Selected Story.

MRS. JENKIN'S HOUSECLEANING

BY Lilian Margaret Houts.
(From the Boston Youth's Companion.)

"Of all things!" ejaculated Mrs. Jenkins, as she rocked vehemently back and forth in her splint-bottomed sewing-chair, pulling her needle and thread with little jerks through the carpet rags she was joining. "Here 'tis the ninth of May, and this house not cleaned yet. There's not one single thing done, and I haven't failed before in twenty odd years to have it all spick and span by the first of the month."

Her pretty daughter, Mary Ellen, bustled back and forth between the kitchen and the pantry, busily engaged in getting supper. The loose sleeves of her calico dress were rolled high, showing the dimpled whiteness of her arms. Her dark apron was plentifully besprinkled with flour, and there was a generous dab on the tip of her nose.

"Oh, never mind, ma," she said cheerily, as she knelt before the oven door to inspect the biscuits. "We're glad enough to have you up and about again; so nobody minds whether the house is cleaned or not."

"My mother brought us up to clean house all right," went on Mrs. Jenkins. "We always took down the stoves and packed away the flannels the first of May, rain or shine, and then we knew what we were about."

"And now," she went on, "your pa's took a sudden notion that he must go down East visitin', and nothing will do but I must go with him, cleaning or no cleaning. And here's your sister Elvira coming home from her school in two weeks. A nice welcome it'll be for her, with the house all full of dust and dirt!"

"I'll do you a lot of good, ma, to get away. You know the doctor said you needed a change more than anything else. You'll get well lots faster than if you stayed at home and worked. And the house isn't so very dirty, either. I'm sure I've worked hard enough to keep it clean," she added, under her breath.

"Much them doctors know!" retorted her mother. "But you may be sure of one thing, Mary Ellen, and that is that I'd never let your pa go off on a trip without me, absentminded as he is. He'd be sure to get run over by the street-cars, or get lost, or something. If nothing else he'd wear his hat hind side before, or forget to put on a clean collar every day."

"Supper ready, Mary Ellen?" called out the cheerful voice of Mr. Jenkins as he drove into the yard. "Well, ma, it's fixed, and we'll start bright and early in the morning. I've bought our tickets, and all you've got to do is to finish packing your trunk, and Mary Ellen can fix up a few doughnuts and some fried chicken for our lunch."

"Of all foolish things, John, this here's the foolishest, pickin' up and goin' down East in May, and Old Speckle about to come off of a settin' of fifteen of the best Plymouth Rock hens I could get! I just know Mary Ellen'll forget to feed 'em. And not one inch of this house cleaned!" And Mrs. Jenkins's voice broke as if she were on the verge of tears.

Mrs. Jenkins had suffered from a tedious attack of grippe during the winter, and not even the mild days of early spring had restored her to her former strength and ambition. Her family hardly recognized in the weak, querulous semi-invalid the active, bustling housekeeper they knew so well.

This journey of her husband, which seemed to her so useless and foolish, had really been planned at the suggestion of the family physician, who thought that a change of scene and freedom from the cares of home might restore the vigor which his remedies were powerless to awaken. So Mr. Jenkins had entrusted the care of the spring work to his faithful assistant, Jonas, and had drawn upon the snug sum laid away in the village bank for a "rainy day."

"I'll make up my blue lawn this week," Mary Ellen soliloquized, as she worked about the kitchen, after her father and mother had gone. "It's all cut out and fitted, and it isn't really much of a job. And then next week— I believe—" She dropped into a chair, laughing to herself.

"Yes, I'll do it, I'll clean house! Ma would faint, I know, if she thought I was trying to do it alone, for she doesn't trust me any more than a baby, if I am eighteen years old. But I know I can do it just as well as she can. And then it'll be all fresh when she comes home, and she needn't work herself sick again. I'll do it! I'll do it!" And Mary Ellen, her cheeks rosier than ever with excitement, went at her work with renewed vigor.

The days flew swiftly by. To the vigorous young arms the household duties seemed light, and the care of the barnyard and poultry—including Old Speckle, who came off punctually with fourteen little black balls of down—did not weigh heavily on her mind. Every afternoon she hitched up the patient family horse, Old Gray, and jogged down the road to visit some of her girl friends, taking her sewing with her; and in the evening, after the chores had been done and the milk put away, she went by the pasture road to the next farmhouse, where lived the Meeks family, to spend the night.

Saturday afternoon she and Marcia Meeks completed the blue lawn. Mary Ellen felt justly proud of her handiwork, as she slipped it on to see if everything was all right, and smiled back at the rosy reflection of herself which she saw in the old mirror in her little room.

"Now that job's done," she said to Marcia, as they went down the stairs each with an arm round the other's waist; "and Monday morning I'm going to begin cleaning house. Mother was so worried because it wasn't done before she went away, and Elvira will be home week after next, and I'd like to surprise them both."

Almost before daylight Mary Ellen began her task. Woodwork and windows were washed, the rag carpet which covered the sitting-room floor and the "boughten" one in the parlor were taken up and beaten. In fact every inch of the little farmhouse from cellar to garret was thoroughly cleaned.

On Thursday, as she was hanging fresh curtains in the chambers up stairs, Jonas drove into the yard and called loudly: "Mary Ellen! Mary Ellen! Here's two letters for you!"

One was from mother. They were having a good time among relatives and old friends, but she was homesick and could hardly wait until the time set to come back, for she did want to get the housecleaning done before summer set in. Mary Ellen smiled as she read.

"Don't let Jonas forget to water the calves, and be sure to feed Old Speckle's chickens every three hours," was the closing sentence. The other letter was from her cousin Roxy, over at Pine Grove. It ran thus:

Dear Mary Ellen: Can't you come over and stay a few days with us? We—that is, the young folks—are going to a party over at Alum Cliffs Saturday, and then there'll be a supper in our barn after we get back. Make Jonas keep house while you're gone, but don't say no. I haven't time for another word; I have forty things to do. But don't fail to come. Your loving cousin,

ROXY.

A party and a supper! The temptation was too much. But Marcia would come over and see that everything was all right, and there was no knowing when she would get a chance to run away again for a little trip. And she had been shut in so closely all winter, too. The blue lawn would be just the thing to wear. So the next day she had Jonas drive her over to town to take the train for Pine Grove, twelve miles away.

"Don't forget the chickens, Jonas," she cried, as the train was about to pull out. "Ma'd never forgive us if anything happened to them. I'll be home Tuesday or Wednesday at the latest."

There was great excitement in the little village of Browsville, where Elvira Jenkins taught school. Some one had set fire to the schoolhouse. An early passer-by had observed smoke pouring from the windows one morning, and before he could bring help, the neat little white building was in flames. Only a part of the books and furniture could be saved.

Poor Elvira sat down and cried bitterly when she heard of the disaster. For had not the work of the last three months been consumed in the conflagration—the prize essays to be read on the last day of school; the drawings so carefully constructed by each class; the kindergarten work, the little ones, an innovation in the neighborhood, but her especial pride? And now they could never be replaced for it was only a week before school would be out. It was a great blow to the little schoolmistress.

"Cheer up, Miss Elviry!" said Deacon Spires, one of the "committee." "We all know you ain't to blame. We'll have the closing exercises, anyway. Mr. Matthews has offered the town hall and Squire Jackson says every boy that wrote a composition shall have a jack-knife, and every girl a new doll to compensate for not gettin' to read 'em the last day of school."

So Elvira dried her tears, and she and the older scholars set to work at once to make the exercises as successful as possible under the circumstances. It was decided, as the time was so short until the end of the term, not to try to hold any more sessions, but simply to have the closing exercises in the town hall on Thursday evening, two days later.

All passed off well. The speakers declaimed with fire and expression. The songs rang out joyously; and the kindergartners covered themselves and their teacher with glory. Elvira was proud and happy, and all the parents were pleased.

The next morning saw her on her way homeward. "I'll just give Mary Ellen a little surprise," she said to herself, as the train rolled along. "There's nobody else at home, and I can get some one from town to take me out. There's no use of troubling Jonas to come after me, anyway, when pa's gone and he's so busy."

She had no trouble in finding a neighbor driving toward the Jenkins place, and as she stopped at the gate she realized afresh the meaning of "Home, Sweet Home." How pleasant to come back! How fresh and green and pretty everything looked! The dear old flowers! Surely they never grew so large or fragrant anywhere else.

Mary Ellen must be keeping all the dust out while her mother was gone, for the windows were down and the shades drawn. She ran round to the back door, but it was locked, and the only sign of life in the yard was Old Speckle clucking discontentedly in her coop, while the little Plymouth Rocks ran here and there after bugs and flies.

Away on the other side of the field back of the barnyard she could see Jonas plowing. She ran along beside the fence, her foot slipping now and then into the fragrant newly-turned earth.

"Jonas! Jonas!" she cried. "Where's Mary Ellen?"

"Well, of all things, Elviry, when did ye come home?" exclaimed Jonas as he leaned on his plow handle and mopped his face with his big blue handkerchief. "Nobody's lookin' for ye home yet this week to come."

"I know, Jonas, but the schoolhouse burned down. Somebody set it on fire. So I thought I'd give you a little surprise."

"The schoolhouse burned down! Well, I swan! Mary Ellen? She's gone to your cousin Roxy's, over to Pine Grove, and she won't be back till next week. There's some big doin's amongst the young folks over there —a narrow evenin'—party, or some such commotion—and she left yesterday, hard as she could go. You'd better stay over to Mis' Meeks's till she gets back."

"All right, Jonas, but first I'll go up to the house and see how everything looks. I suppose the key's under the step."

Elvira entered by the kitchen door and went over the little dwelling where her childhood had been spent. Everything was just as usual. The old eight-day clock, with the picture of a shepherdess and sheep painted on its face, ticked on in the same dignified way that it had ever since she could remember. Her father's paper lay on the mantelpiece in the sitting-room, where he always put it, the one piece of untidiness in which he persisted.

The only sound was a bee buzzing against the window, impatiently trying to get out. Elvira lifted the sash and released him.

How well everything looked, she thought. Her mother was always such a good house-keeper. And how worried she was because she had had to go away without having done her spring house-cleaning. Mary Ellen wrote that it almost kept her awake at night. Things looked ever so clean but her mother would never rest until they went through all the motions, anyway. Would it not be fun if she could clean house? Mary Ellen was too young, of course, but she could do it, she knew, so that her mother would be satisfied.

"I'll just get 'Phrasy and 'Phemy Hines to come over and help me, and then we'll get it done in a jiffy, and I can go over to Cousin Roxy's, too."

Elvira was a person of action, and she had no sooner made up her mind than she proceeded to carry out her plans. She went to the barn, and in a few minutes hitched up Old Gray.