they were not wanted. She ended her performances by a mistake which alarmed her very much, believing as she did that she had done great mischief.

The grocery-man having brought several articles from the store at a time when it was not convenient for the cook to attend to them at once, they had been left standing upon the kitchen porch. Such as were to go to the store-room were by Nellie's direction now carried there; but there were others which were to be left under the cook's care, among them some rock-salt and some saltpetre. [96]

Carrie being, as I have said, seized with the desire of making herself useful, went peering from one to another of these things. Seeing the salt in one bucket, and the saltpetre in another, neither of the vessels being full, and not knowing there was any difference between them, she thought the one pail would hold both, and forthwith emptied the one into the other.

"An' whatever have ye been about then, Miss Carrie?" she heard the next instant from Catherine the cook, and the woman stood beside her with uplifted hands, looking from the empty

bucket to the full one. "If she ain't been and emptied all the salt-pater into me rock-salt," she cried to one of the other servants who was near.

[97]

"Oh my! and saltpetre explodes and goes off sometimes, when it is put with other things," called Nellie, who had heard from the store-room. "Children, come away from it; it might be dangerous."

Away went Carrie, frightened half out of her senses, and, rushing into the room where her mother sat with her aunts, cried in a tone of great distress,—

"Oh! mamma, mamma, I've put all the Peter salt into the other salt, and Nellie thinks we'll blow up."

The smile with which her mother and the other ladies heard this alarming announcement somewhat reassured her, and she soon learned that she had done no such very great harm; but, her brothers Johnny and Bob hearing the story, it was long before she heard the last of the "Peter salt."

With so much else to think about, it is not very surprising that the little girls should forget the white mice; and, even up to the time of their leaving home to go to Mrs. Bradford's house, Nellie did not remember to ask her mother if she would object to them.

[98]

Daisy, mindful of the advantage she had gained in the morning, and very much enjoying the position of affairs, was extremely coy and coquettish with Frankie this afternoon; while he, anxious to return to his old standpoint with her, would have given her every thing she fancied, and courted her favor by every means in his power. So you may be sure that he repeated his offer of the white mice, for which he really did not care much, so that it was no great act of generosity to give them up to his young lady-love.

"They're my own, my very own," said the delighted child, showing her prize to Nellie, and the others. "Frankie says so. Just see this one run up my arm, and the ofer one is way down in my pottet. Oh! they're so cunning, and my very own. There comes that one out of my pottet."

Daisy was too much absorbed with her mice to notice the grave, doubtful face with which Nellie heard her, and watched the tame little creatures as they ran over her hands and arms, and up to her shoulder. Nellie could not bear to damp her little sister's pleasure, but she feared that her mother would be nervous and troubled by their presence.

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"Did you ask your mamma if Daisy could have them?" asked Maggie, noticing the expression of her face, and guessing the cause.

"No, I quite forgot it," answered Nellie; "and I can't bear to disappoint the dear little thing; and yet—and yet—I am 'most sure mamma will not like to have them about."

"I don't believe she'd mind," said Bessie. "Our Aunt Annie is dreadfully afraid of real mice, but she don't mind those white ones a bit."

"Suppose you take them home with you, and see what your mamma says," suggested Maggie. "If she will not let Daisy keep them, then you could bring them back to-morrow; but I feel 'most sure she will not be willing to disappoint Daisy. Just see how delighted she looks, Nellie."

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"Or if your mamma won't let Daisy keep them, Johnny could bring them back to-night," said Bessie.

Nellie was still doubtful; but it was quite true that she herself could not bear to check Daisy's delight by even a hint that their mother would not admire or tolerate the white mice; and, though against her better judgment, she resolved to let the child carry them home, and then act as circumstances, or rather mamma's wishes, dictated. It would have been better to have told Daisy at once, Nellie knew that; but she always shrank from inflicting pain, or saying that which was disagreeable to another; and, besides, she had a faint hope that her mother might not so much mind the *white* mice. Miss Annie Stanton's example was an encouraging one in this matter.

So after an afternoon pleasantly spent in play, during which Daisy could scarcely be persuaded to part from her new pets for a single moment, the Ransom children said good-by to their young friends, and turned their faces homeward.

[101]

Daisy walked sedately along by Nellie's side, not skipping and jumping as was her wont, lest she should disturb the precious white mice, one of which lay curled in her "pottet," the other in a box also given to her by Frankie, which she held tenderly clasped with both hands to her breast. The child's face was radiant as she talked of her treasures, and every now and then peeped within the box where one of them lay; and Nellie, watching and listening to her, was ready to believe that mamma could not and would not have any fear of the pretty little things.

Still!

She, Nellie, had intended to be the first to speak to her mother of the white mice, and to tell Daisy to keep them out of sight till mamma should hear of them, and her permission be gained to bring them into the house. She was just about to speak to Daisy as they entered the gate, when her attention was called for the moment by Johnny, who begged her to help him unravel a knot in his fish-line, knowing well—impetuous fellow!—that her patient fingers were better at that than his own stronger but less careful ones.

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All that needed patience and gentleness it seemed natural to bring to steady, painstaking Nellie.

But just at the moment that she was engaged with Johnny's line, and when she had for the time forgotten Daisy and the white mice, the little one spied her mother coming out upon the piazza; and, anxious to display her prize, she scampered away over the lawn as fast as her feet could carry her, Carrie following.

"Mamma, mamma!" cried Daisy as she reached her mother's side, "dear mamma, just see what Frankie Bradford gave me. All for my own, my very own, to keep for ever, an' ever, an' ever, he said so."

And, plunging her hand into her pocket, she brought forth one mouse and laid it in triumph on her mother's lap; then, opening the box, thrust the other beneath her very eyes, her own chubby face fairly brimming over with dimples and smiles. [103]

Mrs. Ransom turned a shade paler, shrank back a little, then with a forced smile said,—

"Yes, darling, very pretty. I dare say you are very much pleased; but suppose you put this little fellow in the box with his brother. It is a better place for him than mamma's lap."

"Oh, no! mamma, he'd just as lieve stay in your lap," said Daisy. "He's not a bit afraid of you. He likes peoples. See, he'll run right up your arm;" and, taking the mouse up, she would have laid it upon her mother's hand, had not Mrs. Ransom drawn back with an unmistakable shudder and expression of disgust which struck even the unconscious Daisy.

"Don't, darling, don't," she said hurriedly, but gently, unwilling to wound her little girl, or to give her any dread of the harmless creatures, but still feeling that she *could not* bear them near her. "Take them away, my pet: you know mamma does not like mice." [104]

"They're not *weally* mice, mamma," said the little one, opening great astonished eyes at her mother, but at the same time obeying her words and drawing farther away with her mice,—"they're only white ones, not *weally* ones."

"Yes, darling," said her mother, trying to control her disgust for the child's sake, "but mamma does not like any mice. Suppose you put them away."

Just at this moment Nellie ran up the piazza steps.

"O mamma!" she said, seeing the expression of her mother's face, "I meant to tell you about the white mice before Daisy brought them near you or showed them to you, but she was too quick for me. Daisy, darling, take them away; you see mamma does not like them, and you must take them back to Frankie Bradford." [105]

To have seen Daisy's face!

She could not believe it possible that any one should really have a fear or dislike to "such cunning little things" as her white mice, and she stood looking from mother to sister, dismay, disappointment, and wonder mingling in her expression.

Poor little Daisy!

Nellie hastily explained to her mother, telling her how she had been detained by Johnny, and that she had not intended to allow her to see the mice until she had learned whether or no they would annoy her; and ending by saying that she was sure Daisy would be a good girl and carry them back to Frankie.

Nellie herself, Mrs. Ransom and Carrie, all expected to hear Daisy break into one of her dismal wails at this proposal; but, to their surprise, this did not follow.

True, the little face worked sadly, and Daisy winked her eyes very hard, trying to keep back the gathering tears, while her bosom, to which she held the mice tightly clasped, rose and fell with the sobs she struggled to suppress. [106]

"Mamma," she at last gasped rather than said,— "mamma, I'm trying very hard: I *am* trying not to be a cry-baby any more, 'cause Nellie said that was a good way to be a help to you; but, mamma, oh! I do 'most *have* to be a cry-baby if you don't love my mice, 'cause I do love 'em so."

"My precious lambie!" said the mother; and, forgetting her own aversion to Daisy's pets in her sympathy for the child, she held out her arms to her, and gathered her, mice and all, within their loving clasp.

Thoughtful Nellie in another instant had taken the mice from Daisy's hold, and shutting both within the box laid it on a chair at a distance.

"Mamma," sobbed Daisy, hiding her little pitiful face on her mother's bosom, "I will take 'em back to Frankie. I didn't know you would degust 'em so, and I'm sorry I bringed 'em home for you to see. And, mamma, I wouldn't be a cry-baby, 'deed I wouldn't, if I could help it." [107]

"You can cry a little if you want to, and no one shall call you a cry-baby, my pet," said her mother, "and"—Mrs. Ransom hesitated; then after a little struggle with herself, went on—"and you shall keep the mice, darling. Perhaps we can find a place for them where mamma will not see them."

Daisy raised her head, showing flushed cheeks and tearful eyes, and a still quivering lip, although smiles and dimples were already mingling themselves with these signs of distress, at this crumb of comfort.

Never was such an April face and temper as Daisy Ransom's.

"I'll tell you, mamma," said Johnny, coming to the rescue, "Bob and I can make a cubby hole for them down in the garden-house, and they can live there, where they need never bother you. Daisy can go and play with them there when she wants them. Will that do, Daisy?"

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Do? One would have thought so to see Daisy's delight. She was beaming and dimpling all over now.

"Oh! you dear, darling, loving Johnny," she exclaimed, clapping her hands; then turning to her mother, and softly touching her cheek, she asked in the most insinuating little way,—

"Mamma, dear, would they trouble you down in the garden-house? If they would, I'll do wifout 'em."

Who could resist her sweet coaxing way.

Not her mother, certainly, who, once more kissing the little eager, upturned face, assured her that she might keep the white mice, and have them down in the garden-house.

"There's an old bird-cage upstairs in the attic," said Nellie, "why wouldn't that do for a house for them?"

"Just the thing. I'll bring it," said Johnny, and away he went upstairs, three steps at once, and returning in less time than would have seemed possible, with the old, disused bird-cage.

[109]

"It is rather the worse for wear," he said, turning it around, and viewing it disparagingly, "but we'll make it do. I'll cobble it up; and it will hold the mice anyhow, Daisy."

To Daisy it seemed a palace for her mice. Every thing was *couleur de rose* to her now that she was to be allowed to keep her new pets, and that, as she believed, without any annoyance to mamma.

Johnny and Bob were very kind too. They went to work at once; the former straightening the bent bars of the cage, the latter finding a cup and a small tin box for the food and drink of the white mice.

Daisy was enchanted, and stood by with radiant face till she saw her pets lodged safely within their new house, when she was even satisfied to have the boys carry them to the garden-house, and to stay behind herself; mamma telling her that it was too late for her to go out again.

[110]

Never was happier child than Daisy when she laid her little head on her pillow that night.

"What a nice day this has been!" said Carrie, as the four elder children sat with their mother upon the piazza, after Daisy had gone to rest.

"What's made it so wonderfully nice?" asked Johnny.

"Well, I don't know," said Carrie. "I've had a very pleasant time somehow, and I believe it's 'cause Nellie has been with me 'most all day, and been so nice. Why, Nellie, you haven't studied one bit to-day."

"Why, no," exclaimed Nellie. "I declare I forgot all about my practising and sewing, and every thing. I never thought of my books, I've been so busy. Why didn't you remind me of the practising and sewing, mamma?"

Her mother smiled.

"I thought it just as well to let you take the whole day for other things, Nellie," she said: "a whole holiday from books and work will not hurt you. You *have* managed to live and be happy through it, have you not?"

[111]

"Why, yes," answered Nellie, astonished at herself, as she recollected how completely lessons, sewing, and practising had slipped from her mind; "and it has been a very nice day, as Carrie says. A great deal pleasanter than yesterday," she added, as she contrasted her feelings of last night with those of to-night.

There could be no doubt of it. She felt more like herself, better and happier to-night, than she had done, not only yesterday, but for many days previous; and here was fresh proof, if her sensible little mind had needed it, that her father and mother were right, and that "all work and no play" were fast taking ill effect on both mind and body.

Now it will not do for little girls who are inclined to be idle and negligent in their studies to find encouragement for their laziness in Nellie's example, or to think that what was good for her must be good for them. Nellie was a child who, as you have seen, erred on the other side, not only from real love for her books, but also from the desire to learn as much and as fast as her quicker and more clever schoolmates; but this is a fault with which but few children can be reproached, and I should be sorry to have my story furnish any one with an excuse for idleness or neglect of duty.

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## VI. *THE GRAY MICE.*

**D**URING the next few days Daisy, and not Daisy only, but also the other children, found great pleasure and satisfaction in the white mice. They were all very careful not to take them near the house where they might trouble their mother, and Daisy was so particular about this, and so grateful to mamma for allowing her to keep them, that whenever she saw her go out in the garden, or even on the piazza which faced that way, she would rush to the garden-house, put the cage containing her mice in a corner behind a bench, throw over that a piece of old cocoa matting with half a dozen garden-tools piled on top, and then come out in a state of great excitement, shutting the door behind her, and holding it fast with both hands till mamma was out of sight. One might have thought, to see her, that some fierce dog or wild animal was behind that door, able to unlatch it for itself, and eager to make a fierce attack on her mother. As for taking them near the house, or letting them annoy mamma in any way, that Daisy would not have thought of; and she was so good that when a rainy day came, and she could not go out to the garden-house, she never whimpered or fretted at all, but cheerfully submitted to have her pets cared for by the boys.

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After that first day of her new experiment, Nellie did not altogether discard her lessons. Her half-hour of sewing, another of reading history, and an hour's practising, mamma thought might as well be kept up; but she no longer devoted herself to her books and writing as she had done: indeed, this would have been quite impossible if she properly fulfilled her new and pleasant duties as mamma's little housekeeper. There seemed so much to be done; and Nellie was quite amazed to find what a help she could be, and how interested she felt in having things in nice order.

[115]

One morning, Mrs. Ransom said she would have the store-room cleaned, and put in thorough order. But first various drawers, bins, boxes, and other receptacles must be looked over; and this Nellie could do, with Catherine to assist her, and move such articles as were too heavy or cumbersome for her. Mrs. Ransom went herself to the store-room, and gave both Nellie and the cook some general orders, but she was feeling more than usually languid that day, and soon tired of the bustle; so she returned to the library, telling Nellie to send to her if she was in any difficulty, or at any loss to know what to do. Nellie determined that mamma should be troubled as little as possible, and, with a pleasant sense of responsibility and happiness, set about her task.

Catherine humored her as much as possible; for Nellie, with her pleasant, gentle ways, was a favorite with all her inferiors, and every servant in the house was ready to oblige her, or do her bidding.

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Carrie and Daisy were very busy too, of course, and trotted many times between kitchen, pantry, and store-room, carrying articles that were to be thrown away or put in other places.

"There now, Miss Nellie, I think you can get along without me for a bit," said Catherine, at last. "I have my bread to see to, and you could be overhauling all these boxes and pots the while, and setting by what you're sure Mrs. Ransom will want emptied. If ever I see sech an untidy set as must have had this house afore us, and a shame to them it is to be laving things this way, and they calling themselves ladies and gentlemen."

And, with her arms full of "rubbish," away walked the good-natured Irishwoman, whose tidy soul was, as she had said, sorely vexed by the slovenly way in which the house had been left by those who had lived in it before Mrs. Ransom's family.

[117]

"Here, Daisy," said Nellie, who thought it necessary to find incessant occupation for the busy little fingers of her smallest "helper" lest they should find it for themselves,— "here, Daisy dear, you may sort those corks. Pick out all the large ones and put them in this jar, and put the small ones in this. That will be a great help."

"I'd rafer help fissing sugar," said Daisy, raising herself on tiptoe with one hand on the edge of the sugar-barrel, and peeping longingly within its depths.

"Yes, I dare say you would," laughed Nellie, "but then the sugar is to stay where it is. But I'll tell you, Daisy. Run and ask mamma if I may give you the largest lump of sugar I can find when the corks are done."

Away scampered Daisy, and did not return for some minutes, her attention being attracted on the way with something else than her errand, for one thing at a time was not Daisy's motto. [118]

Having at once eased her own mind on the subject of the sugar by receiving mamma's permission to have "the largest lump that Nellie could find," she thought that both sugar and corks would keep till it suited her convenience to return to the store-room, and, seeing a large parcel lying upon the hall-table, she was seized with a thirst for information respecting its contents. She walked round and round it, inspecting it on every side; then ran back to her mother.

"Mamma," she said, "there's oh! *such* a big bundle on the hall-table."

"Yes, I know it," said mamma.

"And with writing on it," said Daisy. "I fink the writing says, Miss Daisy Ransom, with somebody's respects."

"No," said her mother, smiling: "it says John Ransom, Esq."

"Is that our Johnny?" asked Daisy.

"No, it means papa," answered her mother.

"Are you going to open it, mamma. Papa is away." [119]

"No, we'll leave it till papa returns. He will be here to-morrow evening."

"I don't fink it's a good plan to wait. It makes people tired," said Daisy, plaintively.

"But it is right to wait when papa did not tell us to open it," said Mrs. Ransom. "Little girls must not be too curious."

"Is it kurous to make a little hole in the paper and peek in?" asked Daisy, after a moment or two of deep reflection.

"Yes, curious and very naughty," said Mrs. Ransom. "That would be meddlesome. Ask Nellie to tell you a story she knows about a meddlesome girl."

Daisy obeyed, but with less alacrity than usual, lingering for three or four moments longer about the parcel; although, with the fear of being thought "curious and meddlesome," she did not venture to touch it. At last with a long sigh she departed.

Meanwhile Nellie and Carrie were opening the various boxes, jars, &c., and inquiring into their contents. [120]

"I wonder what's in this," said Nellie, who was standing on a chair, and reaching down things from a shelf. "I thought I heard something rustle in it. There it is again. Why! I wonder if there's any thing alive in it," and she looked with some trepidation at a wooden box which stood on the shelf before her. The lid was not shut down quite tight, and again as she looked at it came that rustle from within.

Nellie took up the box rather gingerly; raised the lid a little, just enough to peep within; then, with an exclamation, quickly closed it again.

"Why! what is it?" asked Carrie, gazing up at her.

"There are mice in it, and one almost jumped out," answered Nellie, crimson with the little start and excitement, although she was not in the least afraid of mice. "I'm not quite sure, I had such a little peep; but I think there's a big one, and some little tiny ones." [121]

"How do you suppose they got in?" asked Carrie.

"I expect the cover has been left partly open, and then they have gnawed a place large enough to pass in," said Nellie, turning the box around in her hand. "See here," and she showed Carrie where the lid was gnawed away.

"What shall we do with them?" asked Carrie.

"I don't know," said Nellie, "they'll have to be killed, I s'pose. They must be put out of the way before mamma knows any thing about them, and I think it is best not to tell her, Carrie. It would only trouble her to know there had been any about the house."

"Oh! it's too bad," said Carrie. "Must they be killed?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so," said Nellie. "I am sorry too: they are such cunning little things."

"Why couldn't we keep them, and take them down to the garden-house where Daisy's white mice are?" asked Carrie. [122]



"Oh, no!" answered Nellie: "it would never do, Carrie. I do not believe they would stay there, and they might come back to the house, and perhaps frighten mamma. They must be killed. Just take the box to Catherine before Daisy comes back: she might let it out to mamma without meaning to."

"What will Catherine do with them?" said Carrie, taking the box from her sister's hand, and lingering with it.

"I don't know. Drown them, I suppose. I don't like to think about it, but it can't be helped. Besides, mice *have* to be killed, you know, they are so mischievous. Tell Catherine not to speak about them before mamma."

Carrie passed slowly out of the store-room, feeling very unwilling to have the mice killed; not only from pity for the poor little creatures, but also because she had a strong desire to keep them as pets.

Daisy had her white mice, and was allowed to keep them: why should she not have these little animals, so long as they were kept out of mamma's way? Belle Powers had her tame mouse: why could not she tame these as well? And rebellious thoughts and wishes began to rise in Carrie's breast as she lingered half way between the store-room and the kitchen, unable, or rather unwilling, to make up her mind to do as Nellie had told her, and carry the box to Catherine. [123]

"I don't see why mamma need be so afraid of a harmless, cunning little mouse," she said to herself. "I know grandmamma said she was frightened into convulsions once, when she was a little girl, by a bad servant-girl putting one down her back; but I should think she'd had plenty of time to grow out of being afraid of them, now she's grown up; and if she don't know it, I don't see why I can't keep them in the garden-house, or—or—somewhere else. 'Cause I s'pose if I did take them to the garden-house, there would be a fuss about it; and the other children would say I ought not to keep them, and maybe tell mamma. It's a shame to kill the dear, pretty little things. Belle Powers' papa just lets her have every thing she wants. I wish my papa and mamma did. And Daisy has her own way too, 'most always; and it's not fair. I'm older than she is. If she can have white mice, I don't see why I can't have gray ones. One isn't any more harm than the other. Besides, I don't have to mind Nellie. She needn't be telling me I *must* take the mice to Catherine. She thinks herself so great ever since she's been mamma's housekeeper; but I'm not going to mind her when I don't choose to. I shan't let them be drowned now; and—and—I've just a good mind." [124]

Turning hastily about, Carrie ran down a short side entry which led to a dark closet where Catherine kept wood for daily use; thrust the box in a far corner; and then, with fast beating heart, returned to the store-room.

"How long you stayed!" said Nellie. "I began to be afraid you were waiting to see Catherine drown the mice, and yet I didn't think you could bear to." [125]

"No, I didn't," said Carrie, in a low tone, glad that Nellie had not said any thing that would have forced her either to confess, or to tell a deliberate falsehood. She persuaded herself that she was not acting untruthfully now, but she could not make her voice as steady as usual.

Nellie did not notice it. She was just then absorbed in trying to extract a small jar from one but little larger, into which it had been thrust. Succeeding in her endeavors, she took up again the low song which her words to Carrie had interrupted.

"I wish Nellie would stop that everlasting singing," said Carrie to herself, feeling irritable and out of humor with every one and every thing. "I've a good mind not to help her any more."

She had been pleasant, happy, and interested in her work, but a few moments since. Can you tell what had made such a change in so short a time? [126]

"Daisy has forgotten about her corks and sugar, I think," said Nellie presently, interrupting herself again in her song. "Oh, no! here she comes;" then, as Daisy's little feet pattered into the store-room, "Did you forget the corks, pet?"

"No, and mamma says I can have the biggest lump of sugar, Nellie; and there's a very big bundle on the hall-table, but it's papa's."

"Is it?" said Nellie.

"Yes," answered the little one, settling herself to the task of sorting the corks, "but I wasn't kurous or messeltome."

"Wasn't what?" asked Nellie.

"Messeltome. Mamma said to touch what wasn't ours, or to peek, was messeltome; but I didn't do it. Tell me about that messeltome girl, Nellie. Mamma said you would."

"Very well," said Nellie, understanding Daisy's definition.

"Tell it a long, long story,—tell me till your tongue is tired, will you?" pleaded Daisy, for whom no story could ever be too long. [127]

"I'll see," said Nellie; and she began her tale, but had made but little headway in it when a servant came and told Daisy that Master Frankie Bradford was waiting to see her.

"What shall I do?" said Daisy, in a state of painful indecision between the conflicting claims of business and society. "The torks are not done, and I didn't have my sugar."

"You can take the corks with you, and the sugar too: perhaps Frankie would like to help you," said Nellie, dismounting from her perch, and fishing out the largest lump from the sugar-barrel. "There, I suppose you will want a lump for Frankie too."

"No," said Daisy, "mamma said only one lump. If Frankie does half the torks he shall have half my sugar;" and away she ran, carrying corks and sugar with her.

"What a dear, honest little thing Daisy is!" said Nellie, when she was gone. "I don't believe she could be tempted to do the least thing she thought mamma would not like, or take any thing she thought was not quite fair. And she's so sweet and thoughtful about mamma. Just see how much pains she's taken not to cry for little things since I told her it troubled her." [128]

Carrie turned away her face, feeling more uncomfortable than ever, bitterly reproached by Nellie's unconscious words, no less than by the uprightness and loving dutifulness of her almost baby sister.

Daisy found Frankie in the library with her mother. Mrs. Bradford had sent her nursery maid to ask if Mrs. Ransom would drive with her in the afternoon, and Frankie had decided to accompany her.

"Mamma said I could stay and play with Daisy, if you asked me," was the young gentleman's first remark, after he had greeted Mrs. Ransom.

"Oh!" said Jane, the maid, much mortified, "Master Frankie, I'm ashamed of you. Mrs. Bradford never expected he'd do that, ma'am." [129]

"No, I suppose not," said Mrs. Ransom, smiling; "but Daisy will be very glad to have you stay, and so shall I."

Daisy was called, as you have heard, and made her appearance in great glee, delighted to see Frankie, and at once inviting him to share her labors, and their reward.

The sugar had its attractions, but Frankie privately regarded the cork business with disdain. Having come, however, with the intention of making himself especially agreeable to Daisy, he did not refuse to enter into partnership; and they were soon seated on the upper step of the piazza, and busily at work.

"Frankie," said Daisy presently, luxuriating in thus having him all to herself, and in this condescending mood, "would you rafer go to heaven, or stay here and sort torks?"

"Well, I don't know as I care much about either," answered Frankie. "I'd rather dig clams. But, then, I'd want you to dig them with me, Daisy," he added, sentimentally. [130]

The proposal was alluring certainly, but it had its objections in Daisy's eyes; and she said, in a corresponding tone,—

"I b'lieve I couldn't. They might think I was a boy if I digged clams. But, Frankie, if I went to heaven wifout you, would you cry?"

"No," answered Frankie, indignantly, "men don't cry about things like that. Maybe I wouldn't laugh much that day, but I would not cry."

Daisy was silent for a moment, then suddenly put one of those startling questions for which she was famous.

"Frankie, if I went in to bafe, and Jonah's whale came and swallowed me up, how could God get my soul out of him?"

Frankie considered for a little; then not seeing his way clear to a satisfactory answer, and unwilling to confess ignorance on any point, he said gravely and reprovngly,—

"That's not a proper question for you to ask, Daisy." [131]

Daisy looked abashed, and said,—

"I didn't mean to ask improper kestions."

"No, I don't s'pose you did, so I thought I'd better tell you," said Frankie. "We'll talk about something else."

"They're all done," said Daisy, meaning the corks, "now we'll eat the sugar."

But the dividing of the sugar proved a difficult matter; for the lump was large and thick, and resisted the efforts of both pairs of little hands.

"I'll crack it with this stone," said Frankie; and, suiting the action to the word, he laid it upon the step and gave it a blow with the stone.

One part of the much prized morsel remained in very good condition, but the rest suffered severely under this violent treatment, and was reduced very nearly to powder.

"Just see what this horrid old stone did!" said Frankie, looking at his work in much disgust.

"Never mind," said Daisy, "you can have the whole piece, and I'll eat the mashed."

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The swain made a feeble resistance to this generous offer, feeling in duty bound to do so; but Daisy insisted, and he was so moved by the magnitude of her self-sacrifice that he said,—

"Daisy, I shall make those other girls wait till you're dead, and marry you first, 'cause you're the best of all the lot."

Here Carrie joined them, for she had soon quitted Nellie, telling her that she was tired; but the true reason was that she feared her sister might say something that would force her to confess that she had not obeyed orders about the mice.

But, wherever she went, it seemed somehow as if things would be said to make her feel self-reproached and uncomfortable.

"Oh! but you're a help, Miss Carrie, and your mother'll be proud to see the forethought of you and Miss Nellie," said Catherine, when Carrie brought out her last load to the kitchen.

"What dear, helpful little girls I have!" said mamma, with a loving smile, as Carrie paused for a moment at the open door of the library, not feeling as if she could pass it without seeming to notice her mother, and yet ashamed and afraid to go in. "It almost helps me to feel stronger to see you all so considerate and anxious to do all you can for me."

[133]

Carrie smiled faintly in reply; then passed out upon the piazza. She would be safe with Daisy and Frankie, she thought, from speeches that would make her feel guilty and uncomfortable.

But no.

"What shall we do now?" asked Daisy, when the last crumb of sugar had been disposed of.

"Where are the white mice? Let's play with them a little while," said Frankie.

"Down in the garden-house," answered Daisy.

"What a funny place to keep them!" said Frankie. "Let's go and bring them up here."

[134]

"Oh, no! we mustn't," said Daisy: "we can go and play wif 'em; but they can't come here, 'cause mamma don't like 'em."

"We won't take them in the house, Daisy, only out here on the piazza."

"No, no," said Daisy, decidedly, "not out of the garden-house. Mamma might see 'em, and they would make her feel, oh! dreffully! I should fink we *wouldn't* do any fink mamma don't like, would we, Carrie?" she added, lifting her great, innocent eyes to her sister's face.

Carrie turned quickly away without an answer, and was glad when the next moment the two little things ran hand in hand down the path which led to the garden-house.

Carrie was not happy,—no, indeed, how could she be? A great many uncomfortable feelings were in her young breast just then. Jealousy of her little sister, whom she chose to consider more petted and indulged than herself; envy even of her motherless little playmate, Belle Powers; irritation which she dared not show against Nellie, for bidding her take the mice to Catherine; fear that her secret would be discovered, and the doubt what she was to do with the mice now that she had them: all were making her very restless and miserable.


[135]

What though she did persuade herself that Nellie had no *right* to give her orders; what though mamma had never forbidden her to have the mice; what though she did believe she could keep them safely hidden in some place where they need never trouble her mother,—was she any the less guilty and disobedient? And where should that place be that she was to hide them, not only from mamma, but from every one else?



[136]

## VII. THE BLACK CAT.

"ELLIE, dear," said Mrs. Ransom's gentle voice at the store-room door.

"Yes, mamma," answered Nellie, from the top of a row of drawers where she had climbed to reach some jars from a shelf above her head.

"I think you have worked long enough, my daughter; and I do not wish you to take down those jars. Hannah is at leisure now, and she may come and attend to the rest of the things."

"Oh! but mamma," pleaded Nellie, "if you would just let me do it all myself. It would be so nice to tell papa that I cleared out the store-room entirely, except the very heavy things; and Hannah might be doing something else that would be a help to you." [137]

"It would be no help to me to have you make yourself ill, dear; and papa would not think it at all nice to come home and find you tired and overworked. And it is dangerous for you to be reaching up so high. I had rather you would leave the rest to the servants."

Nellie was very sorry to stop; and for a moment she felt a little vexed. But it was only a fleeting cloud that passed over her face, and almost before her mother could mark it, it was gone. If she wanted to be a real help to mamma, she must do as mamma wished, even though it did not seem just the best thing to herself. It would have been delightful, she would have been proud to tell papa she had done as much in the store-room as mamma herself could have done if she had been well and strong; but it would not prove a real service if she troubled her mother, or made her feel anxious. Nellie did not herself think that she ran any danger of injury; but since mamma did, there was but one thing that was right to do. [138]

"Very well, mamma," she said cheerfully, "I'll come down," and taking the hand her mother offered for her assistance, she descended from her perch.

Still it was with a little sigh that she left her task, as she thought, incomplete, and Mrs. Ransom could not help seeing that it was a disappointment to her.

"You look warm and tired now, dearie," she said, pushing back the hair caressingly from her little daughter's flushed face, "go upstairs and be washed and dressed. Then if there is nothing else you prefer to do I should very much enjoy hearing you read from one of your new books. I feel tired, and should like to lie on the sofa and listen to you."

Nellie brightened immediately, inwardly as well as outwardly. She could be useful to mamma still, if she must leave the store-room; and she ran away to remove the traces of her late toil, and make herself neat and nice. [139]

She was in her own room, washing her face, when she heard a short, quick step running along the hall. She thought it was Carrie's, and called aloud, meaning to tell her she was going to read to her mother, and to ask if she would like to hear the story.

"Carrie!" she called from out of the folds of the towel where she had just buried her face.

No answer; but the step paused for a moment, then ran on.

"Carrie!" this time louder and clearer, for her voice was no longer smothered in the towel.

Still no answer; but Nellie heard the door at the foot of the garret steps softly closed.

"Why! how queer," she said to herself, "what can Carrie be going up to the garret all alone for? I don't believe it was Carrie, it must have been Johnny going up to his printing-press or something."

For Johnny was the only one of the family who much frequented the garret, he having a printing-press, carpenter's tools and other possessions up there. [140]

Nellie did what she could for herself; then went into the nursery to have her dress fastened, and sash tied.

"Would you stop a minute and mind baby while I call Carrie to be dressed?" said the nurse; "I might as well do it now, for there's Daisy to be dressed afterwards, and I suppose they'll both have to be hunted up."

"Daisy is playing somewhere with Frankie Bradford," said Nellie; "but I thought I heard Carrie go up to the garret a few moments ago. But I'm not sure."

"I thought I heard her run along the entry, too," said the nurse.

She went to the foot of the garret-stairs, and opening the door, called Carrie three or four times. But no answer came, and closing the door again, she went away downstairs to look for her.

Baby was just beginning to take notice, and as it lay in the cradle, followed with its eyes the bright-colored worsted ball which Nellie dangled in front of them, cooing softly in reply to the gentle, playful tones of its sister's voice, as she talked "baby" to it. [141]

But this did not prevent Nellie from presently hearing again the closing of the garret door,

closed very softly as by a hand which did not wish that the sound should be heard. Nellie was a little startled, and it was in a tone of some trepidation that she called again.

"Johnny! Carrie! who is that? Do speak."

A step along the hall, and Carrie appeared at the open door of the nursery.

"Where did you come from? was that you went upstairs?" questioned Nellie, looking with surprise at Carrie's crimson, rather troubled face.

"Yes, I went upstairs," answered Carrie.

"And didn't you hear Ruth calling you?" asked Nellie.

"I'm not going to be screeched all over the house by the servants. I should think I was big enough to go where I chose," muttered Carrie, turning away. [142]

"You needn't go away. Ruth wants to dress you," said Nellie. "She'll just bring you back. Just see how cunning the baby is," for she saw Carrie was out of humor, and would have tried to soothe and interest her.

"I want Daisy to be dressed first," said Carrie, who was evidently anxious to be away. "I'm going to see if she can't."

"Daisy is with Frankie, and mamma won't make her come," said Nellie. "I wouldn't bother mamma about it, Carrie, she's lying down."

"Oh, yes, Daisy always has to have every thing *she* wants," said Carrie, coming reluctantly into the room, but keeping away on the other side, "and I shan't have *you* telling me all the time what to do and what not to do. I haven't got to mind you."

The parti-colored ball remained motionless in Nellie's fingers, as she gazed in surprise at her sister, who walking to the window, planted her elbow on the sill, and her chin in her hand; the very picture of a sulky, ill-humored child. [143]

Nellie could not think what she meant by her ugly speech. She had spoken very gently to Carrie, and without any undue authority, either of tone or manner, meaning only to suggest, not to command. But perhaps Carrie thought she had taken too much upon herself in the store-room. That was unreasonable, for she had come there of her own accord, begging that she might be allowed to help, and seeming quite ready to put herself under Nellie's orders. Yes, that must be it, and Nellie herself felt a little resentment at her sister's behavior.

But it was not Nellie's way to speak when she was angry; she waited till she could do so without temper, and then said gently.

"But, Carrie, dear, you know some one had to—" give orders she was about to say, but wise little woman that she was, changed the obnoxious word—"had to say what was to be done, and mamma put me in charge there 'cause I am her housekeeper now. I had to tell you what to do with every thing." [144]

Nellie could not help—what little girl could have helped?—a slight consciousness of authority and satisfaction in her position as mamma's right hand woman; but Carrie did not notice that so much as her words, which brought fresh cause for uneasiness to her guilty conscience. What "things" did Nellie mean? The mice?

"Is Johnny upstairs?" asked Nellie, receiving no answer to her last speech, but still wishing to make peace.

"I should think you'd know he hadn't come home from school," snapped Carrie.

"I forgot; I really don't know at all what time it is," said Nellie. "What were you doing upstairs then?"

"Let me be," was the answer Carrie gave to this; and Nellie was silent, feeling, indeed, that in such a mood she was best let alone.

Little she guessed of the cause of all this ill-temper, however. [145]

For what had Carrie been doing upstairs? Can you imagine?

Watching her opportunity when she thought no one was observing her, she had run to the wood-closet, seized the box containing the mice; and had actually been naughty enough to bring it upstairs, carry it away to the garret, and there hide it behind some old furniture.

But now what was she to do with the mice? How was she to tame them, now that she had them? What pleasure or good could they be to her?

How she wished that she had done as Nellie told her, and taken the box at once to Catherine. Now she was afraid to do it.

And yet she tried to persuade herself that there was no reason she should not have the mice as long as she kept them out of mamma's way; that she had as much right to decide what was to be done with them as Nellie; that it was not fair that Daisy should keep her pets any more than herself. [146]

But why, if all this were true, did Carrie fear to betray her secret; why was she so guilty and miserable?

Presently Ruth returned, rather incensed at finding Carrie in the nursery, and at having had "so much trouble for nothing."

Neither nurse nor child being in a very good humor, the process of dressing Carrie was not likely to be a very pleasant one; and seeing this, and that baby was growing restless, Nellie thought she had better wait till it was accomplished.

There was need for the children to be helpful and obliging in Mrs. Ransom's nursery. Poor little girls, one a young infant, who all required more or less care, to say nothing of the occasional calls of their brothers, gave enough to do; and as their now invalid mother was able to assist but little, it was necessary that the older ones should learn to help themselves and one another.

Daisy, in spite of the floods of tears which had been so frequent until within the last few days since she had taken so much pains to check them, was, as Ruth said, "the blessedest child to have to do with," giving no trouble beyond what her tender age required; patient, obliging, and winsome. Nellie was generally ready to give any assistance that was needed, to tend baby awhile, put Daisy to bed, or any other little office not too hard for her; and few little girls of her age do as much for themselves as she was accustomed to do. And since she had resolved to give all the help she could to mamma, she did all this pleasantly and cheerfully; often, as in the present case, not waiting to be asked, but taking up the small duty of her own free will. [147]

"She's the wisest head of her age ever I saw, has Miss Nellie," the admiring nurse would say to Mrs. Ransom, when some little thoughtful act had lightened her labors, or put aside the necessity of calling upon her feeble mistress.

But poor Carrie had neither Nellie's gentle consideration, nor Daisy's sunny temper, and when, as now, she was not in a good humor, she was a sore trial to the nurse; and seeing that there was every probability of a stormy time, Nellie decided to stay and amuse the baby till Ruth should be at leisure to take it. Mamma would rather wait for her than to be called upstairs by baby's cries. [148]

It was as she had feared. In three minutes a battle royal was raging between Carrie and the nurse.

It did not call Mrs. Ransom up to the nursery, as Nellie feared it would; but it brought her to the foot of the stairs, whence she called to Carrie in a tone of more sadness than severity; and Carrie did look and feel ashamed, when Ruth remarked,—

"See there now, how you're worrying your mother. Daisy wouldn't do that."

But although she now submitted to be dressed, it was still with pouting looks, and much pettish twisting and wriggling, making Ruth's task no light one, and taking far more time than it would have done if Carrie had been patient and amiable. But how could she be patient and good-humored with that uncomfortable secret weighing on her mind? [149]

Presently, Daisy came running up to the nursery.

"Where's Frankie?" asked Nellie, seeing that she was alone.

"Gone home. Jane came for him," answered Daisy, "and mamma told Jane to ask Maggie's and Bessie's mamma to let them come and play with you this afternoon; and Frankie said he'd just as lieve come back too; and mamma said he could. But, O Nellie! what do you fink? a great big, ugly, black cat came in the garden-house, and she was so saucy she was looking at my white mice."

"Was she? Oh, dear!" said Nellie. "Is she there now, Daisy?"

"No, no," said Daisy, "we wouldn't let her stay. Frankie shu'ed her way far off, and chased her wif a stick, and she put up her back at him, and was mad at him; but he wasn't 'fraid of her, not a bit. Nellie, do black cats eat white mice?" [150]

"I don't know," said Nellie looking uneasy. "Do they, Ruth?"

"You may trust any cat to do that, if she gets the chance," said Ruth. "Daisy, my pet, did you shut the door of the garden-house after you?"

"Yes, always I shut it, 'fear mamma might some way see the mice," answered Daisy. "But the black cat's gone quite, quite away, Nellie."

"She might come back if she has seen the mice, and try to come at them," said Nellie in a low tone to the nurse.

"It is what I was thinking," said Ruth.

"I'm going to take baby out for a bit when I have these two dressed, and I'll just walk down that way and see that all's right. It would just break that lamb's heart if aught happened to her mice. I'll get along nicely now if you want to go, Miss Nellie. Daisy's no trouble."

Baby delighted in Daisy as a playmate, and was now crowing in the most satisfied manner as she danced back and forth before her; clapping her hands and exclaiming, "Jackins and forwis, jackins and forwis." The interpretation of these mysterious words being, "backwards and forwards." [151]

Nellie went downstairs, and explained to her mother why she had delayed, without making any complaint of Carrie. She told her also of the black cat, and said she felt uneasy about Daisy's white mice, and thought she would go and see that the creature had not returned.

Mrs. Ransom herself was disturbed when she heard of the unwelcome intruder upon the premises, for she, too, feared danger to Daisy's pets.

Her anxiety and Nellie's proved too well founded; for when the latter reached the garden-house, she discovered the black cat forcing her way under the door, there being quite an open space between that and the ground, as the little building was old and somewhat out of repair. Nellie drove the cat away once more, and put a board against the aperture; but she could not but feel that Daisy's pets were in much danger, and she could not bear to think of her distress if such a terrible fate befel them. [152]

"I think the mice had better be brought up to the house, Nellie," said Mrs. Ransom, when Nellie returned and made her report.

Carrie heard, for she had come downstairs, meanwhile, and fresh jealousy of Daisy took possession of her.

"Mamma don't care if Daisy has *her* mice in the house," she said to herself, "so I might just as well have mine upstairs. One is no worse than the other."

Carrie was doing her best to drown her remorseful feelings, and to persuade herself that she was doing nothing wrong and undutiful, trying rather to feel injured and martyr-like; but it was up-hill work with her own conscience. For although she was a little apt to be jealous of the other children, and fretful at times, she was very seldom disobedient or regardless of her mother's wishes, and she had not had one easy moment since she had hidden the mice. But for all that, she was determined to think herself hardly used, and Daisy preferred to herself. And it seemed to her as if Nellie must know and meant to reproach her, when she said in answer to her mother's last words,— [153]

"Oh, no, mamma! it would never do to have the mice brought into the house, and you made uncomfortable. I am sure Daisy would never wish to do that, no matter what became of the white mice."

"But I can't have the poor creatures destroyed by that cat," said Mrs. Ransom, uneasily.

"No," said Nellie, "but perhaps we could—" she hesitated, not knowing what plan to advise.

"As soon as the boys come home we will see if they can find any way to make the garden-house secure," said her mother.

Ten minutes later, when Nellie had settled down to her reading, but with thoughts which would wander away to the garden-house, white mice and black cat, the boys came in from school, and were speedily made acquainted with the facts of the case. [154]

This was nuts for Johnny and Bob; and true to that aversion with which every well regulated boy-mind must regard all animals of her species, away they rushed in search of the black cat, intending to take the direst vengeance upon her, if they caught her again threatening Daisy's darlings.

And there she was once more, this time forcing her way beneath the wall of the slight structure, which, never very strong even in its best days, was now fast tumbling into decay, and presented many an aperture and crack passable to cats, or other small animals.

She saw the boys, however, before they could catch her; and, either knowing that she was trespassing, or instinctively aware of what would befall her if she fell into their hands, she fled before them, and was presently out of their reach. [155]

Bob and Johnny soon came to the conclusion that the garden-house was no longer a safe shelter for the white mice. Although it did present a pretty appearance from the outside, covered as it was with flowering vines, it was so thoroughly ruinous that they found it would take at least two or three days to make it at all secure against a determined and greedy pussy. They might watch and keep her away in the daytime; but what was to be done at night?

No, Daisy's pets could no longer be left there, if they were to be saved from pussy's clutches.

The boys went back to the house and reported; asking their mother what they should do, for there seemed to be no other proper or convenient place for the white mice.

"I'll think about it," said Mrs. Ransom, who was trying to make up her mind to allow the mice to be brought into the house, "and will tell you what to do after dinner. Will they be safe till then, do you think?" [156]

"Yes, mamma," answered Johnny, "for we set Rover to watch there, and he'll see after that old beast if she comes around again, but we can't keep him there all day, and she's sure to do it some time, if we leave the mice there."

"Don't trouble Daisy about it," said Mrs. Ransom, "there is no need to tell her just now."



## VIII. *DAISY'S SACRIFICE.*



OVER had to be released by and by after dinner, of course, but it did not seem to matter so much by that time, for Daisy went to her pets, and the cat would not dare to come near them so long as she was there.

So every one believed; but this proved to be a mistake, for puss was more persistent and daring than any one would have thought possible.

"Johnny," said Mrs. Ransom, when Daisy had gone, "could you not arrange some place up in the garret where Daisy could keep her mice and they need not come in my way?"

"It is just what I was thinking of, mamma," said Johnny; "you need never know they were there." [158]

"There now," said Carrie to herself, "so it is no harm at all for me to have my mice up there. I shall just keep them."

For repentant resolutions of giving up her hidden prize, and disposing of it in some way without betraying herself, were flitting through Carrie's mind; but now she put them from her again.

"First, we'll see if we cannot knock up some sort of a support to hold a hook in the garden-house," said Johnny, "and then we'll hang the cage upon that. The roof is so old and broken it will not hold; but we may put something in the wall to keep the cage out of the cat's reach, and we'll try it before we bring them in the house, mamma."

Daisy fed her mice, as she generally did at this time of the day,—the little creatures nibbled their food right out of her hand—played with and fondled them, talking to them the while in a coaxing, crooning voice of all her affairs, unconscious of the cruel, greedy eyes which were watching her every motion and those of her pets. [159]

For Rover having gone, puss had made the most of her opportunities, and came creeping slowly and stealthily beneath bushes and behind walls, till she reached the garden-house once more; and climbing to the roof sat watching the little child and her playthings through a hole in the thatch.

And, by and by, this naughty *bête noir* thought her chance had come.

"Now, you ducky darlin's," said Daisy, "I b'lieve it's time for Frankie to come back to my house and play wif me. So you must go in your cage while I go and see, and we'll come back and play here where you can see us. No, you needn't want to go into the house wif me. Mamma don't like you, which is a great, great pity; but she can't help it."

The mice seemed strangely reluctant to go back in their cage, whether it was that they only scented their watchful enemy, or that they had caught a glimpse of the glittering eyes looking down upon them; for one, with a squeak of terror, fled into the depths of Daisy's pocket, and the other would have followed had she not caught him in her hand and stopped him. [160]

"No, no," she said, "you'll have to go into your cage, Dot, and you too, Ditto. Peoples have to do what they don't want to sometimes, and so do mouses. I've found that out," and Daisy shook her head with the air of one who has made a novel and important discovery.

She put the mice into the cage, where they speedily hid themselves beneath their bed, shut and fastened the door and set it upon the floor, believing that she would return in a moment with Frankie and let them out again.

Then she ran away to the house, where, as she had expected, she found Frankie who had just



arrived with his sisters, Maggie and Bessie. They had not cared to wait till their mother came to take Mrs. Ransom to drive, but had begged and received permission to walk over that they might have the longer afternoon for their visit.

[161]

Daisy and Frankie were off together immediately, and the four elder children were settling the question of "what shall we do first?" when the whole household were startled by a succession of fearful shrieks from Daisy, accompanied by shouts of defiance and threats from Frankie. The sounds came from the garden-house; and Daisy's cry was not the dismal, low wail she set up at times over some minor trouble, but an unmistakable scream of terror and pain.

Away ran every one to see what was the matter; mother, brothers and sisters, guests and servants; even Ruth, baby in arms, tearing down the stairs to follow the rest.

The garden-house reached, the trouble proved not as serious as might have been feared; but quite enough so to warrant all the uproar from the two distressed little ones.

There crouched Daisy in an ecstasy of terror, bending over her white mice, which she held cuddled up in her lap; never ceasing her screams and calls for help, while Frankie brandishing a hoe stood boldly between her and the black cat, which with glaring eyes, back erect, stood spitting and growling at the two children, determined no longer to be balked of her prey. For this was no tame puss accustomed to be fed, and having a comfortable home; but a wild, stray cat, half-starved, and now quite furious at seeing her intended prize once more rescued.

[162]

Not fairly rescued, if she could help it. Long waiting for the dainty meal and many disappointments had made her desperate; and more than once she had nearly sprung past the brave little Frankie, who, resolute as the brute herself, fairly stood his ground, and faced her at every turn, calling aloud,—

"Hi! you there! you'd better be off with yourself. Now, you; you'll catch it! I'll give it to you! I'll hoe you if you don't look out! You want to be hoed, do you? I won't let her get them, Daisy. Run, Daisy, run!"

[163]

But Daisy was past running; terror had taken all power from her save that of shielding her pets, as she best could, against her bosom, and shrieking aloud for help.

It was well that help was so close at hand, or the situation of the two little ones might indeed have become dangerous; but at the sight of so many flocking to the rescue, the cat turned and fled, pursued by the boys with stones and sticks,—and who could blame them in such a case as this?—but escaped without much hurt from the missiles which they threw with better will than aim.

The story was soon told: how, coming to the garden-house and pushing open the door, the first thing that presented itself to the eyes of Daisy and Frankie was the black cat, with one paw actually in the cage, the mice squeaking in terror, and shrinking from the cruel claws outstretched for their destruction; how Frankie had snatched the cage away, and the mice had immediately fled to the protection of Daisy's bosom, whence the cat had once tried to tear them.

[164]

How the brave little knight had fought her off, and then tried to stand between his tiny lady-love and farther harm, the new-comers had seen for themselves; how devotedly Daisy herself had clung to her darlings, and how furious their enemy had been, was testified by the poor little woman's torn and scratched arm, bleeding from the adversary's claws, and the bent and twisted bars of the cage.

It was plainly to be seen that the garden-house was no longer a safe place for the white mice, not even until such time as the boys could arrange some contrivance for hanging up the cage; and now Mrs. Ransom almost forgot her dread of them in her sympathy over her poor little girl's distress and bleeding arms.

Poor little dimpled white arms! even now they would not relax their sheltering hold of the white mice, but held them firmly clasped.

Daisy was speedily carried to the house, and once more seated, white mice and all, on her mother's lap, while her scratches were bathed and bound up.

[165]

"A wag on it" was Daisy's sovereign remedy for every thing in the shape of a wound or bruise.

"Let me put your mice away, darling," said Nellie, ever mindful of her mother's antipathy.

"Oh, no! don't take 'em out. Mamma might see 'em, and she can't bear 'em," sobbed Daisy, holding the little skirt tighter than ever. "And oh, dear! I b'lieve I'll have to give 'em back to Frankie, 'cause I can't let 'em live in the garden-house for that black old dreadful cat to eat them up, and I s'pose mamma wouldn't want *me* to live there all the time, even with some one to take care of me."

No, indeed, mamma thought not, as she folded the darling closer in her arms, and bade her cry no more; for her white mice should come into the house, and the boys should arrange a place for them where they would be quite safe from black cats and other enemies.

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To see the change in Daisy's face!

"Mamma! don't you mind? don't you weally mind? Won't they trouble you?"

It was not possible for Mrs. Ransom to say that she would not be annoyed by the presence of the white mice in the house, even though they might never come under her own eye; and, although for Daisy's sake she put aside her own feelings, the loving heart of the little one detected the slight reluctance with which she spoke.

"Mamma couldn't have your white mice destroyed, darling," she answered; "and if Daisy is so careful for mamma, mamma must be careful for Daisy. So let the mice come. Suppose you let Nellie take them now."

Opening her skirt, Daisy revealed the mice, still trembling and quivering with their fright; and, seeking to hide themselves, the one made for the bosom of her dress, the other unluckily ran over mamma's lap looking for some place of refuge. Johnny's hand was over him in an instant, but not before his mother had grown white to the lips, and in spite of a strong effort she could not control a shudder of disgust. This did not escape Daisy. [167]

"Better put 'em away, quick, 'way far off, Johnny," she said in a pitiful little voice, and resigning the other mouse to his care; and Johnny carried both away.

Daisy was used to petting; but in consequence of her misfortunes, and the honorable wounds she had received in the skirmish, she was so overwhelmed with attentions and caresses, not only from her own family, but also from Maggie and Bessie, that she was presently consoled, and beguiled from mamma's lap to the piazza, where she was seated in state among her admirers, and continued to be made much of.

Frankie also came in for a share of the honors he had so fairly won by his heroic defence of his little lady-love and her property; but he presently concluded he had had enough of them, and would like to go upstairs with the older boys and watch them at their work. He would fain have persuaded Daisy to go with him, but she still remained mournful and subdued, and preferred to stay with the little girls and be petted. [168]

For there was a great weight on Daisy's little mind, and a great purpose working there,—a purpose which required much resolution and much self-sacrifice; and it was hard to bring her courage to the point. She had small thought for what the other children were saying, as she sat nestled close to Nellie's side, with her sister's arm about her, and one of Bessie's hands clasped in her own.

Carrie's thoughts were not more easy than Daisy's, and they were far less innocent. She was in an agony lest the boys, who were now in the garret, should discover her secret. And there was Frankie with them! Frankie, who had a faculty for finding that which he was not intended to find, for seeing that which he was not intended to see, for hearing that which he was not intended to hear; who, full of mischief and curiosity, went poking and prying everywhere, and whose bright eyes and busy fingers would, she feared, be sure to fasten themselves upon the hidden box. But she dared not follow the boys upstairs, for it would seem strange if she left Maggie and Bessie, and her doing so might excite questions. [169]

Oh that she had never touched the mice, or had at once obeyed Nellie's directions respecting them, which Carrie's conscience told her now, as it had at the time, was the same as if her mother had given them!

"Nellie and Carrie," said Maggie, "what do you think we are doing, Bessie and I?"

"We don't know. What?" said Nellie.

"Guess," answered Maggie.

"Oh! I'm not good at guessing," said Nellie, smiling. "I never guessed any thing or answered a conundrum in my life, except some of Daisy's;" and she drew her arm closer about the pensive little mortal at her side.

Daisy's conundrums were many and various, some so very transparent that she might as well have given the answer with the question, others so extremely bewildering that Ædipus himself could scarcely have unravelled their meaning; and it was in these last that she gloried, always feeling rather aggrieved if any one gave the right answer. [170]

"She gave a conundrum last night that none of us could guess," continued Nellie, wishing to amuse and interest her little sister. "See if Maggie and Bessie can guess it now, Daisy."

Daisy aroused a little from her melancholy, and said in a plaintive voice,—

"Why don't a pig wif a ni'gown on him want to go to the kitchen fire?"

Maggie and Bessie gave up at once, knowing that this would be Daisy's preference; besides being really quite at a loss to understand why a pig in such unusual attire should shun that particular spot, "the kitchen fire."

"Because he's af'aid he'll burn his ni'gown," said Daisy, when she was called upon for the answer, which Maggie and Bessie pronounced "very good;" and, being encouraged by her success, the pitiful little damsel put forth another conundrum, having reference to the subject which was weighing so heavily on her mind. [171]

"Here's anofer one," she said: "Why don't white mice like to live in the garden-house?"

"Because they are afraid the black cat will eat them," said Carrie, less mindful of her sister's prejudices than Maggie and Bessie had been.

"Now, why did you guess it so soon?" said the affronted Daisy; and this proving the drop too much in the already overflowing cup, her head went down in Nellie's lap, and she resigned herself to tears once more.

None of the other children dreamed of the chief trouble which was weighing on her little heart; but her misfortunes of the afternoon were considered so serious that no one thought it at all strange that she should be in a melancholy state of mind. Still, silent sympathy, at present, seemed the best to Nellie, and she contented herself with softly caressing the bent head, and checked the others with uplifted finger when they would have cheered Daisy with spoken words. [172]

"Talk about something else," she spelled out in the sign alphabet, and then asked aloud,—

"What is it you and Bessie are doing, Maggie?"

"Making such lovely Christmas presents for mamma," answered Maggie.

"What! already?" said Carrie.

"Yes," said Maggie, "because it will take us so long to work it, and we have lots besides to do. And then some dreadful accident might happen to us to prevent our finishing it, you know, like Sir Percy nearly putting out Lily Norris' eye; so it's best to take time by the forelock at once, even if it is only July."

"What are you making?" asked Nellie.

"A pair of brackets, the loveliest things," answered Maggie, with emphasis. "Bessie is filling up one, and I the other." [173]

"And we are going to have them made up ourselves, quite ourselves, out of our own money," said Bessie. "Nellie, why wouldn't you like to make something for your mamma of your own work? You can do worsted work so very nicely."

"I would like to very much," said Nellie. "And I have some money of my own that I could use."

"I shall do it too," said Carrie.

"If you would like to do the same thing that we are doing," said Maggie, "Mrs. Finkenstadt has another pair of brackets nearly like ours, and at the same price. They are very pretty."

"But I'm afraid"—began Nellie, then paused.

"Not that you don't know how," said Maggie; "why, Nellie, every one knows you work better than any of us."

"I was thinking if I would have time enough," said Nellie, "now that I am mamma's housekeeper. It takes up a good deal of time; and then—and then"— [174]

"Oh! it's your old books," said Carrie. "I should think you might be willing to give them up to make something pretty for mamma. If you didn't study so much more than any of the other girls, you could do it very well. I think you might make one; for then I could do the other, if you would show me how."

"I'll show you how and help you all I can," said Nellie, "but I do not think I shall try to do one myself. And it's not because of my studies, Carrie, but for another reason that I'd rather not tell."

"Mamma would just as lief let you give up being her housekeeper if you want to do something else for her," said Carrie.

"I don't want her to," answered Nellie, "for—I do believe I am of use to mamma, and I would not like to put that off for something that is not necessary. Besides, I have still another reason."

"I'm sure I think it seems a great deal more to make a lovely Christmas present for mamma than to do housekeeping for her. I believe she'd rather," said Carrie. [175]

"I don't believe so," answered Nellie.

"And, Carrie," said Maggie, "very often in this world we have to put up with appearances being deceitful, and with knowing not only that 'all is not gold that glitters,' but also that some very true gold does not glitter at all; and Nellie's private reason may be very true gold, indeed, without our seeing it glitter. Besides, mamma says Nellie is one of the most sensible little girls she ever saw; and I believe she is a case of 'old head on young shoulders,' so we may as well think that she is wise and right until we know differently."

Maggie's fine speech, overflowing as it was with proverbs, silenced Carrie, as her wise sayings did usually silence her companions, who did not command such a flow of ideas and language; and Nellie gave her a grateful look.

"Here's mamma in the carriage to take out your mamma," said Bessie; and the attention of the children was for the moment diverted from their own affairs. [176]

"Will you go and drive too, Daisy?" said Mrs. Bradford.

"No, fank you, ma'am," answered Daisy, much to the astonishment of the other children, as she raised her woe-begone little face from its resting-place. For Daisy was generally very ready for a drive, or for an outing of any kind.

But now to all their persuasions, to all their expressions of surprise, she remained perfectly immovable, only blinking her eyes very hard, pursing up her rosy lips, and shaking her head, in the most deplorable manner possible.

But the cause of this came out when Mrs. Bradford and Mrs. Ransom had gone; for as the carriage drove away the boys came running downstairs and out upon the piazza.

"Now your white mice will be all safe, Daisy," said Frankie; "me and Johnny and Bob have made the first-ratest place for them up in the garret. I'd like to see that old cat finding them up there. Come and see how nice it is." [177]

"It's no matter about it," said Daisy. "You're all very good, and I'm very obliged to you; but I wouldn't feel to keep my mice up in the garret."

"What are you going to do with them then?" asked Johnny.

"I couldn't have 'em in the house when mamma feels so about it," said Daisy, choking back a sob, and trying to be very brave.

"She said you could," said Bob.

"Yes, I know she did," answered Daisy; "but she don't like it, I know she don't, and so I'm going to give 'em back to Frankie."

"But, Daisy"—began Johnny.

"No, no," said Daisy, putting out a little hand to stop him, "don't speak to me about it, Johnny, 'cause I do feel so very bad, then maybe I wouldn't; and I should fink a little girl who wouldn't rafer please her mamma than to have white mice must be the naughtiest little girl in the world." [178]

"You dear little thing!" exclaimed Maggie.

"I don't believe mamma would care at all so long as she never saw them," said Bob; "do you, Nellie?"

Nellie hesitated.

"I do think she would *care*," she answered reluctantly, for Daisy's wistful eyes were raised to her face, as if hoping for an encouraging answer; "but she has made up her mind to bear it for Daisy's sake."

"But I don't want her to do any more sake for me," sighed Daisy. "I'd better do sake for her, I should fink; and please don't speak any more about it, children. I'd like to have 'em to play wif down here till mamma comes home; and then I'll give 'em back to Frankie for ever an' ever an' ever. That was why I wouldn't go and drive, so I could say good by to 'em."

Nellie did not oppose her self-sacrificing resolution, hard as she knew it was for the child; for she was sure that her mamma would never feel easy while the creatures were in the house, and she was sure also that in some way she would make it up to Daisy. [179]

Not that Daisy had any such idea. No, in giving up her mice she did it without any thought of payment, only to save mamma from annoyance and discomfort, a great and generous sacrifice for such a little child; for Daisy was but five years old, you must remember; and this showed thought and consideration worthy of a much older person. But then Daisy always had been remarkable for her tender, clinging love for her mother, and her earnest desire to please her in all things.

It struck all the other children; and they overwhelmed her with caresses and expressions of admiration and affection; even bluff Bob, who seldom condescended to bestow much flattering notice upon his sisters, declaring,—

"Well, you are a little brick, Daisy."

It was pleasant to be so petted and admired, for Daisy dearly loved praise, and in all this she found consolation, and began to put on little airs and graces befitting a heroine. [180]

Dear little lamb! who would quarrel with her if she did?

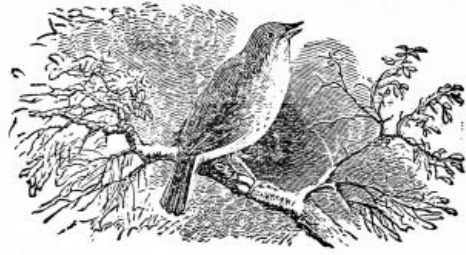
How hard it went with her might be seen by the working of the sweet face, the pitiful pressure of the tiny hands one against the other, the swimming eyes and choking voice.

It was too much for Carrie.

The contrast between her own conduct and that of her little sister was more than her uneasy conscience could bear; secret remorse and shame overwhelmed her, and with a quick resolve to be "as good as Daisy," and sacrifice her own wishes to her mother's prejudices, she slipped away from the other children, and ran upstairs, determined to put the gray mice out of the way.



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## IX. MAKING GINGER-CAKES.



UT how?

Ah! there it was. That which would have been easy and simple enough in the beginning, had she but done as she should, and taken the mice at once to the cook, was now a great trouble and difficulty.

For if she took them to Catherine now, the cook would ask where she had found them, and put other questions which she would not wish to answer; for that would involve a confession she had no mind to make, penitent though she was, or thought herself.

And how was she to put the mice out of the way herself? She could not tell what to do with them. Should she carry the box off somewhere, away to the woods or down on the shore, and let the mice out there? [182]

But then again, if she did this, she must leave the other children, her little guests Maggie and Bessie, too; and this would excite wonder and curiosity; more than that, she was not allowed to go out of their own grounds alone. She might perhaps hide them in the garden-house if she could but contrive to escape the eyes of her companions for a few moments, but no, the black cat might return in search of Daisy's pets, and her own fall victims to the creature. No, that plan would never answer; but what should she do? Oh! if she only had known beforehand what trouble and unhappiness her momentary disobedience and deceit would bring upon her, she would never, never have yielded to temptation, and hidden the mice. Why had she not taken time to think about all this?

Ah, Carrie, there it is. If we only knew beforehand, if we only could foresee the consequences of our wrong-doing, the misery and punishment we shall bring upon ourselves, perhaps upon others, how careful it would make us to avoid the sin! But the pleasure comes first, the punishment after, when it is too late; and nothing is left but repentance and regret. [183]

Carrie had run up to the garret once more, hastily taken the box from its hiding-place, and brought it down to the room next her mother's, which she and Nellie shared. There she stood now, a most unhappy little girl, as such thoughts as these chased one another through her mind, trying to think of some plan for ridding herself of the mice, but obliged to reject first one and then another.

What was she to do?

She was in dread this very moment lest the other children should come upstairs and find her there with her dreadful secret; yes, it was dreadful to Carrie now; and she felt almost angry at the innocent little mice.

You have all heard of the unhappy man who was very anxious to have an elephant, and at last won one in a raffle; but the moment it was his own he did not know what to do with it, and would have been glad to have some one take it off his hands. Those mice were as bad as so many elephants to poor Carrie, and oh, how she wished that she had never seen them! *Seen* them! She had not even done that! Only *heard* them as they rustled in their prison-house; not very satisfactory payment certainly for all the pain and trouble she had gone through ever since she had taken them. The man at least could *see* his elephant, but her mice she had only *heard*. [184]

And what a rustling and scratching and gnawing they were making now within the box which stood on the table before her, where she regarded it with puzzled, troubled face, wishing it and its occupants a thousand miles away!

There was a little hole near the bottom of the box: had the mice gnawed it, trying to make their escape? And how had they come in the box, and how many were there? What a noise they made! [185]

Forgetting her anxieties for one moment, Carrie took up the box again, put her eye to the hole,

and tried to peep within. But it was useless, she could see nothing; and now the mice, frightened by her movements, were as quiet,—well, as quiet as only mice can be under such circumstances.

Carrie thought she would open the lid of the box a little and peep within, just a very little bit, not far enough for the mice to escape, but so she could see how many were there, and what they looked like. Mice were such dear little things!

No sooner said than done. She raised the lid, cautiously and very slightly at first, then a little farther, when, quick as thought, a mouse sprang through the opening, and in a second of time was gone.

Carrie gave a start as sudden; the box fell from her hands, the cover rolled off, and there were four or five little mice tearing wildly about the room, seeking each one for a hiding-place, but rather bewildered by finding themselves so abruptly turned out from their old home, and scattered abroad upon the wide world. [186]

But perhaps you would like to hear how the mice had come to be in the box, and I will let you know. The mice never told *me*; but I know for all that, and this was the way.

Mother Nibble, having strayed into the house one day, made her way into the store-room, and there found this box with the lid partly open, a fine stock of chocolate and barley within, and plenty of soft, tender paper; and made up her mind that here would be a quiet, well-provisioned house in which to bring up her young family.

And here they had remained undisturbed until that very morning, when Nellie, putting her store-room to rights, had chanced to discover them, and, closing them down in sudden imprisonment, had sent them to a fate from which Carrie's naughtiness had saved them. [187]

And they had escaped now, every one of them, and were scampering here and there before Carrie's startled eyes.

Another moment, and they were gone, hidden safely away in nooks and crannies such as only mice could find.

But they were out at large. Here in this very room next to mamma's; even worse, Carrie had seen one run through the open door into mamma's own bedroom! What was she to do? Suppose her mother should see him, find him anywhere, even hear him scratching and nibbling on her own premises! She had seen enough of her mother's nervous terror of a mouse, strange, even needless it might seem to herself; but she knew too well what a torment it was; and now!

She felt as though it was rather hard that the mice should have escaped, and here in this very place, just at the moment when she had been going to sacrifice her own pleasure to her mother's comfort, and to be "as good as Daisy." [188]

Ah! but, Carrie, there was a great difference between you and Daisy. Your little sister had never yielded to temptation, had put aside her own wishes at once for the sake of her mother's feelings,—put them aside as a matter of course, and without a thought that it could or should be otherwise.

Dear, unselfish little Daisy!

But it would not do for her to stand here, idly gazing about her. There were the other children expecting her, perhaps looking for her; she heard their voices even now in the hall below.

Hastily gathering up the scattered fragments of paper, tin-foil, and crumbs of chocolate and barley which had fallen to the floor, she collected them within the box, put the cover upon that, opened a drawer belonging especially to herself, and thrust all beneath some other things. Some other time, she thought, she would throw the box away; for the present it was safe there. [189]

This done, she ran downstairs and rejoined her sisters and brothers and young friends, who were all still so occupied with Daisy and her pathetic sorrow over the parting from the white mice, that they had scarcely noticed Carrie's absence, and did not annoy her with the questions she had dreaded.

But it was a miserable afternoon to Carrie. She felt that repentance had come too late, and that now at any time her mother might encounter a mouse. She was not sorry when it came to an end, and Mrs. Bradford, returning with Mrs. Ransom from their drive, took away her own little flock with her; Frankie carrying the white mice, which he assured Daisy he was "only keeping" for her till he and she were married, when he would "build her a gold house for them;" and that they were just as much hers if they did live in his house.

Daisy watched the departure of her pets with the most pitiful of little faces, striving with all her might to smile and look cheerful, but failing distressingly. Mrs. Ransom hardly understood what it was all about till Mrs. Bradford's carriage had gone, the white mice with it; but, when she did, she overwhelmed her unselfish little darling with so many thanks and caresses that Daisy felt repaid for her sacrifice. [190]

Nellie wondered what it could be that made Carrie continue so out of spirits and almost fretful all the evening; but, having been repulsed once or twice when she would have attempted to give sympathy or ask questions, she found it best to let Carrie alone, even when she heard her crying quietly to herself after they had both gone to rest, and her sister believed her to be asleep.

But when the next morning came, and nothing had yet been seen or heard, so far as she knew, of the escaped prisoners, Carrie's spirits rose once more, and she believed that she should have no farther trouble from them.

Papa was expected home upon the evening of this day, and Nellie was to be allowed to try her hand upon his favorite ginger-cakes. Nellie had something of a turn for cooking, and was always so careful about rules and proportions, steady little woman that she was, that mamma was not much afraid that she would fail, especially with good-natured Catherine to keep an eye upon her. [191]

Of course the making of the ginger-cakes was a very important business, the grand event of the day to Nellie, Carrie, and Daisy; for the two last must have a hand in them, and "help" Nellie in her operations. More than this, they were to be allowed to roll out some "teenty taunty" cakes for their own eating and that of their dolls. They would have had Nellie go to her cake-making the first thing in the morning, and leave all else till this was accomplished; but that was not Nellie's way. "Duty before pleasure" was generally her motto; and of late she had kept it steadily before her, and tried also to be very sure which was the *duty* and which the *pleasure*, feeling that she had too often mistaken the one for the other. [192]

But at last all the regular small housekeeping tasks were done, and, with a pleasant consciousness of duty fulfilled, Nellie signified to the other children that she was ready to begin her cookery.

Catherine had every thing ready for her; and Nellie with a long apron tied about her neck and covering all her dress, her sleeves rolled up to her shoulders, and her receipt-book lying open beside her, was soon deep in the mysteries of mixing, while Carrie stood on the other side of the table, sifting sugar; and Daisy, mounted on a chair beside Nellie, ladled spoonful after spoonful of flour into the stone bowl wherein Nellie was stirring her mixture. Nor did she spill more than a quarter of each spoonful on the way, which, on the whole, is saying a good deal.

Daisy's face was radiant, and her troubles of yesterday were for the time quite forgotten in the interest of her occupation.

"Carrie," said Nellie presently, trying to be mysterious, so that Daisy might not know she was the subject of remark, "Carrie, don't you think a certain person of our acquaintance has pretty well recovered?" [193]

"Yes," answered Carrie, "you mean the youngest person in the k-i-c-h-u-n, don't you? Oh! quite recovered."

But Daisy was too quick for them, and, immediately understanding that she was the individual alluded to, thought herself called upon to return to the mournful demeanor which she considered proper under her bereavement, and, banishing the smiles from her face, she said, dolefully,—

"You mean me! I know you mean me; and I'm not recovered at all, not one bit."

"But I would if I were you," said Nellie. "When we do a kind thing for any one, like your giving up your mice for mamma, it is better not to let them see we feel very badly about it. That is, if we can help it; and I think you could feel a little glad and happy now if you chose: couldn't you?" [194]

"Well, I don't know, I b'ieve not," answered Daisy, closing her eyes with an expression of the most hopeless resignation. "There now!" continued this unappreciated little mortal, opening them again, "just look how that old flour went and spilled itself! There's only a little speck left in the spoon!"

"Because you didn't look what you were doing," said Nellie, laughing; "better keep your eyes open, Daisy, when you are carrying flour."

"I fink I could recovery a little if I only knew what was in that big parcel," said Daisy, taking up another spoonful of flour, this time with her eyes open.

"What parcel?" asked Carrie.

"That large parcel that came home yesterday," said Daisy. "It is for papa, so mamma said it wasn't right for me to peek; and now it's in the hall-closet where I can't even see the outside of it. I asked mamma if I couldn't just open the closet door and look at it, but she told me I'd better not, 'cause, if I did, it might be a temp-ta-tion," repeated Daisy with a justifiable pride in the long word and her correct pronunciation of it. [195]

"Yes, I know," said Nellie, turning to kiss the chubby, befloored little face at her side. "I know, darling; and you were a wise girl to keep away; you've been very good yesterday and to-day. Don't put in any more flour till I come back. I am going into the store-room for another paper of ginger."

"Carrie," said Daisy, when Nellie had gone, "did you ever have a temp-ta-tion?"

Carrie did not like this question; innocently as her little sister put it, it brought back to her too plainly that yielding to temptation of which she had so lately been guilty.

"Of course, child," she answered pettishly, "everybody does."

"Did it make you do somefing naughty?" was Daisy's still more unwelcome question.

"Mind your own business," snapped Carrie. "Daisy, I never did see a child who talked so much."

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Daisy ventured no further remark, but stood gravely regarding Carrie with reproving displeasure till Nellie returned, when she turned to her and said,—

"Nellie, isn't it more politer to say, 'Please wait and talk a little more anofer time,' than to say, 'Mind your own business, you talk too much!'"

"I should think it was. O Daisy, what a funny child you are!" said Nellie, much amused, and without the least suspicion that Carrie was the offender in question. "Who has been so rude to you, darling?"

"Never mind," said Daisy. "Carrie, I won't tell tales 'bout you, if you was rude to me,—oh, so rude!"

Nellie laughed merrily again over Daisy's fancied concealment of Carrie's sins against her.

"I don't see what there is to laugh about," said Carrie, angrily. "You think Daisy is so smart."

Nellie was grave in a moment, wondering, as she had had occasion to do many times during the last twenty-four hours, what could make Carrie so cross and ready to take offence.

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"Any more flour, Nellie?" asked Daisy.

"No more now," answered her sister. "Catherine, the receipt don't say cinnamon, but papa likes it so much, I think I will put some in. It can't do any harm, can it?"

"Not at all; I'm thinking it would be an improvement myself, Miss Nellie," answered the cook. "But then I've not a pinch of powdered cinnamon. I used the last yesterday for the rusks."

"There's some in the dining-room," said Nellie. "Daisy, dear, you can do that. Go to the sideboard, open the right-hand door, and bring sister the spice-box you will see on the first shelf. Bring it very carefully."

"Yes, I know it," said Daisy, scrambling down from her chair, and feeling rather important in her errand. "Cafarine, don't I help a whole lot?"

"Oh! a wonderful lot! I never saw a darlin' that made herself so useful;" and with these words of praise sounding in her ears, Daisy went off happy.

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In two minutes she was back again, breathless, with wide-open eyes, the crimson deepening in her cheeks, but with the spice-box safely in her clasp.

"Nellie! and Carrie! and Cafarine! all of you! what do you fink?" she cried. "Oh! such a fink!"

"What is the matter?" said all three at once.

"A mouse! a weally mouse in the dinin'-room. Not a white mouse, but a nigger mouse,—oh! I forgot again,—I mean a colored person mouse, right in the dinin'-room! What will mamma say?"

"Oh! you must be mistaken, Daisy," said Nellie, while Carrie heard the words of her youngest sister with a sinking heart.

"No, I'm not, I'm not," persisted Daisy. "It was just as weally a mouse as it could be. He was under the sideboard, and he ran out and under the sofa."

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"Oh dear!" said Nellie, in dismay at the news. "Catherine, there must be mice in this house. A good many too."

"Well, no, miss, I think not," said the cook. "This is the first one"—

Down went the bowl into which Carrie was sifting her sugar, not purposely, though she was only too thankful for the diversion it afforded, but because she had given a violent start and knocked the bowl with her elbow in her alarm at Catherine's words. How nearly her secret had been discovered! But now it was safe at least for the time, for the bowl was broken, the sugar scattered over the floor, and it was some moments before order was restored; by which time Nellie was intent upon cutting out her cakes, marking them with the "jigging iron," and laying them in the bake-pans, so that she had no thought for mice, white or gray.

Declaring herself "tired of helping," and feeling that her labors had brought no very satisfactory result to herself or others, Carrie left the kitchen and wandered into the dining-room, possibly to see if she could spy the mouse Daisy had discovered. But no, there was no mouse there, at least she could find none; and she began to hope that, after all, the little one had been mistaken.

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Oh dear! how wretched and unhappy she felt! She began to think she would feel better if she went and told mamma, making honest confession of what she had done, and begging her forgiveness.

Just then Daisy came into the room, and began peeping around in every corner and under each article of furniture.

"You needn't be looking for that mouse," said Carrie, "he's gone; and, any way, I don't believe



there was any mouse there."

"There was, oh! there was," cried Daisy. "I saw him wif my own eyes running fast, fast. But, Carrie, Nellie says we'd better not speak about it 'fore mamma, 'cause it would trouble her."

"I don't believe it. You just thought you saw him," persisted Carrie. [201]

"Now you've said a great many bad fings to me, but that's the baddest one of all, and I shall leave you alone wif your own se'f," said the offended Daisy, and walked away with her head held high.

Now it might almost have been imagined that Daisy knew that Carrie's "own se'f" was no very pleasant company just at this time, and that she wished to punish her by leaving her "alone wif" it; and, innocent as she was of any such intention, she certainly had her revenge.

Carrie's own thoughts were not agreeable companions; even less so now than they had been before Daisy came in, for her half-formed resolution of telling all to her mother seemed less difficult than it had done before her little sister had said that Nellie thought it best not to speak of the mouse to mamma. If mamma was not to hear of one mouse, it would not do to tell her that several were running at large about the house; and Carrie could not help feeling and believing that this was one of the escaped captives. Mice could come downstairs, that she knew; for once, when she and Nellie had been spending the day with Lily Norris, they had seen a little mouse hopping down from stair to stair, and had stood motionless and silent, watching till he reached the bottom of the flight, when his quick, bright eyes caught sight of them, and he scampered away in a fright. [202]

And now that it was forbidden, she was seized with a strong desire to relieve her mind by a full confession to mamma. Then at least she would be free from the burden of carrying about with her such a guilty *secret*.

"Oh dear! oh dear!" she said to herself, "whenever I've done anything naughty before, I could always go and tell mamma, and then she forgave me, and I felt better; but now it seems as if I did not dare to tell her this. I'd dare for myself, even if she was very much displeased and punished me; but I suppose I mustn't dare for her. It is *too* hard."

Ah, Carrie! so, sooner or later, we always find the way of transgression; and oftentimes the sharpest thorns in the road are those which we have planted with our own hands, not knowing that they will wound our feet, and hold us back when we would retrace our steps. [203]



X.  
**FRESH TROUBLES.**

**T**HE ginger-cakes were a great success. It is true that one's tongue was bitten, now and then, by a lump of ginger or other spice, not quite as thoroughly mixed in by Nellie's unaccustomed fingers as it might have been by those which were stronger and more used to such business; but who minded such trifles as that, or would refuse to give the little workwoman the meed of praise she so richly deserved? [204]

Not her papa certainly, who found no fault whatever, and eat enough of the ginger-cakes to satisfy even his Nellie.

Not even Daisy, who met with such a misfortune as that spoken of above, while at the tea-table, and who was perceived first by Nellie holding her tongue with one thumb and finger, while in the other hand she held out the ginger-cake, regarding it with a puzzled and disturbed expression. [205]

"What's the matter, Daisy?" asked Nellie.

"Somefing stinged my tongue. I b'ieve it was a bee, and I eat him up," said Daisy, the ever ready tears starting to her eyes. They were excusable under the circumstances certainly.

"It has been a little bit of ginger," said Mrs. Ransom, who had suffered in a similar manner, but in silence. "Take some milk, my darling."

"O Daisy, I'm so sorry! I suppose I haven't mixed it well," said Nellie, looking horrified.

Daisy obeyed her mother's command, which brought relief to her smarting tongue, and then, turning to Nellie with a most benignant smile, said,—

"You needn't mind, Nellie. I'd just as lieve have my tongue bited for your ginger-cakes. Papa," she added, turning to her father, "I s'pose you're going to be busy after tea, ar'n't you?" [206]

"No, papa has nothing to do but to rest himself this evening," answered Mr. Ransom.

"Oh dear!" sighed Daisy, taking her tongue between thumb and finger again.

"Do you want papa to be busy?" asked Mr. Ransom.

"I fought you would be," said Daisy, who found it extremely inconvenient not to be able to pet the injured member and to talk at the same moment. "I s'posed you'd have to undo that big parcel that's in the hall closet; and I fought my tongue would feel a good deal better to know what's inside of it."

"Oh! that is it, is it?" said Mr. Ransom. "Well, yes, I believe I *have* that little business to attend to, so your tongue may get well right away, Daisy."

Having finished his tea, Mr. Ransom now rose and went out into the hall, returning with the great parcel which had so excited the curiosity of his little daughter. This he put down upon the floor beside his chair, went out once more, and came back again with two smaller parcels. These he put upon the table, and took his seat before all three. [207]

Daisy's excitement hardly knew bounds now, especially when there came from within one of the smaller parcels a little rustle, as though something alive was inside. Still, her attention was principally taken up with the "biggest one of all;" and, to her great delight, this was the first papa opened.

Paper and string removed, two bird-cages, *empty* cages, presented themselves to the eyes of the children. What could they be for?

"Papa," said Daisy, "you *couldn't* be going to catch the little birdies out the trees, and put them in there, could you?"

"Wait a moment," said her father, taking up the parcel whence the rustling had come.

This, opened, revealed another bird-cage, this a tiny wooden one, but oh! delight! containing two beautiful canaries. They looked rather uncomfortable and astonished, it is true, and as if they might be thoroughly tired of their narrow quarters, from which Mr. Ransom now speedily released them, putting one bird in each large cage, which was soon furnished with fresh seed and water, sugar, and all that birds love. [208]

"What little beauties! Who are they for, papa?" asked Carrie.

"For little girls who have been helpful and kind to mamma during the past week," said Mr. Ransom, smiling. "I sent up the cages by express, but brought on the birds myself. Poor little fellows! they are glad to have reached their journey's end, I think."

"But there's only two, and there are fee girls," said Daisy,—"one, two, fee girls," pointing by turns to her sisters and herself, "and one, two birds. That's not enough, papa."

"Papa thought his Daisy too young to have the care of a bird yet," said Mr. Ransom, "but here is what he brought for her; for mamma wrote to him what a good girl she was, and what pains she was taking to cure herself of that foolish habit of crying for trifles." [209]

And, unwrapping the last parcel, Mr. Ransom disclosed a box containing a pretty little dinner-set. At another time Daisy would have been delighted; but what was a dinner-set to a bird?

She stood looking from one to the other without the slightest expression of pleasure or satisfaction in her own pretty gift.

"Don't you like it, Daisy?" asked her father.

"Papa, I—I—I would if I could, but—but the birdies are 'live, and the dinner-set is dead; but I wouldn't cry about it, would I, mamma?"

With which she ran to her mother, and buried her face in her lap. Poor little woman! it was almost touching to see how hard she struggled with her too ready tears, which had been so long accustomed to have their way upon small occasion. There was no mistaking the good-will and resolution with which she was striving to cure herself of a rather vexatious and foolish habit; but it was such hard work as can only be imagined by little girls who have been troubled with a similar failing. [210]

Mamma's praises and caresses helped her to conquer it this time again, though it was a harder

trial than usual, and she altogether declined to look at the dinner-set, or to take any comfort therein.

"Papa," said Nellie to her father in a low tone, as she and Carrie stood beside him, their attention divided between the birds and Daisy, "papa, if you will buy Daisy a bird, I will take care of it for her. I suppose she is too little to do it herself; but she likes pets so much, and she was so very sweet and unselfish about her white mice, that I think she deserves a reward."

Mr. Ransom had not heard the story of the white mice; but he now made inquiries which Nellie soon answered, Daisy's sacrifice losing nothing of its merit in her telling; while Carrie, feeling more and more uncomfortable, but neither caring nor daring to run out of hearing, and so excite questions, stood idly rubbing her finger over the bars of her bird's cage. The contrast between her own conduct and that of her almost baby sister was making itself felt more and more to her own heart and conscience. If Daisy deserved a bird because she had been loving and considerate for mamma, surely she did not deserve the same. How she hoped that papa would give Daisy one!

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But no; papa plainly showed that he had no such intention, for when Nellie concluded with these words,—

"Don't you think you will give Daisy a bird of her own, papa?" he answered,—

"I think not at present, Nellie. I have spent as much as I can afford at this time on trifles, and Daisy must wait for her bird till Christmas, or some other holiday. But she is a darling, blessed, little child, with a heart full of loving, generous feeling, and I do not think the less of her sacrifice because I do not find it best to give her a bird just now. I shall try to give her some other pleasure which may make up to her for the loss of her white mice."

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But it did not seem to Nellie or Carrie, any more than it did to Daisy herself, that any thing could do this so well as a canary-bird; and, although they knew that it was of no use to try and persuade papa to change his mind when he had once resolved upon a thing, they felt as if they could hardly let the matter drop here.

Daisy had heard nothing of all this, for she was cuddled up in her mother's lap on the other side of the room, where mamma had taken her away from birds and dinner-set, till she should be petted and comforted into happiness once more.

And now papa left the other children, and, going over to mamma and Daisy, sat down beside them, and gave his share of praise to his little daughter, not only for the giving up of the white mice, but also for that other matter concerning the tears, which she was so bravely learning to control, with the idea of "helping mamma."

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So at last a calm, though mournful resignation returned to the bosom of the little one, and she was farther consoled by mamma insisting upon putting her to bed herself, a treat which Daisy had not enjoyed since Nellie had taken up the character of mamma's housekeeper; for, when Ruth could not leave baby, Nellie now always considered this a part of her duty.

Still Daisy could not refrain from saying, as her mother led her from the room,—

"Mamma, I fink I never heard of a little girl who had so many *sorrys* as me; did you?"

When Mrs. Ransom came downstairs, however, she reported Daisy as restored to a more cheerful frame of spirits, and as singing herself to sleep with her own version of the popular melody of "One little, two little, three little nigger boys,"—namely, "One little, two little, fee little *colored person* boys;" so careful was she in all things to heed mamma's wishes, and not at all disturbed by the fact that the words of her rhyme did not exactly fit the tune. It was all the same to Daisy. Rules of music and measure were nothing to her, so long as her conscience was at rest.

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The family had all gone out upon the piazza. The father and mother sat a little apart, talking; the boys were amusing themselves with old Rover upon the lower step; while Nellie and Carrie were seated above at the head of the flight.

"What makes you so quiet, Carrie?" asked Nellie.

"I don't know," answered Carrie, though she said "don't know" more from that way we all have of saying it at times when we are not prepared with an answer, than from an intention to speak an untruth. Then, after another silence of a moment or two, she spoke again,—

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"Nellie, why won't you make one of those brackets for mamma?"

"For the reason I told you. Because I don't think I shall have time. I think I'd better take my money to buy her some other Christmas present all ready made. Mamma will like it just as well if she sees I try to help and please her in the mean time," said sensible Nellie.

"But you could give her something a great deal prettier if you made it yourself," said Carrie.

"I know it," answered Nellie, quietly; "but I cannot do it, and have any play-time, and mamma says she does not wish me to be busy all the time."

"Pshaw!" said Carrie, whose mind was quite set upon the pair of brackets to be worked by herself and her sister, "your housekeeping don't take you so long, and you never study so *very* much now, so you have a good deal of time, and I should think you might be willing to use some of it to make a pretty thing for mamma. You think yourself so great with the housekeeping."

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"I have some other work I want to do," said Nellie. "I would do it if I could, but I cannot, Carrie."

"That's real selfish," said Carrie. "You'd rather do something for yourself than please mamma."

Nellie made no answer. If our quiet, gentle "little sunbeam" could not disperse the clouds of Carrie's ill-temper, she would at least not make them darker and heavier by an angry retort or provoking sneer. Carrie was very unjust and unreasonable, it was true; but Nellie knew that she would feel ashamed and sorry far sooner, if she were let alone, than she would if she were answered back. And Nellie felt that it was not so long since she herself had been "cross" and fretful at trifles. She believed, too, that "something ailed Carrie," making her unusually captious and irritable at this time. It was not over-study certainly: Carrie was not likely to be at fault in that; but Nellie could not help thinking either that she was not well, or that some trouble was on her mind. What that was, of course, she had not the slightest suspicion. [217]

"After all, Nellie don't think so very much about pleasing mamma," said Carrie to herself, with rather a feeling of satisfaction in the thought.

It was not pleasant to feel that, while both her sisters were trying so hard to be useful and good to mamma, that she alone had done that which was likely to bring annoyance and trouble upon her.

There is an old adage that "misery loves company." I am not so sure about that, for I do not see what comfort there can be in knowing that others are unhappy; but I fear that sin often "loves company," and that there is a certain satisfaction in being able to feel that some other person is as naughty as ourselves. *Then* we need not draw comparisons to our own disadvantage.

Such was Carrie's state of mind just now; and there is no denying that she was somewhat pleased to believe that Nellie was seeking her own happiness rather than mamma's. [218]

But still she did not feel that she could so easily give up the idea of the pair of brackets. To make mamma such a grand present as that seemed in some sort a kind of amends for her past undutifulness, and she could not bear that she and Nellie should fall behind Maggie and Bessie in a Christmas present to their mother.

So she went on to urge Nellie farther, but in a pleasanter tone.

"I think it would be perfectly splendid to give mamma such a lovely present," she said, "and it would be so nice to tell all the girls in school that we are going to do it. Don't you think it would?"

"I don't care about telling the girls," answered Nellie, "but I would be very glad to make such a lovely thing for mamma."

"And you will do it then?"

"No," said Nellie, reluctantly, but decidedly: "I tell you I cannot, Carrie. I have something else to do, and I know mamma would not wish me to take any more work. Don't ask me any more." [219]

"What are you going to do?" asked Carrie.

"I'll tell you another time," said Nellie, lowering her voice still more. "I don't want mamma to hear. Please don't talk about it."

Carrie pouted again, and, to one or two proposals from Nellie that they should amuse themselves with some game, returned short and sullen refusals. Presently she rose, and, going to her father and mother, bade them good-night.

"What! so early, dear?" said her mother in surprise, for it was something very unusual for Carrie to wish to go to rest before her ordinary bed-time.

"Yes'm," said Carrie: "I've nothing to do, and it's so stupid; and Nellie's cross and won't talk to me."

O Carrie, Carrie! [220]

"I am afraid it is Carrie who is a little cross and fretful," said Mrs. Ransom, who had noticed that this had been Carrie's condition all day. "Well, perhaps bed is the best place for you. Try to sleep it off, and be pleasant and good-natured in the morning."

"Everybody seems to think Nellie and Daisy are quite perfect," murmured Carrie to herself, as she sauntered slowly through the hall and up the stairs. "No one ever says they do any thing wrong; but always say I am cross, and every thing else that is horrid. I've a good mind—I mean I'd just like to go 'way far off in a steamboat or the cars or something, and stay for a great many years, and then how sorry they'd be when they'd lost me, and didn't know where I was. They'd be glad enough when I came back; and wouldn't they wish they'd never been cross to me!"

Drawing such solace as she could from thoughts like these, after the manner of too many little children when they have been cross and discontented, and brought trouble upon themselves, she went on to the nursery. [221]

"I want my clothes unfastened," she said imperiously to Ruth, who held the ever-wakeful baby across her knees, having just succeeded in hushing it to sleep.

Ruth would probably at another time have declined the service demanded from her, until Carrie spoke in a more civil way; but now she preferred submission to having the baby roused, which would be the probable result of any contention between Carrie and herself. So she did as she was *ordered* without answering, and thereby secured the quiet she desired. At least so she thought, as Carrie stood perfectly silent till the task was nearly completed. But Ruth had reckoned without her host.

Carrie had fully expected that Ruth would reprove her for her disagreeable way of speaking, perhaps even refuse to do what she wanted; and she felt ashamed and rather subdued as she stood quietly before the nurse while she unfastened sash, buttons, and strings. She had resolved that she would give no more trouble to-night, would not make any noise that could disturb baby, and was even trying to make up her mind to tell Ruth she was sorry that she had been so troublesome and rebellious all day, when she saw—what?

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There, secure in the silence of the quiet nursery, was a little mouse darting here and there, seeking, probably, for what he might find in the shape of food.

Carrie gave a start, a start as violent as though she herself had been afraid of the harmless little animals her mother held in such nervous dread, causing Ruth to start also in involuntary sympathy, and thus waking the baby upon her lap.

Ruth scolded Carrie, of course: she was more apt to blame her than she was either of the other children, and to believe that she did a vexatious thing "on purpose." Probably this was Carrie's own fault, because she really gave more trouble than her sisters; but it was none the pleasanter, and perhaps there was some truth in her oft repeated complaint that she had "a hard time in the nursery."

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Be that as it may, Ruth's harsh words were the last drop in Carrie's brimming cup; and, wrenching herself out of the nurse's hands, she declared she would finish undressing herself, and ran away to her own room.



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## XI. *A NIGHT OF IT.*



**S**CARCELY was she there when she repented that she had come, until she found out what became of the mouse; but she was too much offended with Ruth to go back, and with some difficulty succeeded in taking off the rest of her clothes without help, tears slowly dropping from her eyes the while.

Poor Carrie! how miserable she did feel; and to her troubled little mind there was no way out of her difficulties.

She would have confessed all, if there had seemed to be any one to confess to; but, remembering Nellie's charge to Daisy and herself that morning, it did not seem wise or right to tell mamma that there were mice in the house when she might possibly escape the knowledge; she was afraid to tell her father, for all Mr. Ransom's children stood a good deal in awe of him; and she did not feel as if there would be much satisfaction or relief in telling Nellie. Nellie could not know how to advise her or tell her what to do. And yet—perhaps she could. Nellie was such a wise, thoughtful, well-judging little girl.

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Perhaps Carrie would not have put her thoughts into just such words; but this was the feeling in her heart at this moment, and it was no more than justice to Nellie. She knew she could depend on Nellie's sympathy, however much shocked her sister might be at her naughtiness, and she half believed that she could help her. How she wished now that she had not been so pettish and disagreeable to her!

"Nellie wasn't cross at all, it was old me that was cross and hateful and horrid; and I have been

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ever since I took the mice," she said to herself, the tears rolling over her cheeks. "I wish she'd come up, and I'd tell her I'm sorry; and if she asks me what's the matter, I b'lieve I've a good mind to tell her. Oh dear! I wish I'd never seen those mice. S'pose that one should run out of the nursery into mamma's room. I wish the door was shut between her room and the nursery."

Then when she knelt down to say her prayers, and came to the words of our Lord's Prayer, "Lead us not into temptation," she remembered how Daisy had asked her what she would do if she "had a temptation;" and she buried her face in the bed-clothes as if she wished to shut out the remorseful recollection of how she had acted yesterday in that moment of temptation; and more and more bitter became her self-reproaches as she thought how sweetly Daisy had acted in the matter of the white mice. Yes: Daisy had shown true love and tenderness for her mother; but how far had she been from doing the same?

Perhaps never in all her little life had Carrie sent heavenward as true and sincere a prayer as that she added to-night to her usual petitions: "And lead me out of this temptation, and show me what to do, O God!"

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Then when she was, with considerable trouble to herself, all ready for bed, she lay down, but not without another anxious glance at the door between her mother's room and the nursery. If she could but have that door closed!

Having soothed the baby to sleep once more, Ruth brought her into her mother's room, and put her into the cradle. This done, she passed on into Carrie's room to see that all was right there, and the little girl safely in bed. She did not speak,—perhaps she thought Carrie was already asleep,—but moved quietly around, picking up the articles of dress which her little charge had left strewn about, arranging the windows and doors properly, and turning down the light.

Then she went away.

And now to have the door closed between her mother's room and the closet which led into the nursery became the great desire of Carrie's mind as she lay in her little bed,—closed so that the mouse should not find its way through.

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She did not dream that mousie had done that already, and hoped to be able to close the door this way without attracting Ruth's attention. Slipping from her bed, she went softly, so that Ruth might not hear her, over her own floor, and through her mother's room to the closet door, and stretching out her hand was about to push it to, when Ruth caught sight of her through the closet door.

"What's the matter, child? What do you want?" she asked in much surprise, coming forward.

"I want this door shut, and I'm going to have it, too," said Carrie, preparing for battle at once, for she saw that Ruth would object.

"Well, what whim has taken you now?" said Ruth, pushing back the door. "Indeed, and you can't have it shut till your mother comes up. How would I hear the baby if it cries?"

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Carrie persisted in her purpose. Ruth would have been firm, but finding the child would not yield, and fearing to wake the baby once more if an uproar were raised, she let her take her way, and immediately went down with a complaint to Mrs. Ransom.

Papa heard as well as mamma, and took the matter into his own hands; and scarcely had Carrie climbed into bed again, glorying, partly in having attained her purpose, partly in the supposed victory over Ruth, when papa appeared, and, with a few stern words to the wilful little girl, set it open again, forbidding her to touch it, and leaving her in a more unhappy state of mind than ever.

She lay there and cried till Nellie came up; Johnny accompanying her, and each carrying a bird. No hooks were in readiness for hanging the cages; and it was decided that, for to-night, they should be placed upon chairs, Nellie's bird by her side of the bed, Carrie's by hers.

Carrie, whose heart and conscience were so uneasy, was very wakeful; and, long after Nellie was asleep, she lay tossing restlessly from side to side. Even after mamma came up to her room, she could not go to sleep for a long while.

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In the night, far into the night it seemed to her that it must be, she was wakened by a sound at her side,—a rustling, scratching sound.

What could it be? Carrie was not so foolish as to be afraid of the dark, indeed she was rather a brave child; but now she felt as if she would have given any thing to have had a light in the room, to see what made that strange sound.

She bore it as long as she could, then woke Nellie.

"What can it be, Nellie?" she whispered, as Nellie listened.

"I don't know: I'm afraid there's somebody here," said Nellie, in the same tone, but very much alarmed.

"What shall we do?" said Carrie, clinging to her sister.

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"'Thou shalt not steal,' 'Thou God seest me,' 'The way of transgressors is hard,' if you are a robber," said Nellie, raising her voice as she addressed the supposed intruder with all the Scripture texts she could muster for the occasion, and which might be imagined to influence him.

No answer, but the rustling ceased for a moment, then began again; and it was more than the children could bear.

"Papa! papa!" shrieked Nellie, "there's some one in our room! Please come, do come, papa!" And Carrie joined her cries to her sister's.

Papa heard, and came; and so did mamma, very much startled.

"There's a noise, a robber, here, by my bed!" exclaimed Carrie all in a flutter, though the noise had again ceased. Papa struck a light, there was a faint rustle, a sound of some small body jumping or falling from a height, and Mr. Ransom exclaimed,—

"A mouse! Nothing but a mouse in the bird's cage!"

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If there had been a veritable robber there, doubtless Mrs. Ransom would have stayed to confront him, and defend her children; but at the sound of "a mouse," a harmless little mouse, she turned about, and ran back to her own room, closing the door in no small haste. If the children had not felt too much sympathy for her, they could have laughed to see how she rushed away.

But Carrie did not feel like laughing, you may be sure, relieved though she might have been to find that it was nothing worse than a mouse that had caused her own and Nellie's alarm. I do not know but that she would almost have preferred the "robber," or some wild monster, now that papa was there to defend them, to the pretty, innocent little creature which had been the real cause of the disturbance.

Mr. Ransom hunted about for the mouse, but all in vain: he had hidden himself somewhere quite safely and was not to be found. The bird-cages were put upon the mantel-piece where he could not reach them again, for mousie had found the bird-seed an excellent supper, and Mr. Ransom thought he might return to his repast.

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Return he did in search of it, as soon as papa had gone and the room was quiet once more; but this time the children knew what it was, and although, when he found his supper placed beyond his reach, he made considerable disturbance, they were not frightened. But they found it impossible to sleep, such a noise did he make, tearing about over the straw matting which covered the floor, nibbling now at this, now at that, and altogether making himself as much of a nuisance as only a mouse in one's bed-room at night can do.

At last he was quiet, and the two weary children were just sinking off to sleep, when Nellie started up with,—

"Carrie! I do believe that mouse is in the bed!"

This was too much, not to be borne by any one, however much they might like mice; and both Nellie and Carrie were speedily out of bed, the former hastily turning up the light which papa had left burning for their comfort.

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Carrie was about to run to the door and call papa to come, but Nellie stopped her.

"Don't, Carrie," she said: "it will just frighten mamma again. Let's see if we can't find him. I'm not afraid of him, are you? Only, I don't like to have him in the bed."

Rather enjoying the fun, Nellie pulled off the covers and pillows, and even, exerting all her little strength, contrived to turn up one end of the mattress; but this, even with Carrie's help, she found hard work, and, nothing being discovered of the little nuisance, they were content to believe that Nellie had been mistaken, to put on the bed-clothes as well as they could, and lie down again.

But Carrie did not enjoy all this, if Nellie did. At another time she, too, might have thought that it was "fun" to have such a good and sufficient excuse for being up and busy when the clock was striking—could it be?—yes, it was twelve o'clock, midnight! and she and Nellie frisking there about the room, as wide awake as if it were noon.

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But there was a weight on Carrie's mind, she felt too guilty to enjoy the novelty, and she was almost vexed at Nellie's glee over it. Oh dear! how she did wish that she had never seen the mice, that "such things as mice had never been made."

And when at last she fell into a troubled slumber, for they heard nothing more of mousie, it was not the calm, peaceful sleep of her sister who lay beside her, but filled with uncomfortable dreams, and many a start and moan.





## XII. *AN ALARM.*

**N**OR did she feel lighter-hearted in the morning, especially when Nellie began to lament the too plain fact that there must be a good many mice in the house, and that they seemed to have come so suddenly. First discovered but two days ago in the store-room, and never seen or heard before since the family had occupied this house, they now appeared to be running wild, all over. It was very singular, certainly.

So thought Nellie, adding that mamma would now "have no peace of her life," so long as the mice were free, and she should ask papa to buy a lot of mouse-traps and set them in every room. [237]

Carrie knew only too well how this had come about; but now that mamma did know that there were mice in the house, she did not feel as if she could confess that it was through her fault that they had been brought upstairs. It seemed so horribly unkind, such a dreadful thing to have done to mamma now.

So, although she was not cross and fretful as she had been last night, she went about listlessly, and with a subdued and melancholy manner that was worthy of Daisy herself when she was at the very lowest depths of despondency, but with far better reason than Daisy usually had.

Even when Ruth, who felt a little grudge against her for her naughty conduct of the last few days, snubbed her and pulled her about rather more than was necessary when she was dressing her, Carrie bore it meekly, not having spirit to answer back, and so softening the nurse by her silent submission that she gave her a kindly pat on the shoulder, saying that she saw she was "tired of being naughty and was going to be good to-day." Which small encouragement Carrie received as she left the nursery with as great a want of interest or animation as she had shown for every thing that morning; and Ruth, shaking her head, privately confided to baby her opinion that that child was "going to be sick, or she never in the world would be so good." [238]

When Mr. Ransom came down to breakfast, he said that Mamma would not be down right away; but sent word that Nellie might "pour out" for her this morning. She had had a restless, wakeful night, having been made nervous and uncomfortable by the knowledge that a mouse was around, and could not compose herself to sleep after the little excitement in the children's room.

Were Carrie's troubles never coming to an end?

"Pouring out" was not new to Nellie, for she had made tea and coffee for her father and brothers many a morning before when mamma was not well enough to come downstairs; but still it was an important business, and one to which she felt obliged to bend every energy, till all were served according to their liking. Then she felt at leisure for conversation, and for observing what was going on about the table. [239]

"Are you not going to eat your breakfast, Carrie?" she asked, seeing that her sister sat idly playing with her spoon, as if she had no appetite.

"I'm not hungry," answered Carrie, not altogether pleased at having notice drawn upon her.

"Did the mouse frighten your appetite away, Carrie?" asked Mr. Ransom, looking at her.

"No, papa,—I—I think not. I'm not afraid of mice," said Carrie.

"But he frightened us very much before we knew what it was," said Nellie; "and afterwards we thought he was in the bed, papa."

"What was it? Tell us all about it," said Johnny. "A mouse! Won't mamma be in a taking, though?" [240]

"Poor mamma!" said Nellie; and then she related the whole story, seeming to think her own experience and Carrie's rather a good joke, though she was sadly troubled about mamma's nervousness over the matter.

"That's worse than white mice," said Daisy, who had listened with wide open eyes, in such intense interest that she quite forgot to eat her breakfast.

"But that's awful for mamma," said Bob. "What will she do?"

"It is a great pity," said Mr. Ransom. "I had hoped mamma would not be troubled in that way."



"They seem to be appearing all over the house at once," said Nellie, "and only since day before yesterday when I found the first in the store-room."

"Did you find one in the store-room too?" asked Johnny.

"Ever so many in a box; but Catherine killed them," said Nellie, never doubting, of course, that she was stating the truth. [241]

Carrie raised her downcast eyes in terror; but, to her relief, the servant in waiting had left the breakfast-room for one moment, and there was no contradiction of Nellie's words.

"Why, Cad?" said Johnny, "what ails you? you seem to take the mouse almost as hard as mamma would. You needn't be afraid for your bird, if that's it; for he was only after the seed."

Mr. Ransom looked at Carrie again.

"Don't be troubled, little daughter," he said. "Johnny is right: the mice will not hurt your birds. But you are quite upset with being so disturbed last night, are you not? Come here to papa."

Dreading questions which she would not care to answer, and wishing that she could creep under the table, run out of the room, or hide herself anywhere, Carrie was about to obey; but, before she could rise from her chair, there was heard a commotion overhead, a smothered scream in Mrs. Ransom's voice, a running and scuffling, and then Ruth calling to her master to "come quick." [242]

Mr. Ransom sprang from his chair, and rushed upstairs, followed by every one of his boys and girls, fearing they knew not what, save that something dreadful had happened.

Something dreadful, indeed, all the children thought, when, running into mamma's room, she was seen, pale, with closed eyes and quite senseless, lying back in the arms of Ruth; while the baby, resenting being placed suddenly face downwards upon the bed, was shrieking with all its little might.

The younger children, not unnaturally, thought that she was dead, and were terrified half out of their senses; but Nellie had seen mamma in a fainting fit before, and, though frightened, knew that she would be better by and by. So she gave the best help she could by taking up the screaming baby and hushing its cries, and encouraging her sisters—although her own lips were trembling and eyes filling with tears—with hopeful words. [243]

"What happened? What caused this?" asked Mr. Ransom, when he had laid his wife upon the couch, and was engaged with the assistance of the servant women in restoring her.

"Indeed, sir, and it was just a mouse, nasty thing!" said Ruth. "I came in with the baby to ask Mrs. Ransom for some ribbon for its sleeves, and she went to the bureau drawer for them, and as she opened it what did a mouse do but jump right out on her. 'Twas enough to scare a body that wasn't afraid of mice; but, for her, it's no wonder it's half killed her, poor dear! We're just getting overrun with mice. There! she's coming to now. That's all right, dear lady!"

Carrie heard, saw mamma's eyes slowly unclosing and looking up at papa; but oh! how white and very ill she looked still. She heard and ran, anxious to shut out sight and hearing,—ran out of the room upstairs to the garret, and, squeezing herself behind the old furniture in the place where she had hidden the mice, sobbed and cried as if her heart would break. [244]

What if mamma was not dead, as she had thought at first: she might be dying still, must be very ill to look like that, and she had done it. It was all her fault.



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### XIII. *AND LAST OF THE SUNBEAMS.*



OW long she stayed there she did not know, now crying, now ceasing, and crouched there in a kind of dumb remorse and misery which would have been a severe punishment for even a worse fault than that of which she had been guilty. She wanted to come out and learn what was going on downstairs, and yet she did not dare to: she felt as if she could not bear to see that look upon mamma's face again. Then she would shed more bitter tears. She imagined and wondered over many things. If mamma died and went to heaven, would she know what she had done, and be so grieved and displeased at her unkindness that she would love her no longer? Were people in heaven ever troubled about the naughty things their loved ones did or had done upon the earth?

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So she sat all in a heap, behind the old chairs and tables, perplexing her poor little brain, and racking her heart with all kind of imaginary consequences to this morning's occurrence. By and by she heard the servants calling her, but would not answer; then her father's voice, but now she believed that he must know all; "it had come out in some way," and she was afraid to face him and did not stir. Ruth opened the door at the foot of the garret stairs and called her name, even came up and looked about the open space, but did not see Carrie crouched in her far corner, and the little girl never stirred till she was gone.

Next she heard Nellie calling her from the garden below, her voice troubled and anxious.

"Carrie," she said, "Carrie, dear! where are you? Do answer if you can hear me. Mamma is growing so troubled because we can't find you."

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Here was a scrap of comfort. Mamma was at least alive enough to inquire for, and be anxious about her. She crept to the window and looked down to where Nellie stood, calling still, and turning her eyes in every direction.

"Here I am, Nellie, I'll come down," she answered, ran down the stairs, opened the door, and then, her courage failing her once more, stood still and peeped out.

Papa stood at the door of mamma's room, and saw her at once. A pale, tear-stained, miserable little face it was that met his eye, and stirred his pity.

"My poor little woman!" he said, holding out his hand to her: "why, how woe-begone you look. Have you been hiding because you were frightened about mamma? That was not worth while, and mamma has been asking for you, and every one looking for you this ever so long. Come and see mamma, she is better now, and looks like herself again."

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Carrie came forward, still with hesitating steps and hanging head; and her father, taking her hand, led her into mamma's room.

Mrs. Ransom lay upon the sofa, looking very white still, but with a smile upon her lips, and her eyes bright and life-like as usual; and the timid glance which Carrie gave to her mother's face reassured her very much.

Still she felt so guilty and conscious, such a longing to confess all, and yet so ashamed and afraid to do it, that her manner remained as confused and downcast as ever.

Nellie stood behind her mother, leaning over the head of the couch, and looking troubled and anxious, but her face brightened when she saw Carrie.

Daisy, with the most solemn of faces, was seated in a little chair at mamma's feet, gazing silently at the pages of "Baxter's Saint's Rest," held upside down. Not one word could Daisy read, she barely knew her letters; but she had found Baxter in the little rack which held mamma's books of devotional reading, her "prayers books," Daisy called them; and believing any work she found there must be suitable to the day, and the state of mind she considered it proper to maintain while mamma was ill, she had possessed herself of it, and was now fully persuaded that she was deriving great benefit from the contents thereof.

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"So you ran away from mamma," said Mrs. Ransom, caressing Carrie's hand as she buried her face in the sofa-pillows beside her mother's. "Did she frighten you so? What a poor foolish mamma it is to be so startled at such a harmless little thing as a mouse, is it not, dearie? I hope I should not have been quite so foolish if I had been well and strong. My poor Carrie!"

Worse and worse! Here was mamma blaming herself and pitying her! She could say nothing, only nestle closer to her mother, and try to keep back the sobs which were struggling to find way.

Mrs. Ransom was quite well again by afternoon, and able to join the family at the dinner-table; but although the spirits of the other children rose with her recovery, Carrie still continued dull and dispirited.

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She accompanied her father and Nellie to church in the afternoon. Happening to turn his eyes towards her during the service, Mr. Ransom saw her leaning her head listlessly against the back of the pew, while her lips were quivering and tears slowly coursing one another down her cheeks. He wondered what could cause it. There was nothing in the sermon to touch her feelings, indeed she probably did not understand one word of it. He drew her towards him, and passing his arm about her let her rest her head against his shoulder where she cried quietly for a few moments, and then, as if this had relieved her, dried her eyes and sat up.

Carrie had taken a resolution, and the very taking of it had done her good, and made her feel less guilty and unhappy. Papa was so kind and good that she began to think that after all perhaps

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it would not be so very hard to tell him all, and confess how naughty she had been. Even if he punished her very much, the punishment could not be worse to bear than this, she thought. She would tell him as soon as they reached home, and she could find an opportunity to talk to him alone.

But alas for poor Carrie's hopes of unburdening her mind at once! On the way home from church a gentleman joined her father and went to the house with him, came in, stayed to tea, and actually remained all the evening, even long after her bedtime and Nellie's.

Nor was this the last drop in Carrie's cup.

Daisy met them at the gate when they returned from church, brimming over with excitement, which was speedily taken down when the strange gentleman, laying his hand on her little round head, turned to her father and said,—

"Your youngest son, Mr. Ransom?"

"My daughter,—another little daughter," said Mr. Ransom, quickly, knowing Daisy's sensitiveness on this point; but the wound was given past recall, and the stranger was henceforth looked upon as a man capable of breaking any and every commandment among the ten. [252]

"I s'pect that man never ermembers the Sabbaf day to keep it holy; and I don't b'lieve he ever says his p'ayers," said Daisy, severely, regarding him with an air of great offence as he walked on with her father to the house.

"I think he does. I believe he's a very nice gentleman," said Nellie, much amused.

"No, I fink not," said Daisy, decidedly. "I b'ieve he slaps his wife fee times ev'y day. He has the look of it."

Nellie laughed outright.

"He hasn't any wife," she said.

"He'd do it if he had one then," persisted Daisy, who, in general the most forgiving and soft-hearted of little mortals, could not overlook the offence of the visitor, "'cause he calls people sons. Augh! People that slap their wives so much that they kill 'em have to be took to prison," she added reflectively, and as if she found some consolation in the thought. "Hannah told me so. She knew a man that was." [253]

"Hannah had no business to tell you such stories as that," said Nellie. "Mamma wouldn't like it at all, Daisy."

"Then I'll tell her she mustn't do it," said Daisy; "but, Nellie, do people that kill mice have to be took to prison?"

"No," said Nellie, "mice are very troublesome and mischievous, so it is not wrong to kill them. But it would be very wicked to tease them or hurt them more than we can help."

"I'm glad of that," said Daisy, "'cause I wouldn't like you and Carrie to go to prison."

"No, I should think not," said Nellie, "but Carrie and I did not kill a mouse."

"Oh, yes! you did," said Daisy, "least you squeezed him up in the bed so he had to kill hisse'f afterwards."

"O Daisy!" said Nellie. [254]

"It's the truf," answered Daisy, as one who knows. "Hannah found him 'most dead in your bed this morning, 'tween the mattresses, and she said you must have put him there last night, but you didn't know it, and afterwards he killed hisse'f about it. I saw him when he was dead, and going to be frowed away."

Nellie shuddered, the thought was very painful to her that the mouse should have come to his death in such a way; but Carrie felt worse still, and turning round and resting her arm upon the back of a rustic chair which stood beneath a tree, she laid her head upon it, and cried as she had done in the morning when she was hiding in the garret. Nellie comforted her as well as she could, but Carrie was hard to be consoled; and felt as if she was never to hear the last of those unlucky mice, and the consequences of her own naughtiness.

Mr. Ransom sat up late that night, long after his visitor had left, and the family gone to rest. All his little children he supposed to be long since fast asleep; and he was just preparing to turn out the lights and go upstairs himself, when a slight sound in the hall without attracted his attention. The patter of small bare feet it sounded like, and the patter of small bare feet it was, as he was assured a moment later when a little white-clad figure presented itself at the open door, and looked wistfully at him with pitiful, beseeching eyes. [255]

"Carrie! my child! are you ill? What is wrong?" he asked in much surprise.

"No, papa, not ill, but,—but"—Tears choked her voice, the little feet ran over the floor, and she had clambered upon his knee, and with her face hidden in his bosom sobbed out her confession.

"I've been awake so long, papa," she said, "and I thought I never could go to sleep till I had told

you, and I could not wait till morning, so I came out of my bed down here to find you. Oh! please forgive me, and do you think mamma can ever forgive me for being so cruel to her, and trying to think it was all nonsense about her being so afraid of mice? And then to think that poor little mouse was killed just for me! Nellie and I never knew he was there when we turned the bed over, but he wouldn't have been in our room if I had not brought the mice upstairs; and now Ruth says she don't know when we'll be rid of them, and mamma will be troubled and frightened with them for ever so long. And Nellie and Daisy have been real helps to mamma, and I talked so much about helping her too, but I've only been a bother and trouble to her, and never did a thing for her after all."

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All this, and much more, the sorrowful little penitent poured into her father's ear.

Mr. Ransom had no mind to punish or scold her: he saw that she was already sufficiently punished by the remorse and anxiety she had brought upon herself, and he thought that this was likely to prove a lasting lesson to her. Besides, the thing was quite a new offence of its kind; for Carrie was generally not only obedient, but also regardful of what she believed to be her mother's wishes, whether expressed or not; and he did not desire to be hard with her now that she saw her fault so plainly, and was in such a humble, repentant frame of mind.

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So although he talked seriously to her, he did so very kindly and quietly,—poor Carrie thought she had never known her father so kind,—nor did he talk very long that night, but soon carried her up to bed in his arms, quite soothed and comforted; and so great was the relief of the confession, that the poor little weary head was scarcely on the pillow before she was fast asleep.

No sooner were she and Nellie awake in the morning than she told her sister the whole story, feeling that she could no longer keep the secret from her, but making her promise not to tell the boys, lest they should tease her, which Carrie felt she could not bear.

The hardest of all was yet to come, the confession to her dear, gentle, tender mother. Mamma would look so surprised and grieved, would be so shocked to think she could be so cruelly thoughtless.

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But it was gone through with bravely, not very steadily it is true, for Carrie's voice failed her more than once, but she did not attempt to hide or excuse any thing.

And oh! how much lighter her heart was when it was over, and mamma knew the worst.

Perhaps Mrs. Ransom was not as much surprised as Carrie had expected she would be: it may be that she was prepared to hear the story which Carrie had believed would shock and distress her so much; and the readiness with which she granted her forgiveness but made her little daughter feel all the more repentant for having been so heedless of her comfort.

It was a healing repentance now, though, with the sting and bitterness gone from it; and Carrie felt as if she should never be fretful and cross again; no, not even with Ruth. She would try to be so helpful, so considerate and good now, she thought; but she would make no "fuss" about it, or talk as though she meant to do such very fine things, only to fail after all perhaps.

[259]

Nellie and Daisy had said and promised far less than she had done, but their actions had spoken for them.

"What is that you are doing, Nellie?" she asked, when all the little housekeeping tasks accomplished, her reading and practising finished, Nellie brought her workbox and sat down to sew. "Why! those are the slippers mamma was going to work for Johnny, are they not?"

"Yes," said Nellie.

"And are you going to help her with them?"

"I am going to work them all," answered Nellie. "Mamma began them, but she found it tired her eyes, and she was anxious that Johnny should not be disappointed, so I told her I would work them."

Carrie sat a moment silent.

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"And I suppose," she said at length, "that that was the reason you said you would not have time to make the bracket for mamma?"

"Yes," said Nellie, quietly.

"O Nellie!" said Carrie, "how much better you are than I am. You are a real, true help to mamma: you think of and you do what is really useful to her, but you don't talk about doing such great things. And Daisy, too; when I think about her giving up her white mice that she really had a right to keep, 'cause mamma said she could, I do feel too ashamed and mean for any thing. Nellie,"—after another little thoughtful pause,— "do you think a good way to show mamma how sorry I am would be to spend all my saved-up money for mouse-traps?"

"Well, no, I don't," said Nellie. "I do not think that would do any good, for papa has bought several this morning; and there is one set in every room in the house, so that we hope the mice will soon all be caught."

"Then what can I do to show mamma how sorry I am?" asked Carrie.

[261]

"I think mamma knows it already, dear; and the best way is just to be careful to think about what she would like, and then to be very sure to do it;—and—and I think one good way would be not to quarrel with Ruth, and not to make trouble in the nursery."

"Ruth is so hateful," murmured Carrie.

"I don't think Ruth would be cross to you if you would be a little more patient and good in the nursery," said Nellie. "You know, Carrie, dear, how often poor mamma has to go to the nursery to make peace, or to take the baby, because you will not wait for what you want, or will not stand quiet to be dressed, or something like that."

"Yes," owned Carrie, half reluctantly, "and Ruth never does be cross to you or Daisy; and when I am good she is pretty decent. But, Nellie, such things as that do not seem like a real help."

"But they *are* the best help: mamma says so, and I've found it out for myself, Carrie," said Nellie. [262]

"Nellie, would you ever have believed that I could do such a thing as to keep those mice?"

"I was surprised when you told me," answered her sister, "but I was just thinking, Carrie, that it was really not so very much worse than the way I behaved while I was studying so much and tiring myself out over those 'Bible subjects.' I think I was horrid to mamma and to all of you then."

"Yes, you were," said tactless Carrie.

"I was thinking so much more about being wise and knowing a great deal than about being good and a help to mamma," continued Nellie, not offended, though she had winced a little at Carrie's plain speaking, "that it seems to me now that I was almost as naughty as—as"—

"As I was to keep the mice?" said Carrie.

"Yes, as you were to keep the mice. I don't think I thought any more about mamma than you did, and I know several times I made a good deal of trouble for her which might have been helped if I had been more careful." [263]

"You've quite given up your Bible subjects, haven't you?" asked Carrie.

"Yes, I made up my mind to be contented with those I had. They would show Miss Ashton I had thought of what she said, but I know she would think it was right for me to leave them. I've made up my mind too, Carrie, not to be so very anxious about my books and studies."

Here Daisy came running up to them.

"Nellie, what'll make me grow very fast?"

"I don't know," said Nellie: "what do you want to grow very fast for?"

"So I can have a birdie," said Daisy. "Papa said I was too little now, least he said he would give me one when I was bigger. If I was to plant myse'f and then pour water on my foots like they do on the flowers' foots, then wouldn't I grow pretty fast?"

"No," said Nellie, "you'd only be all wet and muddy, and then you'd be sick." [264]

Daisy sighed.

"Oh, I do want a birdie so," she said. "I'd love my birdie more'n my white mice; oh! a great deal more. Nellie, if I was a birdie, or a white mouse, would you love me the most?"

"I'd love you whatever you were," said Nellie, turning to kiss the sweet, dimpled cheek beside her: "I couldn't help it."

"If I was an ugly bug crawling about, would you love me?" questioned Daisy.

Nellie laughed.

"Yes, I'd try to," she answered.

"Nellie, if I was that ugly bug crawling about, would you smash me?"

"Not if you were not doing any harm," said Nellie. "That would be cruel."

"I'm glad," said Daisy, with unmistakable signs of relief in the assurance. "I wouldn't like my sister to smash me even if I was a bug. Nellie, mamma said God sometimes made people sorry 'cause He thought it was good for 'em to make 'em better: does He send bugs and spiders 'cause it is good for 'em too, and birdies just to make 'em glad?" [265]

Daisy's questions were sometimes quite beyond Nellie's powers of answering: indeed they often puzzled older and wiser people. But she tried to explain to her little sister that even bugs and spiders were made for some good purpose; and after this Daisy looked with more respect upon those obnoxious creatures, and was even upon one occasion heard to say,—

"Good, little, very ugly spider, maybe God has some work for you to do, so I won't smash you, but let you do it."

While Nellie was talking to Daisy, Carrie rose and went in search of her father. She found him in the library.

"Papa," she said, going close to him, "I think I ought to ask you to give my bird to Daisy. She deserves it a great deal more than I do for giving up her white mice, and I do not think I ought to have it. Nellie will take care of it for her, and she does want a bird so much."

Mr. Ransom lifted her upon his knee.

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"You really think this, Carrie? You really wish that Daisy should have your bird?"

"Yes, papa, it really seems the most right for her to have it. I thought so ever since you brought the birds home and she wanted one so much, but I felt as if I could not tell you to give her mine; but now I think I would feel better if you let her have it instead of me."

"Do as you please, my dear child," said her father, kissing her. "Daisy certainly does deserve a reward for her self-sacrifice."

To describe Daisy's delight when Carrie took her up stairs, and leading her up to the bird said that it was hers, would be quite impossible.

"Are you sure you don't mind, Carrie? Would you just as lieve I'd have him, for my own?" she exclaimed. "Oh! I am so glad, so glad! When I have a camel wif two humps on his back, I'll give him to you, Carrie,—I really will."

The bird was henceforth called Daisy's, but I believe that he afforded quite as much satisfaction to the former little owner as he did to the present one; for she had the care of him as much as if she had kept him for her own; and it was thought best that he should still hang in her room so that he might not be separated from Nellie's bird.

[267]

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And now good-by to my "Little Sunbeams." If they have shed light in any shady places, brightened any youthful eyes, or cheered any innocent hearts; if they have poured even the faintest ray upon the safe and narrow path which leadeth upward to Eternal Light,—the recompense is great; and may the blessing of the Master go with them, and prosper them, it may be, for His glory.

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**Transcriber's Note**

Page 17, "Neilie" changed to "Nellie" (Nellie ran down to meet)

Page 64, "reponsibility" changed to "responsibility" (of all this responsibility)

Page 74, "oppsite" changed to "opposite" (into the opposite)

\*\*\* END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK NELLIE'S HOUSEKEEPING \*\*\*

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