

Literature.org:
[Authors](#)
[Contact](#)

[Jack And Jill](#)

[Louisa May Alcott](#)

This Book:
[Contents](#)
[Previous Chapter](#)
[Next Chapter](#)

Chapter 17 - Down At Molly's

"Now, my dears, I've something very curious to tell you, so listen quietly and then I'll give you your dinners," said Molly, addressing the nine cats who came trooping after her as she went into the shed-chamber with a bowl of milk and a plate of scraps in her hands. She had taught them to behave well at meals, so, though their eyes glared and their tails quivered with impatience, they obeyed; and when she put the food on a high shelf and retired to the big basket, the four old cats sat demurely down before her, while the five kits scrambled after her and tumbled into her lap, as if hoping to hasten the desired feast by their innocent gambols.

Granny, Tobias, Mortification, and Molasses were the elders. Granny, a gray old puss, was the mother and grandmother of all the rest. Tobias was her eldest son, and Mortification his brother, so named because he had lost his tail, which affliction depressed his spirits and cast a blight over his young life. Molasses was a yellow cat, the mamma of four of the kits, the fifth being Granny's latest darling. Toddlekins, the little aunt, was the image of her mother, and very sedate even at that early age; Miss Muffet, so called from her dread of spiders, was a timid black and white kit; Beauty, a pretty Maltese, with a serene little face and pink nose; Ragbag, a funny thing, every color that a cat could be; and Scamp, who well deserved his name, for he was the plague of Miss Bat's life, and Molly's especial pet.

He was now perched on her shoulder, and, as she talked, kept peeping into her face or biting her ear in the most impertinent way, while the others sprawled in her lap or promenaded round the basket rim.

"My friends, something very remarkable has happened: Miss Bat is cleaning house!" and, having made this announcement, Molly leaned back to see how the cats received it, for she insisted that they understood all she said to them.

Tobias stared, Mortification lay down as if it was too much for him, Molasses beat her tail on the floor as if whipping a dusty carpet, and Granny began to purr approvingly. The giddy kits paid no attention, as they did not know what house-cleaning meant, happy little dears!

"I thought you'd like it, Granny, for you are a decent cat, and know what is proper," continued Molly, leaning down to stroke the old puss, who blinked affectionately at her. "I can't imagine what put it into Miss Bat's head. I never said a word, and gave up groaning over the clutter, as I couldn't mend it. I just took care of Boo and myself, and left her to be as untidy as she pleased, and she is a regular old - -"

Here Scamp put his paw on her lips because he saw them moving, but it seemed as if it was to check the disrespectful word just coming out.

"Well, I won't call names; but what shall I do when I see everything in confusion, and she won't let me clear up?" asked Molly, looking round at Scamp, who promptly put the little paw on her eyelid, as if the roll of the blue ball underneath amused him.

"Shut my eyes to it, you mean? I do all I can, but it is hard, when I wish to be nice, and do try; don't I?" asked Molly. But Scamp was ready for her, and began to comb her hair with both paws as he stood on his hind legs to work so busily that Molly laughed and pulled him down, saying, as she cuddled the sly kit.

"You sharp little thing! I know my hair is not neat now, for I've been chasing Boo round the garden to wash him for school. Then Miss Bat threw the parlor carpet out of the window, and I was so surprised I had to run and tell you. Now, what had we better do about it?"

The cats all winked at her, but no one had any advice to offer, except Tobias, who walked to the shelf, and, looking up, uttered a deep, suggestive yowl, which said as plainly as words, "Dinner first and discussion afterward."

"Very well, don't scramble," said Molly, getting up to feed her pets. First the kits, who rushed at the bowl and thrust their heads in, lapping as if for a wager; then the cats, who each went to one of the four piles of scraps laid round at intervals and placidly ate their meat; while Molly retired to the basket, to ponder over the phenomena taking place in the house.

She could not imagine what had started the old lady. It was not the example of her neighbors, who had beaten carpets and scrubbed paint every spring for years without exciting her to any greater exertion than cleaning a few windows and having a man to clear away the rubbish displayed when the snow melted. Molly never guessed that her own efforts were at the bottom of the change, or knew that a few words not meant for her ear had shamed Miss Bat into action. Coming home from prayer-meeting one dark night, she trotted along behind two old ladies who were gossiping in loud voices, as one was rather deaf, and Miss Bat was both pleased and troubled to hear herself unduly praised.

"I always said Sister Dawes meant well; but she's getting into years, and the care of two children is a good deal for her, with her cooking and her rheumatiz. I don't deny she did neglect 'em for a spell, but she does well by 'em now, and I wouldn't wish to see better-appearing children."

"You've no idee how improved Molly is. She came in to see my girls, and brought her sewing-work, shirts for the boy, and done it as neat and capable as you'd wish to see. She always was a smart child, but dreadful careless," said the other old lady, evidently much impressed by the change in harum-scarum Molly Loo.

"Being over to Mis Minot's so much has been good for her, and up to Mis Grant's. Girls catch neat ways as quick as they do untidy ones, and them wild little tykes often turn out smart women."

"Sister Dawes has done well by them children, and I hope Mr. Bemis sees it. He ought to give her something comfortable to live on when she can't do for him any longer. He can well afford it."

"I haven't a doubt he will. He's a lavish man when he starts to do a thing, but dreadful unobserving, else he'd have seen to matters long ago. Them children was town-talk last fall, and I used to feel as if it was my bounden duty to speak to Miss Dawes. But I never did, fearing I might speak too plain, and hurt her feelings."

"You've spoken plain enough now, and I'm beholden to you, though you'll never know it," said Miss Bat to herself, as she slipped into her own gate, while the gossips trudged on quite unconscious of the listener behind them.

Miss Bat was a worthy old soul in the main, only, like so many of us, she needed rousing up to her duty. She had got the rousing now, and it did her good, for she could not bear to be praised when she had not deserved it. She had watched Molly's efforts with lazy interest, and when the girl gave up meddling with her affairs, as she called the housekeeping, Miss Bat ceased to oppose her, and let her scrub Boo, mend clothes, and brush her hair as much as she liked. So Molly had worked along without any help from her, running in to Mrs. Pecq for advice, to Merry for comfort, or Mrs. Minot for the higher kind of help one often needs so much. Now Miss Bat found that she was getting the credit and the praise belonging to other people, and it stirred her up to try and deserve a part at least.

"Molly don't want any help about her work or the boy: it's too late for that; but if this house don't get a spring cleaning that will make it shine, my name ain't Bathsheba Dawes," said the old lady, as she put away her bonnet that night, and laid energetic plans for a grand revolution, inspired thereto not only by shame, but by the hint that "Mr. Bemis was a lavish man," as no one knew better than she.

Molly's amazement next day at seeing carpets fly out of window, ancient cobwebs come down, and long-undisturbed closets routed out to the great dismay of moths and mice, has been already confided to the cats, and as she sat there watching them lap and gnaw, she said to herself, -

"I don't understand it, but as she never says much to me about my affairs, I won't take any notice till she gets through, then I'll admire everything all I can. It is so pleasant to be praised after you've been trying hard."

She might well say that, for she got very little herself, and her trials had been many, her efforts not always successful, and her reward seemed a long way off. Poor Boo could have sympathized with her, for he had suffered much persecution from his small schoolmates when he appeared with large gray patches on the little brown trousers, where he had worn them out coasting down those too fascinating steps. As he could not see the patches himself, he fancied them invisible, and came home much afflicted by the jeers of his friends. Then Molly tried to make him a new pair out of a sack of her own; but she cut both sides for the same leg, so one was wrong side out. Fondly hoping no one would observe it, she sewed bright buttons wherever they could be put, and sent confiding Boo away in a pair of blue trousers, which were absurdly hunchy behind and buttony before. He came home heart-broken and muddy, having been accidentally tipped into a mud-puddle by two bad boys who felt that such tailoring was an insult to mankind. That roused Molly's spirit, and she begged her father to take the boy and have him properly fitted out, as he was old enough now to be well-dressed, and she wouldn't have him tormented. His attention being called to the trousers, Mr. Bemis had a good laugh over them, and then got Boo a suit which caused him to be the admired of all observers, and to feel as proud as a little peacock.

Cheered by this success, Molly undertook a set of small shirts, and stitched away bravely, though her own summer clothes were in a sad state, and for the first time in her life she cared about what she should wear.

"I must ask Merry, and may be father will let me go with her and her mother when they do their shopping, instead of leaving it to Miss Bat, who dresses me like an old woman. Merry knows what is pretty and becoming: I don't," thought Molly, meditating in the bushel basket, with her eyes on her snuff-colored gown and the dark purple bow at the end of the long braid Muffet had been playing with.

Molly was beginning to see that even so small a matter as the choice of colors made a difference in one's appearance, and to wonder why Merry always took such pains to have a blue tie for the gray dress, a rosy one for the brown, and gloves that matched her bonnet ribbons. Merry never wore a locket outside her sack, a gay bow in her hair and soiled cuffs, a smart hat and the braid worn off her skirts. She was exquisitely neat and simple, yet always looked well-dressed and pretty; for her love of beauty taught her what all girls should learn as soon as they begin to care for appearances - that neatness and simplicity are their best ornaments, that good habits are better than fine clothes, and the most elegant manners are the kindest.

All these thoughts were dancing through Molly's head, and when she left her cats, after a general romp in which even decorous Granny allowed her family to play leap-frog over her respectable back, she had made up her mind not to have yellow ribbons on her summer hat if she got a pink muslin as she had planned, but to finish off Boo's last shirt before she went shopping with Merry.

It rained that evening, and Mr. Bemis had a headache, so he threw himself down upon the lounge after tea for a nap, with his silk handkerchief spread over his face. He did get a nap, and when he waked he lay for a time drowsily listening to the patter of the rain, and another sound which was even more soothing. Putting back a corner of the handkerchief to learn what it was, he saw Molly sitting by the fire with Boo in her lap, rocking and humming as she warmed his little bare feet, having learned to guard against croup by attending to the damp shoes and socks before going to bed. Boo lay with his round face turned up to hers, stroking her cheek while the sleepy blue eyes blinked lovingly at her as she sang her lullaby with a motherly patience sweet to see. They made a pretty little picture, and Mr. Bemis looked at it with pleasure, having a leisure moment in which to discover, as all parents do sooner or later, that his children were growing up.

"Molly is getting to be quite a woman, and very like her mother," thought papa, wiping the eye that peeped, for he had been fond of the pretty wife who died when Boo was born. "Sad loss to them, poor things! But Miss Bat seems to have done well by them. Molly is much improved, and the boy looks finely. She's a good soul, after all;" and Mr. Bemis began to think he had been hasty when he half made up his mind to get a new housekeeper, feeling that burnt steak, weak coffee, and ragged wristbands were sure signs that Miss Bat's days of usefulness were over.

Molly was singing the lullaby her mother used to sing to her, and her father listened to it silently till Boo was carried away too sleepy for anything but bed. When she came back she sat down to her work, fancying her father still asleep. She had a crimson bow at her throat and one on the newly braided hair, her cuffs were clean, and a white apron hid the shabbiness of the old dress. She looked like a thrifty little housewife as she sat with her basket beside her full of neat white rolls, her spools set forth, and a new pair of scissors shining on the table. There was a sort of charm in watching the busy needle flash to and fro, the anxious pucker of the forehead as she looked to see if the stitches were even, and the expression of intense relief upon her face as she surveyed the finished button-hole with girlish satisfaction. Her father was wide awake and looking at her, thinking, as he did so, -

"Really the old lady has worked well to change my tomboy into that nice little girl: I wonder how she did it." Then he gave a yawn, pulled off the handkerchief, and said aloud, "What are you making, Molly?" for it struck him that sewing was a new amusement.

"Shirts for Boo, sir. Four, and this is the last," she answered, with pardonable pride, as she held it up and nodded toward the pile in her basket.

"Isn't that a new notion? I thought Miss Bat did the sewing," said Mr. Bemis, as he smiled at the funny little garment, it looked so like Boo himself.

"No, sir; only yours. I do mine and Boo's. At least, I'm learning how, and Mrs. Pecq says I get on nicely," answered Molly, threading her needle and making a knot in her most capable way.

"I suppose it is time you did learn, for you are getting to be a great girl, and all women should know how to make and mend. You must take a stitch for me now and then: Miss Bat's eyes are not what they were, I find;" and Mr. Bemis looked at his frayed wristband, as if he particularly felt the need of a stitch just then.

"I'd love to, and I guess I could. I can mend gloves; Merry taught me, so I'd better begin on them, if you have any," said Molly, much pleased at being able to do anything for her father, and still more so at being asked.

"There's something to start with;" and he threw her a pair, with nearly every finger ripped.

Molly shook her head over them, but got out her gray silk and fell to work, glad to show how well she could sew.

"What are you smiling about?" asked her father, after a little pause, for his head felt better, and it amused him to question Molly.

"I was thinking about my summer clothes. I must get them before long, and I'd like to go with Mrs. Grant and learn how to shop, if you are willing."

"I thought Miss Bat did that for you."

"She always has, but she gets ugly, cheap things that I don't like. I think I am old enough to choose myself, if there is someone to tell me about prices and the goodness of the stuff. Merry does; and she is only a few months older than I am."

"How old are you, child?" asked her father, feeling as if he had lost his reckoning.

"Fifteen in August;" and Molly looked very proud of the fact.

"So you are! Bless my heart, how the time goes! Well, get what you please; if I'm to have a young lady here, I'd like to have her prettily dressed. It won't offend Miss Bat, will it?"

Molly's eyes sparkled, but she gave a little shrug as she answered, "She won't care. She never troubles herself about me if I let her alone."

"Hey? what? Not trouble herself? If she doesn't, who does?" and Mr. Bemis sat up as if this discovery was more surprising than the other.

"I take care of myself and Boo, and she looks after you. The house goes any way."

"I should think so! I nearly broke my neck over the parlor sofa in the hall to-night. What is it there for?"

Molly laughed. "That's the joke, sir, Miss Bat is cleaning house, and I'm sure it needs cleaning, for it is years since it was properly done. I thought you might have told her so."

"I've said nothing. Don't like house-cleaning well enough to suggest it. I did think the hall was rather dirty when I dropped my coat and took it up covered with lint. Is she going to upset the whole place?" asked Mr. Bemis, looking alarmed at the prospect.

"I hope so, for I really am ashamed when people come, to have them see the dust and cobwebs, and old carpets and dirty windows," said Molly, with a sigh, though she never had cared a bit till lately.

"Why don't you dust round a little, then? No time to spare from the books and play?"

"I tried, father, but Miss Bat didn't like it, and it was too hard for me alone. If things were once in nice order, I think I could keep them so; for I do want to be neat, and I'm learning as fast as I can."

"It is high time someone took hold, if matters are left as you say. I've just been thinking what a clever woman Miss Bat was, to make such a tidy little girl out of what I used to hear called the greatest tomboy in town, and wondering what I could give the old lady. Now I find you are the one to be thanked, and it is a very pleasant surprise to me."

"Give her the present, please; I'm satisfied, if you like what I've done. It isn't much, and I didn't know as you would ever observe any difference. But I did try, and now I guess I'm really getting on," said Molly, sewing away with a bright color in her cheeks, for she, too, found it a pleasant surprise to be praised after many failures and few successes.

"You certainly are, my dear. I'll wait till the house-cleaning is over, and then, if we are all alive, I'll see about Miss Bat's reward. Meantime, you go with Mrs. Grant and get whatever you and the boy need, and send the bills to me;" and Mr. Bemis lighted a cigar, as if that matter was settled.

"Oh, thank you, sir! That will be splendid. Merry always has pretty things, and I know you will like me when I get fixed," said Molly, smoothing down her apron, with a little air.

"Seems to me you look very well as you are. Isn't that a pretty enough frock?" asked Mr. Bemis, quite unconscious that his own unusual interest in his daughter's affairs made her look so bright and winsome.

"This? Why, father, I've worn it all winter, and it's frightfully ugly, and almost in rags. I asked you for a new one a month ago, and you said you'd 'see about it'; but you didn't, so I patched this up as well as I could;" and Molly showed her elbows, feeling that such masculine blindness as this deserved a mild reproof.

"Too bad! Well, go and get half a dozen pretty muslin and gingham things, and be as gay as a butterfly, to make up for it," laughed her father, really touched by the patches and Molly's resignation to the unreliable "I'll see about it," which he recognized as a household word.

Molly clapped her hands, old gloves and all, exclaiming, with girlish delight, "How nice it will seem to have a plenty of new, neat dresses all at once, and be like other girls! Miss Bat always talks about economy, and has no more taste than a - caterpillar." Molly meant to say "cat," but remembering her pets, spared them the insult.

"I think I can afford to dress my girl as well as Grant does his. Get a new hat and coat, child, and any little notions you fancy. Miss Bat's economy isn't the sort I like;" and Mr. Bemis looked at his wristbands again, as if he could sympathize with Molly's elbows.

"At this rate, I shall have more clothes than I know what to do with, after being a rag-bag," thought the girl, in great glee, as she bravely stitched away at the worst glove, while her father smoked silently for a while, feeling that several little matters had escaped his eye which he really ought to "see about."

Presently he went to his desk, but not to bury himself in business papers, as usual, for, after rummaging in several drawers, he took out a small bunch of keys, and sat looking at them with an expression only seen on his face when he looked up at the portrait of a dark-eyed woman hanging in his room. He was a very busy man, but he had a tender place in his heart for his children; and when a look, a few words, a moment's reflection, called his attention to the fact that his little girl was growing up, he found both pride and pleasure in the thought that this young daughter was trying to fill her mother's place, and be a comfort to him, if he would let her.

"Molly, my dear, here is something for you," he said; and when she stood beside him, added, as he put the keys into her hand, keeping both in his own for a minute, -

"Those are the keys to your mother's things. I always meant you to have them, when you were old enough to use or care for them. I think you'll fancy this better than any other present, for you are a good child, and very like her."

Something seemed to get into his throat there, and Molly put her arm round his neck, saying, with a little choke in her own voice, "Thank you, father, I'd rather have this than anything else in the world, and I'll try to be more like her every day, for your sake."

He kissed her, then said, as he began to stir his papers about, "I must write some letters. Run off to bed, child. Good-night, my dear, good-night."

Seeing that he wanted to be alone, Molly slipped away, feeling that she had received a very precious gift; for she remembered the dear, dead mother, and had often longed to possess the relics laid away in the one room where order reigned and Miss Bat had no power to meddle. As she slowly undressed, she was not thinking of the pretty new gowns in which she was to be "as gay as a butterfly," but of the half-worn garments waiting for her hands to unfold with a tender touch; and when she fell asleep, with the keys under her pillow and her arms round Boo, a few happy tears on her cheeks seemed to show that, in trying to do the duty which lay nearest her, she had earned a very sweet reward.

So the little missionaries succeeded better in their second attempt than in their first; for, though still very far from being perfect girls, each was slowly learning, in her own way, one of the three lessons all are the better for knowing - that cheerfulness can change misfortune into love and friends; that in ordering one's self aright one helps others to do the same; and that the power of finding beauty in the humblest things makes home happy and life lovely.