

Bessy's Troubles at Home

Elizabeth Gaskell

Table of Contents

<u>Bessy's Troubles at Home</u>	1
<u>Elizabeth Gaskell</u>	1

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"Well, mother, I've got you a Southport ticket," said Bessy Lee, as she burst into a room where a pale, sick woman lay dressed on the outside of a bed. "Aren't you glad?" asked she, as her mother moved uneasily, but did not speak.

"Yes, dear, I'm very thankful to you; but your sudden coming in has made my heart flutter so, I'm ready to choke."

Poor Bessy's eyes filled with tears; but, it must be owned, they were tears half of anger. She had taken such pains, ever since the doctor said that Southport was the only thing for her mother, to get her an order from some subscriber to the charity, and she had rushed to her, in the full glow of success; and now her mother seemed more put out by the noise she had made on coming in, than glad to receive the news she had brought.

Mrs. Lee took her hand and tried to speak, but, as she said, she was almost choked with the palpitation at her heart.

"You think it very silly in me, dear, to be so easily startled; but it is not altogether silliness; it is I am so weak that every little noise gives me quite a fright. I shall be better, love, please God, when I come back from Southport. I am so glad you've got the order, for you've taken a deal of pains about it." Mrs. Lee sighed.

"Don't you want to go?" asked Bessy, rather sadly. "You always seem so sorrowful and anxious when we talk about it."

"It's partly my being ailing that makes me anxious, I know," said Mrs. Lee. "But it seems as if so many things might happen while I was away."

Bessy felt a little impatient. Young people in strong health can hardly understand the fears that beset invalids. Bessy was a kind-hearted girl, but rather headstrong, and just now a little disappointed. She forgot that her mother had had to struggle hard with many cares ever since she had been left a widow, and that her illness now had made her nervous.

"What nonsense, mother! What can happen? I can take care of the house and the little ones, and Tom and Jem can take care of themselves. What is to happen?"

"Jenny may fall into the fire," murmured Mrs. Lee, who found little comfort in being talked to in this way. "Or your father's watch may be stolen while you are in talking with the neighbours, or"

"Now come, mother, you know I've had the charge of Jenny ever since father died, and you began to go out washing and I'll lock father's watch up in the box in our room."

"Then Tom and Jem won't know at what time to go to the factory. Besides, Bessy," said she, raising herself up, "they're but young lads, and there's a deal of temptation to take them away from their homes, if their homes are not comfortable and pleasant to them. It's that, more than anything, I've been fretting about all the time I've been

Bessy's Troubles at Home

ill that I've lost the power of making this house the cleanest and brightest place they know. But it's no use fretting," said she, falling back weakly upon the bed and sighing. "I must leave it in God's hands. He raiseth up and He bringeth low."

Bessy stood silent for a minute or two. Then she said, "Well, mother, I will try to make home comfortable for the lads, if you'll but keep your mind easy, and go off to Southport quiet and cheerful."

"I'll try," said Mrs. Lee, taking hold of Bessy's hand, and looking up thankfully in her face.

The next Wednesday she set off, leaving home with a heavy heart, which, however, she struggled against, and tried to make more faithful. But she wished her three weeks at Southport were over.

Tom and Jem were both older than Bessy, and she was fifteen. Then came Bill and Mary and little Jenny. They were all good children, and all had faults. Tom and Jem helped to support the family by their earnings at the factory, and gave up their wages very cheerfully for this purpose to their mother, who, however, insisted on a little being put by every week in the savings' bank. It was one of her griefs now that, when the doctor ordered her some expensive delicacy in the way of diet during her illness (a thing which she persisted in thinking she could have done without), her boys had gone and taken their money out in order to procure it for her. The article in question did not cost one quarter of the amount of their savings, but they had put off returning the remainder into the bank, saying the doctor's bill had yet to be paid, and that it seemed so silly to be always taking money in and out. But meanwhile Mrs. Lee feared lest it should be spent, and begged them to restore it to the savings' bank. This had not been done when she left for Southport. Bill and Mary went to school. Little Jenny was the darling of all, and toddled about at home, having been her sister Bessy's especial charge when all went on well, and the mother used to go out to wash.

Mrs. Lee, however, had always made a point of giving all her children who were at home a comfortable breakfast at seven, before she set out to her day's work; and she prepared the boys' dinner ready for Bessy to warm for them. At night, too, she was anxious to be at home as soon after her boys as she could; and many of her employers respected her wish, and, finding her hard-working and conscientious, took care to set her at liberty early in the evening.

Bessy felt very proud and womanly when she returned home from seeing her mother off by the railway. She looked round the house with a new feeling of proprietorship, and then went to claim little Jenny from the neighbour's where she had been left while Bessy had gone to the station. They asked her to stay and have a bit of chat; but she replied that she could not, for that it was near dinner-time, and she refused the invitation that was then given her to go in some evening. She was full of good plans and resolutions.

That afternoon she took Jenny and went to her teacher's to borrow a book, which she meant to ask one of her brothers to read to her in the evenings while she worked. She knew that it was a book which Jem would like, for though she had never read it, one of her schoolfellows had told her it was all about the sea, and desert islands, and cocoanut-trees, just the things that Jem liked to hear about. How happy they would all be this evening.

She hurried Jenny off to bed before her brothers came home; Jenny did not like to go so early, and had to be bribed and coaxed to give up the pleasure of sitting on brother Tom's knee; and, when she was in bed, she could not go to sleep, and kept up a little whimper of distress. Bessy kept calling out to her, now in gentle, now in sharp tones, as she made the hearth clean and bright against her brothers' return, as she settled Bill and Mary to their next day's lessons, and got her work ready for a happy evening.

Presently the elder boys came in.

"Where's Jenny?" asked Tom, the first thing.

Bessy's Troubles at Home

"I've put her to bed," said Bessy. "I've borrowed a book for you to read to me while I darn the stockings; and it was time for Jenny to go."

"Mother never puts her to bed so soon," said Tom, dissatisfied.

"But she'd be so in the way of any quietness over our reading," said Bessy.

"I don't want to read," said Tom; "I want Jenny to sit on my knee, as she always does, while I eat my supper."

"Tom, Tom, dear Tom!" called out little Jenny, who had heard his voice, and, perhaps, a little of the conversation.

Tom made two steps upstairs, and re-appeared with Jenny in his arms, in her night-clothes. The little girl looked at Bessy, half triumphant and half afraid. Bessy did not speak, but she was evidently very much displeased. Tom began to eat his porridge with Jenny on his knee. Bessy sat in sullen silence; she was vexed with Tom, vexed with Jenny, and vexed with Jem, to gratify whose taste for reading travels she had especially borrowed this book, which he seemed to care so little about. She brooded over her fancied wrongs, ready to fall upon the first person who might give the slightest occasion for anger. It happened to be poor little Jenny, who, by some awkward movement, knocked over the jug of milk, and made a great splash on Bessy's clean white floor.

"Never mind!" said Tom, as Jenny began to cry. "I like my porridge as well without milk as with it."

"Oh, never mind!" said Bessy, her colour rising, and her breath growing shorter. "Never mind dirtying anything, Jenny; it's only giving trouble to Bessy! But I'll make you mind," continued she, as she caught a glance of intelligence peep from Jem's eyes to Tom; and she slapped Jenny's head. The moment she had done it she was sorry for it; she could have beaten herself now with the greatest pleasure for having given way to passion; for she loved little Jenny dearly, and she saw that she really had hurt her. But Jem, with his loud, deep, "For shame, Bessy!" and Tom, with his excess of sympathy with his little sister's wrongs, checked back any expression which Bessy might have uttered of sorrow and regret. She sat there ten times more unhappy than she had been before the accident, hardening her heart to the reproaches of her conscience, yet feeling most keenly that she had been acting wrongly. No one seemed to notice her; this was the evening she had planned and arranged for so busily; and the others, who never thought about it at all, were all quiet and happy, at least in outward appearance, while she was so wretched. By-and-by, she felt the touch of a little soft hand stealing into her own. She looked to see who it was; it was Mary, who till now had been busy learning her lessons, but uncomfortably conscious of the discordant spirit prevailing in the room; and who had at last ventured up to Bessy, as the one who looked the most unhappy, to express in her own little gentle way, her sympathy in sorrow. Mary was not a quick child; she was plain and awkward in her ways, and did not seem to have many words in which to tell her feelings, but she was very tender and loving, and submitted meekly and humbly to the little slights and rebuffs she often met with for her stupidity.

"Dear Bessy! good-night!" said she, kissing her sister; and, at the soft kiss, Bessy's eyes filled with tears, and her heart began to melt.

"Jenny," continued Mary, going to the little spoilt, wilful girl, "will you come to bed with me, and I'll tell you stories about school, and sing you my songs as I undress? Come, little one!" said she, holding out her arms. Jenny was tempted by this speech, and went off to bed in a more reasonable frame of mind than any one had dared to hope.

And now all seemed clear and open for the reading, but each was too proud to propose it. Jem, indeed, seemed to have forgotten the book altogether, he was so busy whittling away at a piece of wood. At last Tom, by a strong effort, said, "Bessy, mayn't we have the book now?"

Bessy's Troubles at Home

"No!" said Jem, "don't begin reading, for I must go out and try and make Ned Bates give me a piece of ash-wood deal is just good for nothing."

"Oh!" said Bessy, "I don't want any one to read this book who does not like it. But I know mother would be better pleased if you were stopping at home quiet, rather than rambling to Ned Bates's at this time of night."

"I know what mother would like as well as you, and I'm not going to be preached to by a girl," said Jem, taking up his cap and going out. Tom yawned and went up to bed. Bessy sat brooding over the evening.

"So much as I thought and I planned! I'm sure I tried to do what was right, and make the boys happy at home. And yet nothing has happened as I wanted it to do. Every one has been so cross and contrary. Tom would take Jenny up when she ought to have been in bed. Jem did not care a straw for this book that I borrowed on purpose for him, but sat laughing. I saw, though he did not think I did, when all was going provoking and vexatious. Mary no! Mary was a help and a comfort, as she always is, I think, though she is so stupid over her book. Mary always contrives to get people right, and to have her own way somehow; and yet I'm sure she does not take half the trouble I do to please people."

Jem came back soon, disappointed because Ned Bates was out, and could not give him any ash-wood. Bessy said it served him right for going at that time of night, and the brother and sister spoke angrily to each other all the way upstairs, and parted without even saying good-night. Jenny was asleep when Bessy entered the bedroom which she shared with her sisters and her mother; but she saw Mary's wakeful eyes looking at her as she came in.

"O Mary," said she, "I wish mother was back. The lads would mind her, and now I see they'll just go and get into mischief to spite and plague me."

"I don't think it's for that," said Mary softly. "Jem did want that ash-wood, I know, for he told me in the morning he didn't think that deal would do. He wants to make a wedge to keep the window from rattling so on windy nights; you know how that fidgets mother."

The next day, little Mary, on her way to school, went round by Ned Bates's to beg a piece of wood for her brother Jem; she brought it home to him at dinner-time, and asked him to be so good as to have everything ready for a quiet whittling at night, while Tom or Bessy read aloud. She told Jenny she would make haste with her lessons, so as to be ready to come to bed early, and talk to her about school (a grand, wonderful place, in Jenny's eyes), and thus Mary quietly and gently prepared for a happy evening, by attending to the kind of happiness for which every one wished.

While Mary had thus been busy preparing for a happy evening, Bessy had been spending part of the afternoon at a Mrs. Foster's, a neighbour of her mother's, and a very tidy, industrious old widow. Mrs. Foster earned part of her livelihood by working for the shops where knitted work of all kinds is to be sold; and Bessy's attention was caught, almost as soon as she went in, by a very gay piece of woolknitting, in a new stitch, that was to be used as a warm covering for the feet. After admiring its pretty looks, Bessy thought how useful it might be to her mother; and when Mrs. Foster heard this, she offered to teach Bessy how to do it. But where were the wools to come from? Those which Mrs. Foster used were provided her by the shop; and she was a very poor woman too poor to make presents, though rich enough (as we all are) to give help of many other kinds, and willing to do what she could (which some of us are not).

The two sat perplexed. "How much did you say it would cost?" said Bessy at last; as if the article was likely to have become cheaper since she asked the question before.

"Well! it's sure to be more than two shillings if it's German wool. You might get it for eighteenpence if you could be content with English."

Bessy's Troubles at Home

"But I've not got eighteenpence," said Bessy gloomily.

"I could lend it you," said Mrs. Foster, "If I was sure of having it back before Monday. But it's part of my rentmoney. Could you make sure, do you think?"

"Oh, yes!" said Bessy eagerly. "At least I'd try. But perhaps I had better not take it, for after all I don't know where I could get it. What Tom and Jem earn is little enough for the house, now that mother's washing is cut off."

"They are good, dutiful lads, to give it to their mother," said Mrs. Foster, sighing: for she thought of her own boys, that had left her in her old age to toil on, with faded eyesight and weakened strength.

"Oh! but mother makes them each keep a shilling out of it for themselves," said Bessy, in a complaining tone, for she wanted money and was inclined to envy any one who possessed it.

"That's right enough," said Mrs. Foster. "They that earn it should have some of the power over it."

"But about this wool; this eighteenpence! I wish I was a boy and could earn money. I wish mother would have let me go to work in the factory."

"Come now, Bessy, I can have none of that nonsense. Thy mother knows what's best for thee; and I'm not going to hear thee complain of what she has thought right. But may be, I can help you to a way of gaining eighteenpence. Mrs. Scott at the worsted shop told me that she should want some one to clean on Saturday; now you're a good strong girl, and can do a woman's work if you've a mind. Shall I say you will go? and then I don't mind if I lend you my eighteenpence. You'll pay me before I want my rent on Monday."

"Oh! thank you, dear Mrs. Foster," said Bessy. "I can scour as well as any woman, mother often says so; and I'll do my best on Saturday; they shan't blame you for having spoken up for me."

"No, Bessy, they won't, I'm sure, if you do your best. You're a good sharp girl for your years."

Bessy lingered for some time, hoping that Mrs. Foster would remember her offer of lending her the money; but, finding that she had quite forgotten it, she ventured to remind the kind old woman. That it was nothing but forgetfulness, was evident from the haste with which Mrs. Foster bustled up to her tea-pot and took from it the money required.

"You're as welcome to it as can be, Bessy, as long as I'm sure of its being repaid by Monday. But you're in a mighty hurry about this coverlet," continued she, as she saw Bessy put on her bonnet and prepare to go out. "Stay, you must take patterns, and go to the right shop in St. Mary's Gate. Why, your mother won't be back this three weeks, child."

"No. But I can't abide waiting, and I want to set to it before it is dark; and you'll teach me the stitch, won't you, when I come back with the wools? I won't be half-an-hour away."

But Mary and Bill had to "abide waiting" that afternoon; for, though the neighbour at whose house the key was left could let them into the house, there was no supper ready for them on their return from school; even Jenny was away spending the afternoon with a playfellow; the fire was nearly out, the milk had been left at a neighbour's; altogether home was very comfortless to the poor tired children, and Bill grumbled terribly; Mary's head ached, and the very tones of her brother's voice, as he complained, gave her pain; and for a minute she felt inclined to sit down and cry. But then she thought of many little sayings which she had heard from her teacher such as "Never complain of what you can cure," "Bear and forbear," and several other short sentences of a similar description. So she began to make up the fire, and asked Bill to fetch some chips; and when he gave her the gruff answer, that he

Bessy's Troubles at Home

did not see any use in making a fire when there was nothing to cook by it, she went herself and brought the wood without a word of complaint.

Presently Bill said, "Here! you lend me those bellows; you're not blowing it in the right way; girls never do!" He found out that Mary was wise in making a bright fire ready; for, before the blowing was ended, the neighbour with whom the milk had been left brought it in, and little handy Mary prepared the porridge as well as the mother herself could have done. They had just ended when Bessy came in almost breathless; for she had suddenly remembered, in the middle of her knitting lesson, that Bill and Mary must be at home from school.

"Oh!" she said, "that's right. I have so hurried myself! I was afraid the fire would be out. Where's Jenny? You were to have called for her, you know, as you came from school. Dear! how stupid you are, Mary. I am sure I told you over and over again. Now don't cry, silly child. The best thing you can do is to run off back again for her."

"But my lessons, Bessy. They are so bad to learn. It's tables day to-morrow," pleaded Mary.

"Nonsense; tables are as easy as can be. I can say up to sixteen times sixteen in no time."

"But you know, Bessy, I'm very stupid, and my head aches so to-night!"

"Well! the air will do it good. Really, Mary, I would go myself, only I'm so busy; and you know Bill is too careless, mother says, to fetch Jenny through the streets; and besides they would quarrel, and you can always manage Jenny."

Mary sighed, and went away to bring her sister home. Bessy sat down to her knitting. Presently Bill came up to her with some question about his lesson. She told him the answer without looking at the book; it was all wrong and made nonsense; but Bill did not care to understand what he learnt, and went on saying, "Twelve inches make one shilling," as contentedly as if it were right.

Mary brought Jenny home quite safely. Indeed, Mary always did succeed in everything, except learning her lessons well; and, sometimes, if the teacher could have known how many tasks fell upon the willing, gentle girl at home, she would not have thought that poor Mary was slow or a dunce; and such thoughts would come into the teacher's mind sometimes, although she fully appreciated Mary's sweetness and humility of disposition.

To-night she tried hard at her tables, and all to no use. Her head ached so, she could not remember them, do what she would. She longed to go to her mother, whose cool hands around her forehead always seemed to do her so much good, and whose soft, loving words were such a help to her when she had to bear pain. She had arranged so many plans for to-night, and now all were deranged by Bessy's new fancy for knitting. But Mary did not see this in the plain, clear light in which I have put it before you. She only was sorry that she could not make haste with her lessons, as she had promised Jenny, who was now upbraiding her with the non-fulfilment of her words. Jenny was still up when Tom and Jem came in. They spoke sharply to Bessy for not having their porridge ready; and, while she was defending herself, Mary, even at the risk of imperfect lessons, began to prepare the supper for her brothers. She did it all so quietly, that almost before they were aware, it was ready for them; and Bessy, suddenly ashamed of herself, and touched by Mary's quiet helpfulness, bent down and kissed her, as once more she settled to the never-ending difficulty of her lesson.

Mary threw her arms round Bessy's neck, and began to cry, for this little mark of affection went to her heart; she had been so longing for a word or sign of love in her suffering.

"Come, Molly," said Jem, "don't cry like a baby;" but he spoke very kindly. "What's the matter? the old headache come back? Never mind. Go to bed, and it will be better in the morning."

Bessy's Troubles at Home

"But I can't go to bed. I don't know my lesson!" Mary looked happier, though the tears were in her eyes.

"I know mine," said Bill triumphantly.

"Come here," said Jem. "There! I've time enough to whittle away at this before mother comes back. Now let's see this difficult lesson."

Jem's help soon enabled Mary to conquer her lesson; but, meanwhile, Jenny and Bill had taken to quarrelling in spite of Bessy's scolding, administered in small sharp doses, as she looked up from her all-absorbing knitting.

"Well," said Tom, "with this riot on one side, and this dull lesson on the other, and Bessy as cross as can be in the midst, I can understand what makes a man go out to spend his evenings from home."

Bessy looked up, suddenly wakened up to a sense of the danger which her mother had dreaded.

Bessy thought it was very fortunate that it fell on a Saturday, of all days in the week, that Mrs. Scott wanted her; for Mary would be at home, who could attend to the household wants of everybody; and so she satisfied her conscience at leaving the post of duty that her mother had assigned to her, and that she had promised to fulfil. She was so eager about her own plans that she did not consider this; she did not consider at all, or else I think she would have seen many things to which she seemed to be blind now. When were Mary's lessons for Monday to be learnt? Bessy knew as well as we do that lesson-learning was hard work to Mary. If Mary worked as hard as she could after morning school she could hardly get the house cleaned up bright and comfortable before her brothers came home from the factory, which "loosed" early on the Saturday afternoon; and if pails of water, chairs heaped up one on the other, and tables put topsy-turvy on the dresser, were the most prominent objects in the house-place, there would be no temptation for the lads to stay at home; besides which, Mary, tired and weary (however gentle she might be), would not be able to give the life to the evening that Bessy, a clever, spirited girl, near their own age, could easily do, if she chose to be interested and sympathising in what they had to tell. But Bessy did not think of all this. What she did think about was the pleasant surprise she should give her mother by the warm and pretty covering for her feet, which she hoped to present her with on her return home. And if she had done the duties she was pledged to on her mother's departure first, if they had been compatible with her plan of being a whole day absent from home, in order to earn the money for the wools, the project of the surprise would have been innocent and praiseworthy.

Bessy prepared everything for dinner before she left home that Saturday morning. She made a potato-pie all ready for putting in the oven; she was very particular in telling Mary what was to be cleaned, and how it was all to be cleaned; and then she kissed the children, and ran off to Mrs. Scott's. Mary was rather afraid of the responsibility thrust upon her; but still she was pleased that Bessy could trust her to do so much. She took Jenny to the ever-useful neighbour, as she and Bill went to school; but she was rather frightened when Mrs. Jones began to grumble about these frequent visits of the child.

"I was ready enough to take care of the wench when thy mother was ill; there was reason for that. And the child is a nice child enough, when she is not cross; but still there are some folks, it seems, who, if you give them an inch, will take an ell. Where's Bessy that she can't mind her own sister?"

"Gone out charing," said Mary, clasping the little hand in hers tighter, for she was afraid of Mrs. Jones's anger.

"I could go out charing every day in the week if I'd the face to trouble other folks with my children," said Mrs. Jones in a surly tone.

"Shall I take her back, ma'am?" said Mary timidly, though she knew this would involve her staying away from school, and being blamed by the dear teacher. But Mrs. Jones growled worse than she bit, this time at least.

Bessy's Troubles at Home

"No," said she, "you may leave her with me. I suppose she's had her breakfast?"

"Yes; and I'll fetch her away as soon as ever I can after twelve."

If Mary had been one to consider the hardships of her little lot, she might have felt this morning's occurrence as one; that she who dreaded giving trouble to anybody, and was painfully averse from asking any little favour for herself, should be the very one on whom it fell to presume upon another person's kindness. But Mary never did think of any hardships; they seemed the natural events of life, and as if it was fitting and proper that she, who managed things badly, and was such a dunce, should be blamed. Still she was rather flurried by Mrs. Jones's scolding; and almost wished that she had taken Jenny home again. Her lessons were not well said, owing to the distraction of her mind.

When she went for Jenny she found that Mrs. Jones, repenting of her sharp words, had given the little girl bread and treacle, and made her very comfortable; so much so that Jenny was not all at once ready to leave her little playmates, and when once she had set out on the road, she was in no humour to make haste. Mary thought of the potato-pie and her brothers, and could almost have cried, as Jenny, heedless of her sister's entreaties, would linger at the picture-shops.

"I shall be obliged to go and leave you, Jenny! I must get dinner ready."

"I don't care," said Jenny. "I don't want any dinner, and I can come home quite well by myself."

Mary half longed to give her a fright, it was so provoking. But she thought of her mother, who was so anxious always about Jenny, and she did not do it. She kept patiently trying to attract her onwards, and at last they were at home. Mary stirred up the fire, which was to all appearance quite black; it blazed up, but the oven was cold. She put the pie in, and blew the fire; but the paste was quite white and soft when her brothers came home, eager and hungry.

"O Mary, what a manager you are!" said Tom. "Any one else would have remembered and put the pie in in time."

Mary's eyes filled full of tears; but she did not try to justify herself. She went on blowing, till Jem took the bellows, and kindly told her to take off her bonnet, and lay the cloth. Jem was always kind. He gave Tom the best baked side of the pie, and quietly took the side himself where the paste was little better than dough, and the potatoes quite hard; and when he caught Mary's little anxious face watching him, as he had to leave part of his dinner untasted, he said, "Mary, I should like this pie warmed up for supper; there is nothing so good as potato-pie made hot the second time."

Tom went off saying, "Mary, I would not have you for a wife on any account. Why, my dinner would never be ready, and your sad face would take away my appetite if it were."

But Jem kissed her and said, "Never mind, Mary! you and I will live together, old maid and old bachelor."

So she could set to with spirit to her cleaning, thinking there never was such a good brother as Jem; and as she dwelt upon his perfections, she thought who it was who had given her such a good, kind brother, and felt her heart full of gratitude to Him. She scoured and cleaned in rightdown earnest. Jenny helped her for some time, delighted to be allowed to touch and lift things. But then she grew tired; and Bill was out of doors; so Mary had to do all by herself, and grew very nervous and frightened, lest all should not be finished and tidy against Tom came home. And, the more frightened she grew, the worse she got on. Her hands trembled, and things slipped out of them; and she shook so, she could not lift heavy pieces of furniture quickly and sharply; and in the middle the clock struck the hour for her brothers' return, when all ought to have been tidy and ready for tea. She gave it up in despair, and began to cry.

Bessy's Troubles at Home

"O Bessy, Bessy, why did you go away? I have tried hard, and I cannot do it," said she aloud, as if Bessy could hear.

"Dear Mary, don't cry," said Jenny, suddenly coming away from her play. "I'll help you. I am very strong. I can do anything. I can lift that pan off the fire."

The pan was full of boiling water, ready for Mary. Jenny took hold of the handle, and dragged it along the bar over the fire. Mary sprang forwards in terror to stop the little girl. She never knew how it was, but the next moment her arm and side were full of burning pain, which turned her sick and dizzy, and Jenny was crying passionately beside her.

"O Mary! Mary! Mary! my hand is so scalded. What shall I do? I cannot bear it. It's all about my feet on the ground." She kept shaking her hand, to cool it by the action of the air, Mary thought that she herself was dying, so acute and terrible was the pain; she could hardly keep from screaming out aloud; but she felt that if she once began she could not stop herself, so she sat still, moaning, and the tears running down her face like rain. "Go, Jenny," said she, "and tell some one to come."

"I can't, I can't, my hands hurt so," said Jenny. But she flew wildly out of the house the next minute, crying out, "Mary is dead. Come, come, come!" For Mary could bear it no longer; but had fainted away, and looked, indeed, like one that was dead. Neighbours flocked in; and one ran for a doctor. In five minutes Tom and Jem came home. What a home it seems! People they hardly knew standing in the house—place, which looked as if it had never been cleaned all was so wet, and in such disorder, and dirty with the trampling of many feet; Jenny still crying passionately, but half comforted at being at present the only authority as to how the affair happened; and faint moans from the room upstairs, where some women were cutting the clothes off poor Mary, preparatory for the doctor's inspection. Jem said directly, "Some one go straight to Mrs. Scott's, and fetch our Bessy. Her place is here with Mary."

And then he civilly, but quietly, dismissed all the unnecessary and useless people, feeling sure that in case of any kind of illness, quiet was the best thing. Then he went upstairs.

Mary's face was scarlet now with violent pain; but she smiled a little through her tears at seeing Jem. As for him, he cried outright.

"I don't think it was anybody's fault, Jem," said she softly. "It was very heavy to lift."

"Are you in great pain, dear?" asked Jem, in a whisper.

"I think I'm killed, Jem. I do think I am. And I did so want to see mother again.

"Nonsense!" said the woman who had been helping Mary. For, as she said afterwards, whether Mary died or lived, crying was a bad thing for her; and she saw the girl was ready to cry when she thought of her mother, though she had borne up bravely all the time the clothes were cut off.

Bessy's face, which had been red with hard running, faded to a dead white when she saw Mary; she looked so shocked and ill that Jem had not the heart to blame her, although, the minute before she came, he had been feeling very angry with her. Bessy stood quite still at the foot of Mary's bed, never speaking a word, while the doctor examined her side and felt her pulse; only great round tears gathered in her eyes, and rolled down her cheeks, as she saw Mary quiver with pain. Jem followed the doctor downstairs. Then Bessy went and knelt beside Mary, and wiped away the tears that were trickling down the little face.

"Is it very bad, Mary?" asked Bessy.

Bessy's Troubles at Home

"Oh, yes! yes! if I speak I shall scream."

Then Bessy covered her head in the bed—clothes and cried outright.

"I was not cross, was I? I did not mean to be but I hardly know what I am saying," moaned out little Mary. "Please forgive me, Bessy, if I was cross."

"God forgive me!" said Bessy, very low. They were the first words she had spoken since she came home. But there could be no more talking between the sisters, for now the woman returned who had at first been assisting Mary. Presently Jem came to the door, and beckoned. Bessy rose up, and went with him below. Jem looked very grave, yet not so sad as he had before the doctor came. "He says she must go into the infirmary. He will see about getting her in."

"O Jem! I did so want to nurse her myself!" said Bessy imploringly. "It was all my own fault" (she choked with crying); "and I thought I might do that for her, to make up."

"My dear Bessy," before he had seen Bessy, he had thought he could never call her "dear" again, but now he began "My dear Bessy, we both want Mary to get better, don't we? I am sure we do. And we want to take the best way of making her so, whatever that is; well, then, I think we must not be considering what we should like best just for ourselves, but what people, who know as well as doctors do, say is the right way. I can't remember all that he said; but I'm clear that he told me, all wounds on the skin required more and better air to heal in than Mary could have here; and there the doctor will see her twice a day if need be."

Bessy shook her head but could not speak at first. At last she said, "Jem, I did so want to do something for her. No one could nurse her as I should."

Jem was silent. At last he took Bessy's hand, for he wanted to say something to her that he was afraid might vex her, and yet that he thought he ought to say.

"Bessy!" said he, "when mother went away, you planned to do all things right at home, and to make us all happy. I know you did. Now, may I tell you how I think you went wrong? Don't be angry, Bessy."

"I think I shall never have spirit enough in me to be angry again," said Bessy, humbly and sadly.

"So much the better, dear. But don't over—fret about Mary. The doctor has good hopes of her, if he can get her into the infirmary. Now, I'm going on to tell you how I think you got wrong after mother left. You see, Bessy, you wanted to make us all happy your way as you liked; just as you are wanting now to nurse Mary in your way, and as you like. Now, as far as I can make out, those folks who make home the happiest are people who try and find out how others think they could be happy, and then, if it's not wrong, help them on with their wishes as far as they can. You know, you wanted us all to listen to your book; and very kind it was in you to think of it; only, you see, one wanted to whittle, and another wanted to do this or that, and then you were vexed with us all. I don't say but what I should have been the same if I had been in your place, and planned such a deal for others: only lookers—on always see a deal; and I saw that if you'd done what poor little Mary did next day, we should all have been far happier. She thought how she could forward us in our plans, instead of trying to force a plan of her own on us. She got me my right sort of wood for whittling, and arranged all nicely to get the little ones off to bed, so as to get the house quiet, if you wanted some reading, as she thought you did. And that's the way, I notice, some folks have of making a happy home. Others may mean just as well; but they don't hit the thing."

"I dare say it's true," said Bessy. "But sometimes you all hang about as if you did not know what to do. And I thought reading travels would just please you all."

Bessy's Troubles at Home

Jem was touched by Bessy's humble way of speaking, so different from her usual cheerful, self-confident manner. He answered, "I know you did, dear. And many a time we should have been glad enough of it, when we had nothing to do, as you say."

"I had promised mother to try and make you all happy, and this is the end of it!" said Bessy, beginning to cry afresh.

"But, Bessy! I think you were not thinking of your promise, when you fixed to go out and char."

"I thought of earning money."

"Earning money would not make us happy. We have enough, with care and management. If you were to have made us happy, you should have been at home, with a bright face, ready to welcome us; don't you think so, dear Bessy?"

"I did not want the money for home. I wanted to make mother a present of such a pretty thing."

"Poor mother! I am afraid we must send for her home now. And she has only been three days at Southport!"

"Oh!" said Bessy, startled by this notion of Jem's; "don't, don't send for mother. The doctor did say so much about her going to Southport being the only thing for her, and I did so try to get her an order! It will kill her, Jem! indeed it will; you don't know how weak and frightened she is, O Jem, Jem!"

Jem felt the truth of what his sister was saying. At last, he resolved to leave the matter for the doctor to decide, as he had attended his mother, and now knew exactly how much danger there was about Mary. He proposed to Bessy that they should go and relieve the kind neighbour who had charge of Mary.

"But you won't send for mother," pleaded Bessy; "if it's the best thing for Mary, I'll wash up her things to-night, all ready for her to go into the infirmary. I won't think of myself, Jem."

"Well! I must speak to the doctor," said Jem. "I must not try and fix any way just because we wish it, but because it is right."

All night long, Bessy washed and ironed, and yet was always ready to attend to Mary when Jem called her. She took Jenny's scalded hand in charge as well, and bathed it with the lotion the doctor sent; and all was done so meekly and patiently that even Tom was struck with it, and admired the change. The doctor came very early. He had prepared everything for Mary's admission into the infirmary. And Jem consulted him about sending for his mother home. Bessy sat trembling, awaiting his answer.

"I am very unwilling to sanction any concealment. And yet, as you say, your mother is in a very delicate state. It might do her serious harm if she had any shock. Well! suppose for this once, I take it on myself. If Mary goes on as I hope, why well! well! we'll see. Mind that your mother is told all when she comes home. And if our poor Mary grows worse but I am not afraid of that, with infirmary care and nursing but, if she does, I'll write to your mother myself, and arrange with a kind friend I have at Southport all about sending her home. And now," said he, turning suddenly to Bessy, "tell me what you were doing from home when this happened, Did not your mother leave you in charge of all at home?"

"Yes, sir!" said Bessy, trembling. "But, sir, I thought I could earn money to make mother a present!"

"Thought! fiddle-de-dee. I'll tell you what; never you neglect the work clearly laid out for you by either God or man, to go making work for yourself, according to your own fancies. God knows what you are most fit for. Do

Bessy's Troubles at Home

that. And then wait; if you don't see your next duty clearly. You will not long be idle in this world, if you are ready for a summons. Now, let me see that you send Mary all clean and tidy to the infirmary."

Jem was holding Bessy's hand. "She has washed everything and made it fit for a queen. Our Bessy worked all night long, and was content to let me be with Mary (where she wished sore to be), because I could lift her better, being the stronger."

"That's right. Even when you want to be of service to others, don't think how to please yourself."

I have not much more to tell you about Bessy. This sad accident of Mary's did her a great deal of good, although it cost her so much sorrow at first. It taught her several lessons, which it is good for every woman to learn, whether she is called upon, as daughter, sister, wife, or mother, to contribute to the happiness of a home. And Mary herself was hardly more thoughtful and careful to make others happy in their own way, provided that way was innocent, than was Bessy hereafter. It was a struggle between her and Mary which could be the least selfish, and do the duties nearest to them with the most faithfulness and zeal. The mother stayed at Southport her full time, and came home well and strong. Then Bessy put her arms round her mother's neck, and told her ail and far more severely against herself than either the doctor or Jem did, when they related the same story afterwards.