

# **Belles on Their Toes Study Guide**

**Belles on Their Toes by Frank Bunker Gilbreth, Sr.**

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# Plot Summary

"Belles on Their Toes" by Frank B. Gilbreth and Ernestine Gilbreth Carey tells the story of Lillian and her children. After her husband's death, the woman was left to earn the income for the family and raise 11 children on her own. This isn't easy to do at any time and much less in the pre-World II era when women didn't generally work outside the home, and certainly not in the field of engineering.

Three days after their father died, Mother had to go to Europe to lecture in place of their father and try to keep his business going. The 11 children in the family were on their own for a little more than a month, along with the handyman, Tom.

Since they didn't want the family split up, the children knew they had to do their best to keep the household running. They took the money that Mother left them and figured out a budget, cutting their expenses in half. Shortly after she left, all eleven of the children came down with chickenpox. They recovered well and kept things in order for the month. As they did during previous summers, they traveled to Nantucket to spend some time in the family summer home.

Things went pretty well on the island, although everyone was beginning to get a bit short tempered. Tom also ran into a minor problem with the law. Everyone was very happy to see Mother by the time she showed up. The older girls rejoined the social scene knowing that they were no longer in charge of the family. On the way back to their home in Montclair, Mother took the boys shopping, wearing out a sales clerk.

Mother was having a hard time breaking into the man's field of engineering. She decided to set up a Motion Study course in her home. She needed six students to sign up for the course in order for the family to remain together. Eight people signed up. Mother realized that one way she could break into the field was by designing kitchens since she was a woman. This idea went over well, and she got a lot of publicity.

As her name got out there, Mother was invited to speak about motion study at various institutions around the country. She used this money to pay for extras that were not part of the regular budget. The children understood what she was doing and they supported her. However, they didn't appreciate when she talked at their schools because she used personal anecdotes that came back to haunt them as their friends teased them. When Mother heard about what was going on, she promised not to tell any personal anecdotes any longer.

One by one, the children graduated from college, moved out, got married, and had children. They were concerned about Mother and how she would survive with all of them gone. They wanted her to move in with one of them, but she insisted on living alone. Mother kept on working long past the age of retirement, and her children eventually realized that as much as she loved them, once was enough. She lived on her own by choice, continuing to travel around the country, lecturing.



# Chapters 1-5

## Chapters 1-5 Summary and Analysis

"Belles on Their Toes" by Frank B. Gilbreth and Ernestine Gilbreth Carey tells the story of Lillian and her children. After her husband's death, the woman was left to earn the income for the family and raise 11 children on her own. This isn't easy to do at any time, much less in the pre-World II era when women didn't generally work outside the home, and certainly not in the field of engineering.

Mother had to go to Europe and the children had to stay by themselves. It was difficult for everybody involved, but they all knew that they had to do it. They were used to their father going away on trips and had a special going-away routine. The driver who was going to take their Mother to the station told them that he heard about their father. The man had died three days prior on June 14, 1924. He was at the railroad station talking to Mother over the phone when he had a heart attack and died.

Even though Mother was different from their father, the children lined up on the porch the same way they did when the father went away on trips. They sorted themselves by age. Their father used to tease him before he went away on his trips, telling them that he knew that they were only waiting for him to get out of sight before they ran off to cause all sorts of trouble. Mother tried to copy his attitude, but she couldn't do it. Everybody gathered around hugging each other.

Mother reminded the children that she didn't really want to go, but she had to in order to keep the business running. If she couldn't bring in an income, the family would be broken up. With 11 children in the family, it would be too difficult to keep going. Several friends and family members had offered to take some of the children, but nobody could take all of them.

As Mother drove away, Lillian burst into tears. Anne reprimanded her, and the rest of the children smiled and waved at their Mother until she disappeared. Things got better after they said goodbye. They knew their Mother would be home in slightly over one month. They wanted to make Mother proud of them.

Mother sailed away to London because their father had been scheduled to speak about motion study over there. Mother was his business partner, even though engineering was considered a man's field. She wanted to make sure her deceased husband got recognition for the work he had done. If she did well in Europe, she might be able to persuade his clients to continue working with her. The experience changed her, giving her more confidence than she ever had before.

In a household run by efficiency, Tom was an anomaly. He was a handyman that Dad had hired, and he had been with the family for 17 years. He was a rough man of Irish descent who would take on any job, even if he wasn't very good at it. He loved animals



and children, and they all loved him. Before Mother left on her trip, she realized that they needed to lay off either Tom or the cook to help their budget. None of them ever thought of getting rid of Tom. He took over cooking duties even though he had no idea how to cook.

Everyone knew that money was tight at the time, and Anne had been left \$600 for expenses while Mother was away. This included the cost of tickets to Nantucket, Massachusetts, where the family summered at their cottage. The children decided that they could get by with \$300, and saved the rest to give to Mother once she met them at the cottage.

Anne and the other children looked over the budget carefully to figure out what was absolutely necessary and where they could cut back. They were used to breaking things down to minimalistic movements thanks to their father and his motion study charts. The children decided that Martha was the most efficient of all of them so they put her in charge of the budget. She was also in charge of packing the clothes for Nantucket.

The children knew that if they couldn't help their Mother out, then there was a chance the family get split up. None of them wanted that. That afternoon, Bill developed a fever and broke out in spots. Soon, Martha and Ernestine showed similar symptoms. By noon the next day, all 11 of the children were bedridden.

No matter what befell anybody, it seemed as if Tom had experienced it in the past. He sent them all to bed and determined to treat them with quinine and castor oil. The children didn't want to spend money on going to the doctor if it wasn't absolutely necessary. Still, as the children lay in bed, he kept alluding to the fact that something was seriously wrong with them. They called in the doctor, and they were all diagnosed with chicken pox. The doctor conceded that a little bit of castor oil wouldn't hurt the children, and Tom was determined to make them take it.

Even though they were all ill, Anne make sure that everybody followed household routines. They practiced language records while they lay in bed, and they sang songs together. Tom came out to give them the medication, and the boys tried to feign sleep, but it didn't work. Eventually, they were all dosed up. However, in their negotiations over taking the medicine, they had Tom drink some as well.

Martha had just finished her sophomore year in high school. She was growing up, but didn't realize how beautiful she was getting. She was very laid back and had a pleasant attitude. Everyone loved her. She is also very efficient. She took over the job of supervising the packing for Nantucket. Sitting herself in a comfortable chair, she drew up various check-off lists and had the other children report to her with all the items they planned to pack. She also took over the budget, requiring that children fill out requisition slips in triplicate if they wanted to buy anything for the house or receive their weekly allowance.

In order to get to the cottage, they planned to take the train, a ferry, a night boat, and the Nantucket boat. This would be a tricky task with all the suitcases and younger



children. When Martha learned about the price of the trip, she was astonished. To save money, she turned back in two of the five state rooms their Mother had reserved. Tom had always said that he couldn't sleep on the boat anyway, so she also gave up his room.

As they left for the train, they decided not to take more than one can. Five of the older children walked from the house to the station while the other children helped round up the youngest children and pets. This was very challenging, and they had some trouble when Tom's cat couldn't be found. They finally made the difficult decision to leave without the cat, but found it about a block away from the house as they drove off.

As they continued on their journey, the dog howled in the cab. The children wouldn't accept help from the porters as they loaded because they didn't want to pay them so the children struggled with suitcases as they boarded the boat. The purser told them that the cat and the dog would have to go down with the freight in the hold. The dog complained about that all through the night, and everyone could hear it. The next morning, Anne discovered her friend Morton on the boat. He was a very tall, thin young man who did his best to ignore him and her family. When she realized that he was trying to avoid her, it made her furious. Anne stated that any feelings she had for him in the past were dead. Completely dead.

They were all very happy to see their cottage in Nantucket. Their father had named it The Shoe. It was flanked by two circular lighthouses, which were used as a study and an overflow dormitory. The children wondered what it would be like spending the summer on Nantucket without their father. His presence seemed to be everywhere.

Everything was put into place. As they settled in, Martha had a horrible realization. She had forgotten to pack for herself while she was so busy making sure everybody else had packed. Determined not to waste any of the family money, Martha decided to borrow clothes from her siblings and use her mother's swimsuit.

The others couldn't believe it. Their mother's swimsuit covered more than most clothes did, and it looked ridiculous. Martha insisted that she didn't care about how she looked. The next day, Ernestine and Anne completed their chores and went out to the water. Some of their other siblings were swimming, and they asked where Martha was. The brothers said she was wearing mother's suit and looked grand. They said she was out swimming with the skinny man from the boat.

Anne noticed a swimmer in a one-piece suit and realized it was her sister. When Martha swam in, Ernestine and Anne took her to task for only wearing part of their mother's suit. They thought it was indecent even though Martha said that everybody was wearing that kind of suit now.



# Chapters 6-10

## Chapters 6-10 Summary and Analysis

About a week later, Tom had to go to police court. He had been in a bad mood because a family had brought an English cook to Nantucket, and he didn't appreciate the English. This particular English woman was obese. While they were on the beach one day, she leaned over to unlace her sneaker. Tom picked up a piece of driftwood and walloped her, toppling her over. He was shocked and apologized, telling her that he didn't know why he had done that.

As he apologized, he suddenly began to laugh. This outraged the cook, who went off to find the law. When he had to talk to the judge, Tom explained that he had no excuse for what he had done. As he retold the tale, he began to laugh once again and couldn't stop laughing. The judge knew him, and he knew that Tom had no prior offenses so he let him go with a suspension.

Things went well for the next two weeks before Mother's arrival. However, the children were having a hard time not fighting with each other. One night, they came to blows because some of the children were tired of eating chowder. The situation ended with several children wearing some chowder, and the children all had to run down to the water to clean up. This restored their spirits.

Mother wrote to the children every day, and she told them that the talks had gone well over in Europe. She had plans for opening a motion study school at their home in Montclair. On the day she was due home, the children made sure the house was in order, and they cooked a large roast. Anne gave them a lecture, telling the other children how proud she was of them. The children all went down to the dock to meet their Mother, and they were all extremely happy to see each other and be together once again.

Dinner went well, and the children kept the worst of the events away from Mother. The children told her about the ways they saved money, and Mother gave them gifts from Europe. She knew how Martha had forgotten to pack her clothes. She gave Martha a swimsuit, and it was a one-piece suit. The other girls received their own one-piece suits as well, and Mother said the boys could each get a knife.

Now that Mother was back, the family members settled back into routine. Ernestine and Anne rejoined the social scene. There were three times as many girls on the island as there were boys so competition was fierce. Most of the girls were after Morton since he was tall, good-looking, and had a great car. Anne didn't seem very interested in him, and this might have been why he was so determined to get her attention.

He asked her why she was giving him the cold shoulder, and she told him it was because of the situation on the boat. He had acted as if he was ashamed of her large



family. He insisted that it wasn't her family that unnerved him. It was Tom, and at first he thought Tom was her father. The two decided to begin again as friends, and Morton shared a cigarette with her. Ernestine couldn't believe that her sister was smoking. She decided to give it a try as well, but she didn't do very well with it.

Anne was embarrassed by the way her sister was smoking and told her that she would show her how to do it later when they weren't in public. They decided to tell Mother about it later. At night, Anne held true to their promise and began to teach Ernestine how to smoke. Mother felt unusually restless after the little ones had gone to bed. She decided to spend some time at the older girls. She caught them smoking, and they admitted that they had planned to tell her about it.

Mother didn't approve, but she didn't have any really good argument against it. She said that she didn't really like it, but it was a prejudice, and she didn't believe them prejudices so they could go ahead and light up if they wanted to.

A week before summer vacation was over, Ernestine found a young man she was interested in. His name was Al, and she kept him a secret from the others. He worked at the grocery store. As they headed off for Montclair, Ernestine's siblings noticed that she was holding his hand. They boarded onto the boat, and halfway up the gangplank, Ernestine turned back to embrace Al. On the boat, she showed them his fraternity pin that he had given her and mentioned that he was going to come visit them over the Christmas holidays.

In general, Mother took the boys into New York every autumn to shop for clothes for the coming year. This year, she decided to do it on the way home from Nantucket. Anne and the other girls continued home to Montclair while the boys went shopping with Mother in a department store. Before they left the island, Ernestine had compiled a list of clothing the boys needed to get. Each boy would get one suit, which would be handed down to the next brother in size when the first one outgrew it. Therefore, the boys decided that each suit they bought should be acceptable not only to themselves but to the next boy in line.

A middle-aged salesman greeted the family enthusiastically. He seemed excited about his upcoming big sale. Mother handed him the list of what they might want, and the man smiled. It was most likely his last smile for the day.

The boys noticed that the man had something that he kept fiddling with. Mother told them that it was a hearing aid. The man showed the boys how it worked then set out to get them their clothing. He highlighted all the store's sales, but the boys didn't agree to the purchases because it was still over budget. They tried things on, checked out inventory, and haggled until they got exactly what they wanted for a proper price. The salesman was completely worn out. By the time they left, they realized he had turned his hearing aid off. Mother seemed extremely envious.

Eight of the children went to school in Montclair while Anne rode a bus to the University of Michigan. Finances were extremely tight, and Mother decided to offer her Motion





Study Course. She marketed the course intensely, figuring that if six individuals signed up, there was a chance the family could stay together. If there were more than six, not only could they stay together, but there would be enough money for Ernestine to begin college in the fall.

It was a tough time for the family, and Mother worked ten hours a day in addition to her parenting. She seemed exhausted every night, yet she looked refreshed every morning. None of the children were supposed to interrupt Mother while she was working, but their idea of interrupting weren't always the same as her idea of it. She devised an interruption chart, which the children had to sign each time they interrupted her. It worked well for everyone except for Tom who felt the chart was just for the children. He never thought of himself as someone who interrupted because he felt his interruptions were too important.

For nearly two weeks, there was no response to the marketing of the course. Suddenly, five acceptances arrived within two days. A week later, more acceptances arrived. Eight individuals responded in affirmative. Mother planned to run the course for five years, hoping that during that time she would be able to convince employers that she could work in the man's field of engineering.

When she told her children about the people coming to the school, she said that she hoped they would treat them like friends. The children expected cranky old people, but Mother told them that this was not the case. Tom was upset to find that one of the students was an Englishman. When the students arrived, everyone was happy. They got along famously, and the guests even seem to enjoy playing with the children. They gave Tom such honor and respect that he, too, found himself interested in getting along with the students - even the Englishman.

Mother thought one way she could break into the man's field was by applying time-saving methods to the kitchen. She submitted blueprints, and it made the news. She was asked to be photographed in her own kitchen. Unfortunately, her own kitchen was very different from the kitchens in her designs. It was very old, and Tom did not want anything changed.

Although Mother tried to get out of having their picture taken, the newsreel man stressed the importance of the story, detailing how great the publicity would be for her business. She agreed to have the photo taken on Saturday afternoon when Tom was off-duty. That day, she gave him the whole day off instead of his usual half day. After he left, she quickly rearranged the kitchen.

The newsreel crew arrived, and they set up the shots to show Mother cooking. In reality, she only knew how to make one dish. The filming went well until a cat jumped onto the small of Mother's back while she was bending over. Mother couldn't handle having anything on her back, and she reacted by screaming and throwing the dairy products over her head. The children and cameraman began to laugh.

They cleaned up the mess, and began to film again. For some reason, Tom decided to come home early that afternoon. He was very upset at the shape of his kitchen. Mother promised to put everything back into place.



# Chapters 11-15

## Chapters 11-15 Summary and Analysis

Mother's course closed down for the Christmas holidays. Anne came home for her college break in December 19, and Al came to visit Ernestine the next day. She had given specific instructions to all the family members on how to treat the young man. Everyone was supposed to use their best manners and treat him properly. Ernestine specifically asked her siblings to give Al top priority in the bathroom.

Al's father had come into some serious money, and the young man arrived in a fancy car and wore extravagant clothing. Everything about him seemed over-the-top and opulent. He used phrases the others didn't really understand, trying to appear modern. The children couldn't stand him.

Frank and Bill decided that it was time to get rid of him so they ran the hot water out while Ernestine and Al went off for a ride. They also took the bolt off the bathroom door. When Al came back, he was freezing and went to take a warm bath. While he soaked in the cold tub, the boys continued traipsing in and out of the bathroom. Al was very disturbed and worried that the girls would come in. Frank dressed up in Martha's dress and shoes and walked to the bathroom.

Ernestine had a party so her friends could meet her young man. He was very froward and did his best to remain the center of attention. When the others broke into small groups, he went from group to group, but nobody really seemed interested in small talk revolving around his school. Pulling Ernestine aside, he tried to get her to go out for a ride. They argued since she wouldn't leave her friends, and he told her that he found everything around him in extremely bad taste. She handed him back his fraternity pin, and he left. The party was much better after that.

Christmas was the most important day of the year in the Gilbreth household. Even though they didn't have much money, they wanted to celebrate the day the best they could. Mother encouraged homemade gifts, but the children had been saving their allowances. Following tradition, the children trimmed the tree so that Mother would be surprised. She wasn't allowed into the parlor on Christmas Eve. The children sang carols as they decorated, and they could hear their Mother singing along from the next room.

That night, after the children had gone to bed, Martha was restless. Around 2 o'clock in the morning she heard something. Leaving the room, she found Mother feeling the presents underneath a tree.

The next morning, Mother acted as if she had never seen the tree and the presents. On Christmas morning, Mother played the piano as the children marched single file down



the staircase into the parlor. In the past, Dad brought up the rear. This year, it was Jane. They did their best in the singing, but they missed their father and his bass voice.

This year Dan had insisted that he was old enough to do his own shopping for Christmas. He brought back identical gifts for everybody. Mother opened hers first, and it was a hideous ash tray. Mother said it was what she had always wanted, and the other children said that they wished they had one just like it. Dan, who had been concerned about their reactions, relaxed and sighed in happiness.

In addition to her parenting duties, Mother traveled around making motion study speeches throughout the country. She was very relaxed, and when she was on the platform, it was as natural as if she was talking to her children in the parlor. When she spoke about a subject, she would use everyday experiences to illustrate her point. People loved listening to her talk.

All the money she made from her speeches went into a special account for items the family wanted outside of their budget. This was how they paid for Martha's new overcoat, Ernestine's college wardrobe, and a small sailboat for Nantucket. The children didn't like when Mother was away from home, but they understood that she was doing it for them so they cooperated. However, they didn't appreciate it when she came to talk at their schools. Still, they didn't want to hurt her feelings so they didn't say anything at first.

Mother was very involved in the children's schooling. She had one-on-one talks with the teachers about her children's performances in the classroom. She began to speak to parent-teacher groups about motion study, and soon she was invited to speak at school assemblies and commencement exercises. The other children would pick on the Gilbreth children after they heard stories from their home life. The siblings stood up for each other, and eventually Mother realized something was going on. When she learned about how her children were picked on, she felt horrible. She promised not to speak of any of the schools any longer. The children thought that was too drastic, and they agreed that she could speak at the schools, but she just wouldn't tell any personal stories any longer.

One night in the spring, Mother left the house in a taxi to go to a meeting in Jersey City. An hour and a half later, the chairman of the meeting called to see where Mother was. This worried the children until they heard from their Mother around 10 o'clock. Mother told them that everything was taken care of, and she was going to get a new nose. Ernestine, the child who answered the phone, thought Mother was under too much stress. Mother told her that she was in Mountainside Hospital.

When Mother explained what had happened, the children learned that she had been in a car accident. There was so much damage done to her nose that they were giving her a new one. They found out that they could visit after 10 o'clock in the morning, but children under 12 were not allowed to visit.



Taking the day off of school, they decided that Mother would really want to see everybody. They picked all the flowers out of the yard and walked over to the hospital, sneaking the younger children in the back way. Mother was thrilled to see them. A nurse came in and saw them, and she was concerned about all the flowers. When she sent the children away, she let them know that they could come back again the next day, after school. She also suggested that they sneak the younger children through the back door again.

The children thought that it would be a good idea to surprise her Mother by planting a vegetable garden in the backyard. This would cut expenses for food. Ernestine wrote a letter to the Department of Agriculture for information on how to grow a garden. Mother was still in the hospital while they got everything in order. Working together, the children and Tom prepared almost half an acre and planted some seed. They knew they needed some fertilizer, but they didn't want to spend all the money on it. Tom told them that he knew where they could get some manure without it costing them a cent.

Later that day, he made a wagon, got three snow shovels, and asked Bill and Frank to help him. They went through the neighborhood gathering up the manure left from the horse-drawn wagons used to deliver milk and ice. They went out every afternoon, and the pile at home began growing. The girls didn't know anything about it until one day when Ernestine was walking home a different way with a boy. She was very embarrassed to see what they were doing, but still, they were family. She went over and greeted them.

When Mother came home from the hospital, she was very impressed with the garden. She asked where they got the fertilizer since she didn't see any checks up for it. They told her it was a long story, and Mother said that it was probably a better idea for them not to tell her. The garden was a success, and later in the year they got some hens as well. They noticed that their hens laid more eggs than anything the poultry bulletins claimed a hen could do. The children sometimes found store-bought egg containers underneath old newspapers in the trash. They didn't want to spoil Tom's joke on them so they nudged the containers out of sight.



# Chapters 16 - 21

## Chapters 16 - 21 Summary and Analysis

Anne fell in love with a doctor from the University of Michigan and became engaged. She wanted to see him more often and didn't want to finish college. Mother talked with her, telling her that she knew what her daughter was going through. Still, she encouraged her daughter to stay in college. Anne was also concerned about leaving home since she knew her mother needed her there to help run the house until little children were grown. Mother told her that was no reason to stay, and they would be just fine.

Dr. Bob, Anne's fiancé, came to visit. When he found out that Frank and Bill had moved out of the room so he could have a room, he insisted that they move back into the room. Everybody loved him, even Tom. The children decided that they loved him so much that they should take necessary precautions to make sure Anne wouldn't lose him. They did everything they could to make him feel comfortable and welcome. It began to embarrass Anne because the children would go out of their way to leave them alone, shutting out lights as they went.

Dr. Bob and Anne were married after Anne finished college. The wedding was at their house, and Mother gave the bride away. It was a very happy wedding, but everybody felt sorry for Mother since the first of her brood was going away. As the newlyweds prepared to leave for their honeymoon, Jane and Bob tried to go along. Anne refused to let them join them on their honeymoon.

Martha took charge of the household after Anne left. She knew how to bargain and was strict with the budget. She also knew how to use certificates, and the children saved up enough to buy Mother a lamp for Mother's Day. Later, Martha decided to purchase a bottle-capper so that the younger children can make their own drinks. They enjoyed making root beer, and making it became a regular household routine.

Tom suggested that they leave a gallon of the mixture on the stove so that he could flavor it to his own tastes. He marked the bottles and told them not to touch them. When Frank asked him if he was trying to make some kind of home brew, he piously denied it and said there was a law against that, right?

Cousin Leora was a wealthy woman that the children did not appreciate. She wasn't really of relative. Her family was just close to Mother's family as they were growing up. She liked to come visit the family and quiz them about their affairs. She generally showed up when Mother was out of town, and it was usually when they were eating. On this particular evening, she came while Mother was out giving a lecture. She started asking the family about their finances, and they said that their family was doing fine.



When Tom came in with dessert, there was a roar from the basement. By now, Mother had come home. She explained that it was only the root beer, but Cousin Leora pointed out that root beer doesn't explode. She opened the door to the hallway, and everyone could smell alcohol. Mother was so furious that she fired Tom. After she told the children what she had done, she asked Frank to go down and tell Tom that he could have his job back, after he got rid of the bottles.

Motion study became increasingly important during the 1920s, and Mother became an accepted industrial engineer. She wrote several books and became an honorary Girl Scout. Mother was a friend of the Hoovers, and they invited her to bring the children to a formal afternoon reception at the White House. Not wanting to bring everyone all at once, she suggested that she just invite the six boys.

The boys tried to get out of the situation, but they were trapped. Wanting to save money, they decided to drive to Washington in an old car with an open top. Their suits that soaking wet when it began to rain. They arrived at the hotel, and Mother took control of the situation, ironing the suits dry. Frank had a particularly brightly colored suit, and Mother accidentally burned it with her iron. They ran to the store to buy him a new suit.

The children in college were able to see their mother several times a year as she toured around the country giving lectures. One time, when Mother was visiting Purdue, she was unexpectedly asked to speak in front of a lecture class in which Bill was enrolled. Bill didn't know about it, and he skipped class that day. His friends tried to cover for him, but it was obvious that he wasn't there.

That afternoon, Bill spent time with his Mother. She didn't tell him that she had spoken to his class, but she did spend a lot of time telling him about her studies on the motions of physically disabled persons, helping them find jobs in the industry. Bill was interested in the topic so he looked over her notes and all photographs and diagrams she had brought regarding the subject. The next day he went to class, and the professor asked the student to write a summary regarding the high points of the talk from the day prior. Bill asked a boy near him who had spoken and what they spoke about. He found out that it was his mother, and she talked about the motion study of the disabled.

By the middle of the 1930s, all the children through Lillian were married and had their own homes. Some also had children. Fred and Diane were in college, Jack and Bob were in high school, and Jean was entering the 10th grade. Tom was in the hospital, suffering from a heart ailment. The children were worried what was going to happen to their mother when the youngest ones moved out.

The four youngest boys wanted to make sure that Jane was a social success when she entered high school. They gave her advice on how to dress, how to do her makeup, and how to walk. They also taught her how to behave at a dance, making all the boys feel as if she was interested in them. She was a complete success socially, and they soon discovered that they would also have to teach her how to prevent boys from kissing her.





Several months later, Tom died. All the family members had been visiting him regularly in the hospital. He had his faults, but when he died there were 12 people who wept for him.

The house they grew up in was showing wear. Mother agreed with her children that it was time to move out of the house the year James went to college. She didn't like the idea of other people in the house, and she had it razed.

Mother was doing more than fine financially. Not only did she have plenty of consulting jobs, but she also came into an inheritance from her family's estate. If she wanted to, she could relax for the rest of her life, hiring a maid, a chef, a limousine, and a chauffeur. However, she chose to continue working. She and Jane lived together in an apartment in Montclair. When Jane left for college, Mother was alone.

The children got together and agreed that Mother should move in with one of the families. They thought that she should learn to relax and enjoy retirement like other people her age. Ernestine tried to talk with her about it, but she wanted to live alone. The children were all worried about her.

When World War II came, five of the boys went overseas. Mother seemed to age suddenly. There was also no more thought of her retiring since she was needed in the war effort. The government used her studies on motions of the disabled to rehabilitate amputees. War industries also wanted the latest time saving techniques. When her youngest graduated from college, Anne commented that Dad would have been proud. She nudged her mother, thinking she was sleeping, and Mother opened her eyes and said that she wasn't asleep. She was saying thank you.

When the war was over, the boys began to come home. Mother suddenly seemed younger once again. She wanted to hold a family reunion, and they all decided that the youngest three grandchildren would be christened together in the church in Montclair. They remembered times in the past when the father stood awkwardly holding a child at the altar. Bob did the same thing, and Ernestine couldn't hold back the laughter. Soon everybody else joined in, including Mother. It was during this service that the children realized how their mother truly felt. She lived alone because it was what she wanted. She loved having her children, but once was enough.

Mother retired from Purdue when she was 70, but continued to stay active. She continued to travel the country as she worked. Every time she left, she left a copy of her itinerary so the kids could find her if they needed her.





# Characters

## Lillian Gilbreth

Looking at this character, it was difficult to believe that she had a dozen children. She was slim, tall, and beautiful and had red hair. She worked closely with her husband in the field of engineering even though this was highly unusual for a woman in the early 1900s. After his death, she traveled to Europe to give lectures and to try to persuade her husband's clients to remain with her so that her family could stay together. Even though she was very busy with her work, her children were her priority. Somehow she always came up with the time to become an integral part of their lives. This character was very resourceful and economical. She didn't worry about details that she felt others could handle, and she included her children and their opinions in her decisions. She was so close to their children

## Tom

This was a small, tough, light footed man of Irish descent. Before Dad died, he had been with the family for 17 years as his handyman. He continued to stay with the family after the father's death. This character loved animals and children, and they loved him, too. He had some rough edges, and he was willing to try to do just about anything. He took over the role when the family needed to cook, even though he had no idea how to do it. While he got along with most people, he was very prejudiced against people who came from England. This became a problem on the family was vacationing in Nantucket. An obese worker from England was bending over on the beach, and he whacked her across her wide backside with a bit of driftwood. He apologized profusely, but still had to go to court. Unfortunately, while he was in front of the judge, he had a hard time controlling his laughter regarding the situation.

## Frank

As the story began, this character was the oldest boy. He was 13 years old.

## Anne

This character was the oldest of the children in the Gilbreth household. She was in charge of the household while Mother was away.

## Jane

This was the youngest daughter. Her brothers taught her how to become a social success.



## **Ernestine**

This character graduated from high school right before Dad died.

## **Martha**

This is the daughter who was known for her genial personality and thriftiness. She was in charge of the packing for this summer trip while their Mother was away.

## **Bill**

This was one of the brothers who was determined to get rid of Ernestine's suitor when he came over Christmas break.

## **Lillian**

This character was 10 years old when the story began. She burst out crying when their Mother was leaving on her trip to Europe.

## **Fred**

This was the child who whispered to his brothers that Cousin Leora made an ugly face.

## **Dan**

This is a character who decided he was old enough to do his own Christmas shopping. Everyone pretended that the gift was what they always wanted, even though it was hideous.

## **Jack**

This was the brother who said they "don't take nothing from nobody" when they were pulled over by the policeman.

## **Bob**

This was the son that reminded Ernestine of her father as he held a wiggling child during a baptism.



## **Dad**

This character died while talking on the phone to Mother. He was at the train station.

## **Al Lynch**

This was Ernestine's suitor from the island. He came to visit her over Christmas, and his visit was a disaster.

## **Dr. Bob**

This was the man who married Anne. The children were determined to make them part of their family.

## **Leora**

This character wasn't really a relative. She grew up in a family that was close to Mother's family.



# Objects/Places

## Europe

This is where Mother had to go three days after her husband died. She had to give speeches so that she could persuade his former clients that they might want to work with her.

## Montclair, New Jersey

This was where the large family lived.

## Nantucket

This is where the family spent their summers. They had a cottage there.

## The Shoe

This is the name of the house on the island. Dad named it in honor of his wife and all her children.

## Quinine

This is what Tom made the children drink anytime he felt that they were ill. He was certain it would cure anything.

## Cigarette

This is what Anne taught Ernestine to use. They planned to tell her Mother, but Mother discovered them first.

## Fraternity Pin

This is what Ernestine got from a young man as she left the island. She returned it at Christmas.

## New York

This is where Mother took the boys shopping. It was an exhausting day, but everyone got what they needed and stayed within budget.



## **Motion Study Course**

This is a school Mother decided to open in their home. The first year she did it, she had eight students.

## **Kitchen**

This is where Mother was filmed. It was ironic since it looked nothing like her blueprints.

## **Ash Tray**

Each member of the family received this for Christmas from one of the children. It was huge and looked terrible, but Mother said that was what she always wanted. The other siblings said that they wished they had one as well.

## **Purdue**

This was an institution Mother worked for. She retired from this place when she was 70.



# Themes

## Economy of Motion

Both Frank and Lily built careers around the economy of motion. This is how they ran their household. The children were raised to get the most result out of each motion to a point where they knew how to soap up in the quickest manner to save time while bathing.

At this point in history, the motion studies were pivotal because they helped increase production in the work force. Lillian had a hard time getting people to take her seriously until she came up with a blueprint for an efficient kitchen. Since she was a woman, people listened to her when it came to the kitchen, even though she only knew how to cook one dish herself.

She started a school in her home, teaching about the studies. Another way she taught about motion study was by going around and lecturing at schools and colleges. The woman obtained numerous honorary degrees for her work in the field. By the time most of her children were in college, she was able to visit them as she toured around the country, offering her lectures at colleges, including their own colleges.

By the time World War II came along, she had already established a stellar reputation in the field. The government hired her to help it run more efficiently during the war.

## Raising 11 Children as a Single Mother

The death of their beloved father was a tough blow for the entire family. Frank adored his wife and children, and they adored him. Even though he worked regularly with his wife, his clients didn't really trust that she knew what she was doing after his death so the family's financial situation was precarious.

Lillian worked very hard to build up her business, and she did it so well that none of her children felt neglected. They knew that they were the most important things in her life. She communicated with teachers, helped her children with their homework, wrote letters, and took time to talk with the children about things such as which dress they should wear for an occasion.

She respected her children and their ability to complete tasks. Instead of micro-managing, she left things in their hands, knowing they were up to the task. This is shown when she leaves the kids alone for a month after her husband dies. It is also shown in the way she lets her children choose their clothes when shopping and in the way she adopts the budget the children came up with. When her son missed class in college on the day that she gave a lecture, she didn't get mad for it. Instead, she casually filled him in on the lecture as they dined together without ever mentioning the class. This saved him the next day when the class had a quiz on her lecture.



Lillian was a very busy woman, but she incorporated business into her family life by allowing her children to interact with students in her school.

## Family Closeness

Although the Gilbreth family was very large with 11 children, the family members were very close to each other. They watched out for each other and cared for each other. This is evident when Mother had to go to Europe and the children had to take care of themselves for a month. As a team, they figured out a system that would keep everyone safe and cared for. The children took the budget their Mother had left and became more frugal, asking the budget stretch even further. The children also showed how they cared for each other at school. When some of the kids were picked on by bullies, the other siblings would rush to their defense.

The kids always put family first, even when it embarrassed them. This is shown by the way Ernestine ran back to acknowledge her brothers when she was walking home with a boy even though she was mortified by the fact that her brothers were collecting manure off the streets and putting it in their wagon for their garden.

If one of the older girls was dating someone, the rest of the family checked him out. One boy did not meet their approval. They harassed and embarrassed him. Eventually, he left. When they found a suitor they appreciated, the kids went out of their way to make him feel comfortable, treating him like royalty.

# Style

## Perspective

This book is written by two of Lillian's children. They wrote from their own experiences as well as those of their siblings.

Most of this novel takes place on the east coast. The family resides in Montclair, New Jersey in the same house that they lived in before their father died. They vacation in Nantucket in the summer, and do their clothes shopping in New York. The town they live in is small enough for them to know many of the people in the town, yet it's large enough to have cabs.

Mother has to travel around the country and to Europe for her job. She takes a boat to Europe so she is gone for long periods of time. The older siblings help take care of the younger ones while she is gone. Relatives in California offered to help with the children after the father died, but Mother and the children saved and worked hard to keep the family together. They succeeded.

## Tone

The language in this novel is very relaxed and inviting. The Foreword is written in third person. It's a formal introduction to the book

As the main part of the book begins, the story switches to third person with a personal perspective, highlighting the story from the children's point-of-view. The language is simple to read, yet has enough of a variety in vocabulary that it can expand a reader's vocabulary. The more complex words are used in context so a reader can easily understand what is going on and what the authors are trying to say.

The novel takes place in the early twentieth century, and old words, phrases and concepts are often used, offering a history lesson through dialogue.

## Structure

"Belles on Their Toes" by Frank B. Gilbreth, Jr. and Ernestine Gilbreth Carey is comprised of 21 chapters of varying length. The chapters average 10-15 pages in general. The Foreword of the book offers the reader a glimpse into the premise of the book. While the last book, "Cheaper by the Dozen," focused on Dad, this book was Mother's story. It addresses her personal and professional life after Dad's death.

Each of the 21 chapters in the book has a title that summarizes something important that happens within the chapter. The chapters themselves center around particular



anecdotes, locations, or stages of life. They are very thematic, yet flow well from one to the other.

The plot of this book shows the challenges of living a life as a single working Mother with 11 children in the early 1900s. The novel's pace is fast and will often have the reader laughing out loud.



## Quotes

"Mother has a way of making each child know he means something very special to her. Not just as one of the group, but as an individual person who has his own special claim on her heart" (Chapter 1, p. 3).

"Well, what she had feared had happened, and tears would not wash out a word of it. So she gave his speech in London and presided for him in Prague. And she was not afraid any more" (Chapter 1, p. 7).

"Before she went to college, she had been a mainstay of the high school debating team, and drove her arguments home with such enthusiasm that her coach had to tell her she was supposed to stump her opponents, not tree them" (Chapter 6, p. 58)

"In a person's lifetime there may be not more than half a dozen occasions that he can look back to in the certain knowledge that right then, at that moment, there was room for nothing but happiness in his heart" (Chapter 6, p. 59).

"If the only way to enter a man's field was the kitchen door, that's the way she'd enter" (Chapter 10, p. 101).

"We wound up the song standing around the piano, pushing as close to Mother as we could. Frank did his best to sing bass, but all of us knew something was missing from the harmony" (Chapter 12, p. 127).

"There was more than the usual trouble filing across street intersections, because it was hard to see through our bulging bouquets" (Chapter 14, p. 143).

"The boys had the good grace to think there was a slight possibility Mother might be prejudiced" (Chapter 18, p. 194).

"He swore a good deal, and in later years he drank more than he should have. But the day he died, 12 people wept for him" (Chapter 20, p. 214).

"We hadn't had a meeting of our Family Council for years, but when Anne next came to Montclair from Cleveland for a visit, we called a meeting of the Council to discuss Mother" (Chapter 21, p. 217).

"Mother was older, suddenly, and sometimes she was tired" (Chapter 21, p. 219).

"Mother opened her eyes. 'I wasn't asleep,' she said softly. 'I was saying thank you'" (Chapter 21, p. 220).

"We glanced at Mother to see how she was taking it, and for the first time we knew for certain why she was alone. We knew that, glad as she was to have at home, she was alone because she liked it" (Chapter 21, p. 224).

## Topics for Discussion

Why did Mother leave so soon after her husband died?

Why did the family struggle financially?

What did the children think about the Motion Studies school and how did this differ from the reality of the school?

Describe Tom's role in the family.

Compare and contrast Lillian's professional life and her life as a mother. Discuss how she merged the worlds.

Compare and contrast Mother's parenting to Dad's.

What worried the children as they all moved out? How did Mother feel about the situation?