"OK, Helen, I'll fix the sandwiches for the girls, the Lord willing, but I honestly don't see how I'll find time to do it," Nicole told her friend, as the two cleaned the stoves in the Home Ec room. "Mother said she thinks it's time I begin to cut out some things instead of always taking more on. In other words, cut, instead of add; stop, instead of go; cease, instead of continue."
"A case of subtraction versus addition," Helen said, laughing pleasantly.

"In this case -- my mother's suggestion I mean--it wouldn't be a 'versus thing'; it would be a minus. Period! And I mean period! The end!" Nicole stated emphatically, giving the chrome on the stove a thorough polishing.

"What would we do without you, Nicole!" Helen exclaimed with a look of horror on her face. "Why, if it wasn't for you we'd never make it."

"Yes, you would, Helen. There's not a single person in our youth group who couldn't do what I'm doing. God distributes and disburses talents fairly. To each person, He gives a talent. It's when we use our one talent that He adds more talents."

"But you're so good at everything you do, Nicole. Me, I'm clumsy. Plain old clumsy. Take the sandwiches, for instance: They'd look like some child did them if I took that job on. I never made a dainty little sandwich in my life. By the way, how do you intend to make them dainty looking, like Mrs. Pillfer wants them?"

"I haven't given it any thought as yet, since I just learned I was to do them. Rather, since you just told me that Mrs. Pillfer wondered if I'd make them up. I could use a cookie cutter, though, now that you mention the dainty bit. Mother has some really pretty ones. They'd make dainty looking sandwiches. I used them when I wanted to do something special for a wonderful aunt and uncle who were coming to visit some time ago. I baked two loaves of banana-nut bread and sliced them when they were cold. Then, with the cookie cutter, I cut them into an attractive shape and spread some with cream cheese pineapple mixture and put another cut-out piece on top. I did this until I had enough to make a nice plate full. They were not only attractive but they were delicious, as well."

"See what I mean!" Helen exclaimed. "You're just plain clever. And I'm certainly glad it's you and not I who's going to be making those dainty little sandwiches for Mrs. Pillfer. One of her girls is having a birthday, I believe she told my mother. She's such a fuddy-duddy when it comes to things like this. A perfectionist, I guess would be a better, more accurate word. Oh, and one thing more, Nicole, could you give me a hand with this dress we're making in
Home Ec? I'm all thumbs, it seems. And the dress is to be finished by next Wednesday, God willing. I'll never make it. I know I won't."

"I don't see how I can, Helen. My days are so full already: School five days a week; regular daily chores at home, both before leaving for school and after returning home from school; young peoples' leader at church; Sunday school teacher for the Beginner's Class; choir practice here at Sighing Pines Christian School; our young ladies' trio rehearsal; plus studying I need to do for that spelling and math competition coming up soon. And now the sandwiches .... "

"Please, Nicole! Please! You have more patience with me than Mrs. Steimer does. Not that she isn't a good woman; she is. And I really like her. But I don't seem to able to grasp what she's trying to teach us. So will you help me? Please?"

"Oh, Helen, I wish I could. But. . . ."

"Don't turn me down, Nicole. Please! I don't want to make a flunking grade. And you know it's going to really bring my grade down if I don't get the dress finished. Oh me! I'm just not cut out to be a seamstress, I guess. I know one thing, and that is that I'd never want to have to make my living sewing clothes for other people. I'm afraid that, with my present knowledge, or lack of it, my 'skill' and 'expertise,' I'd starve."

"Oh, Helen, you're funny. Of course you wouldn't starve. The old saying declares that 'necessity is the mother of invention.' And, were you so unfortunate as to be starving, your sewing genius would come to the fore, I'm sure."

"What genius, Nicole? I'm positively and absolutely dull where sewing up a dress is concerned. Please, will you help me? I've already talked to Mrs. Steimer and asked her if it would be all right for you to show me what to do and how. She said it would be fine so long as you instructed only. I told her this was all I wanted. I feel it would be all I'll need, because you always explain so plainly. I'll come to your house, Nicole."

Nicole was silent for a while, trying to find an opening in her already-full evening. "Seven o'clock," she answered quickly.
"Oh, thanks. Thanks much!" Helen cried happily. "I'll try not to keep you tied up longer than is necessary. And maybe I can help you get Mrs. Pillfer's sandwiches ready for tomorrow, the Lord willing. She wants them done by four-thirty, she said. So if you could teach me how to do them I'd be happy to try, even though I know I'll be all nervous and scared, afraid they won't measure up to what she expects and wants. But I'll try, if you want me and need me. I could put the ham salad and olives on what you cut out," Helen said brightly. "I know I can spread that on."

"You're hired," Nicole said quickly. "And you'll be able to make those sandwiches every bit as neat and as dainty as anyone. We'll do them together and together we'll learn. How many other fillings or spreads does she plan on using, do you know?"

"Not really; I know she told Mother she wants a variety. 'A good variety; spreads, meats, cheeses. The works.' Her words. She won't spare on anything. But maybe some people don't have to spare like some of the rest of us. And I'm happy for her. At our house, with so many of us, food must be 'stretched' and things must be added to certain dishes to make them serve us all. But we're a happy bunch. And, too, we're always thankful for everything we have, a gift from God and our wonderful parents. They instilled thankfulness into us. They really did."

"I believe you, Helen. And I must say you're a rare breed. Just open your ear sometime to all the complainers. It's heartbreaking. We all have so much, don't we? Even in our necessity we still have so much more than the poor heathen do in the unevangelized countries."

"And some that are evangelized, Nicole. Every time I read anything about Haiti, and see all those pictures Mrs. Blooming's daughter sends home, my heart breaks and I want to share my food with some of those poor, dear, hungry people. Well, I guess we're finished with these stoves. They look like new again. Wonder if we'll be graded on our cleaning skills."

The girls laughed together, then went their separate ways.

The phone was ringing when Nicole got home from school. She answered it and heard Mrs. Brown's voice on the other end of the line. "Oh, it's you, Nicole. Am I ever glad! I'm bringing Amber over for a couple of hours.
I have some shopping that just must get done before Mr. Brown gets off work. I'll be right over."

She hung up before Nicole had been able to reply even. What would she do? she wondered. Amber was a beautiful but much-spoiled little three-year-old who was pretty much used to getting her way and having her way.

"Please, dear Jesus, help me!" Nicole cried. How was she ever going to get everything done? How? Amber was a disobedient child who demanded one's attention almost all of the time, and Mrs. Brown's "couple of hours" stretched into the night hours on more than one occasion, Nicole remembered. She was always paid for baby-sitting Amber, to be sure. But why did Mrs. Brown feel she could bring Amber over any time, and all the times when she took a notion to do so or just wanted to go shopping, like today? The polite and proper thing to do was to ask whether or not it was convenient for her, Nicole, to bring Amber by.

She saw a note on the bulletin board in the kitchen and recognized her mother's neat handwriting, "Sorry I couldn't be home when you got in from school, honey," the note read. "I was called over to the Worleys. Their little baby is very ill; Mrs. Worley wondered if I could come over and stay with her until the doctor arrives.

She's so new at this mothering role, and sounded terrified and petrified with fear. I have meatloaf ready to go into the oven. You may make whatever else you think will be a good accompaniment to the meatloaf. We're all quite fond of your onion or spinach quiche, and your Harvard beets and cheese-sauced carrots, too. However, you make whatever you care to, my dear. Sorry I didn't have time to peel the potatoes for mashing. I love you. I'll be home as quickly as I can. Mother."

Nicole stood like one dazed, wondering where to begin and what to do first. Tears sparkled in her eyes. Again she prayed for help and for wisdom and guidance. Then she peeled the potatoes and readied them for cooking. Next she got the beets from the pantry shelf and prepared them, Harvard style. Then, working as rapidly as she could, she prepared the onion quiche and quickly tore up lettuce for a salad which she would toss with other vegetables before serving the meal. And then the doorbell rang.
She wiped her hands on a towel and hastened to receive the laughing Amber who immediately demanded that she play with her.

"I shouldn't be more than a couple of hours," Mrs. Brown stated, starting for the car.

"Please, not more than that!" Nicole exclaimed softly. "My evening is full. Full." She was surprised at herself. She had actually said those words!

Mrs. Brown turned and looked at her. "I should have asked if you could watch Amber, Nicole. I guess we all take you for granted. You're always so willing and so efficient. And believe me, this time I'll make sure it's not more than the hour I told you. You're a doll. Thanks much."

Before the car was out of the driveway, Amber was tugging at Nicole's skirt. "Come out and play with me," she demanded.

"Not now, honey," Nicole said kindly but firmly. "I'm bringing the toys into the kitchen and you're going to play while I work."

"No!" came the indignant reply. "You play with me."

"Amber," Nicole said in a stern sounding tone of voice, "when you are here, you must obey me. And I said you will be playing here while I work. Do you understand, dear? Maybe you can help me finish getting the vegetables ready for the salad. The radishes need to be washed and so do the green onions and the celery. I'll give you an apron and a brush and we'll both clean these vegetables. Would you like that? You can play afterwards."

Amber was ecstatic with delight and Nicole allowed her to play in the water with her brush and half a dozen radishes to her heart's content. "Oh, 'Cole," she cried happily, "I love helping you. This is fun."

Nicole watched her little charge with wonder and amazement. Why hadn't she given her something creative and "big" to do before? she wondered. Why, the child was having the time of her life, it seemed, "working." Every now and then she "drip dried" her lovely little hands and picked up a piece of celery and bit off a generous bite; then she resumed her scrubbing of the radishes and three carrots which Nicole had dropped into the water for her pleasure.
The little girl was a model child the entire time she was there and when, true, to her word for a pleasant change, Mrs. Brown picked Amber up in less than two hours, Nicole bragged on her obedience and excellent behavior.

That night, long after Helen had left the house, understanding completely the difference between a flat fell seam and a French seam, and after having made perfectly beautiful French seams now on her dress, Nicole knelt by her bedside to pray. She was too weary to linger long with Him. So weary, in fact, that she fell asleep upon her knees.

"Forgive me, blessed Jesus," she cried, looking upward and sensing His sweet presence in spite of having gone to sleep. "I'm so sorry. I love You more than anyone or than anything and yet I couldn't stay awake to commune with You! I am sorry."

Like a softly whispered breeze going over her, she heard the kind admonition: "Come ye . . . apart and rest awhile."

Tears ran copiously down her cheeks. She was now wide awake. His Voice seemed to whisper words of encouragement and of wisdom to her. And suddenly she knew it wasn't wrong to say, "I can't" to some things. It wasn't wrong to decline when asked to fill another position. It wasn't wrong to begin subtracting from one's overloaded schedule, no matter how good the cause. No, it wasn't wrong. And by God's grace and His help, she would begin now. Her appointment with God was by far the most important of all things.

Her mother's advice was God's voice to her, too, only she hadn't known how to go about fulfilling it. And all the time the answer was a simple one; simply, a "No, I'm sorry. I can't take on any more."

The phone rang and Nicole's mother called to her. "It's for you, dear. A Mrs. Anthony. . . ."

"Hello, Mrs. Anthony," she said, hurrying from her bedroom to the phone in the hallway. "Could I take care of Heather and Todd tomorrow? I'm sorry, I can't. Jenny Eastman's a dependable and trustworthy young woman, call her, Mrs. Anthony. Yes, I'm sorry. Goodnight, my dear."
Nicole felt lighter than she had felt in a long time. She would cut out that she might keep her daily appointment with Jesus her Lord and her Savior and not fall asleep when she met with Him.

Hurrying to her mother, she kissed her lightly on the cheek. "You're a wonderful mother," she said. "And I'm going to take your advice and put it into practice. I love you. Goodnight, Mom." And she retreated to the bedroom to fellowship with the Lord. More than anything else, she needed His presence.