FRANCES BURNETT

TWO LITTLE PILGRIMS' PROGRESS

Frances Burnett
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Two Little Pilgrims' Progress / A Story of the City Beautiful

I

The sun had set, and the shadows were deepening in the big barn. The last red glow – the very last bit which reached the corner the children called the Straw Parlor – had died away, and Meg drew her knees up higher, so as to bring the pages of her book nearer to her eyes as the twilight deepened, and it became harder to read. It was her bitterest grievance that this was what always happened when she became most interested and excited – the light began to fade away, and the shadows to fill all the corners and close in about her.

She frowned as it happened now – a fierce little frown which knitted her childish black brows as she pored over her book, devouring the page, with the determination to seize on as much as was possible. It was like running a desperate race with the darkness.

She was a determined child, and no one would have failed to guess as much who could have watched her for a few moments as she sat on her curious perch, her cheeks supported by her hands,

her shock of straight black hair tumbling over her forehead.

The Straw Parlor was the top of a straw stack in Aunt Matilda's barn. Robin had discovered it one day by climbing a ladder which had been left leaning against the stack, and when he had found himself on the top of it he had been enchanted by the feeling it gave him of being so high above the world, and had called Meg up to share it with him.

She had been even more enchanted than he.

They both hated the world down below – Aunt Matilda's world – which seemed hideous and exasperating and sordid to them in its contrast to the world they had lived in before their father and mother had died, and they had been sent to their sole relation, who did not want them, and only took them in from respect to public opinion. Three years they had been with Aunt Matilda, and each week had seemed more unpleasant than the last. Mrs. Matilda Jennings was a renowned female farmer of Illinois, and she was far too energetic a manager and business woman to have time to spend on children. She had an enormous farm, and managed it herself with a success and ability which made her celebrated in agricultural papers. If she had not given her dead brother's children a home, they would have starved or been sent to the poorhouse. Accordingly, she gave them food to eat and beds to sleep in, but she scarcely ever had time to notice them. If she had had time to talk to them, she had nothing to say. She cared for nothing but crops and new threshing-machines and fertilizers, and they knew nothing about such things.

“She never says anything but ‘Go to bed,’ ‘Keep out of the way.’ She’s not like a woman at all,” Meg commented once, “she’s like a man in woman’s clothes.”

Their father had been rather like a woman in man’s clothes. He was a gentle, little, slender man, with a large head. He had always been poor, and Mrs. Matilda Jennings had regarded him as a contemptible failure. He had had no faculty for business or farming. He had taught school, and married a school teacher. They had had a small house, but somehow it had been as cosey as it was tiny. They had managed to surround themselves with an atmosphere of books, by buying the cheap ones they could afford and borrowing the expensive ones from friends and circulating libraries. The twins – Meg and Robin – had heard stories and read books all the first years of their lives, as they sat in their little seats by the small, warm fireside. In Aunt Matilda’s bare, cold house there was not a book to be seen. A few agricultural papers were scattered about. Meals were hurried over as necessary evils. The few people who appeared on the scene were farmers, who talked about agricultural implements and the wheat market.

“It’s such a bare place,” Robin used to say, and he would drive his hands into the depths of his pockets and set his square little jaw, and stare before him.

Both the twins had that square little jaw. Neither of them looked like their father and mother, except that from their mother they inherited black hair. Robin’s eyes were black, but Meg’s were gray, with thick black lashes. They were handsome

little creatures, but their shocks of straight black hair, their straight black brows and square little jaws, made them look curiously unlike other children. They both remembered one winter evening, when, as they sat on their seat by the fire, their father, after looking at them with a half smile for a moment or so, began to laugh.

"Margaret," he said to their mother, "do you know who those two are like? You have heard me speak of Matilda often enough."

"Oh, Robert!" she exclaimed, "surely they are not like Matilda?"

"Well, perhaps it is too much to say they are like her," he answered, "but there is something in their faces that reminds me of her strongly. I don't know what it is exactly, but it is there. It is a good thing, perhaps," with a queer tone in his voice. "Matilda always did what she made up her mind to do. Matilda was a success. I was always a failure."

"Ah, no, Bob," she said, "not a failure!"

She had put her hand on his shoulder, and he lifted it and pressed it against his thin cheek.

"Wasn't I, Maggie?" he said, gently, "wasn't I? Well, I think these two will be like Matilda in making up their minds and getting what they want."

Before the winter was over Robin and Meg were orphans, and were with Aunt Matilda, and there they had been ever since.

Until the day they found the Straw Parlor it had seemed as if no corner in the earth belonged to them. Meg slept on a cot in a

woman servant's room, Robin shared a room with some one else. Nobody took any notice of them.

"When any one meets us anywhere," Meg said, "they always look surprised. Dogs who are not allowed in the house are like us. The only difference is that they don't drive us out. But we are just as much in the way."

"I know," said Robin; "if it wasn't for you, Meg, I should run away."

"Where?" said Meg.

"Somewhere," said Robin, setting his jaw; "I'd find a place."

"If it wasn't for you," said Meg, "I should be so lonely that I should walk into the river. I wouldn't stand it." It is worth noticing that she did not say "I *could* not stand it."

But after the day they found the Straw Parlor they had an abiding-place. It was Meg who preëmpted it before she had been on the top of the stack five minutes. After she had stumbled around, looking about her, she stopped short, and looked down into the barn.

"Robin," she said, "this is another world. We are miles and miles away from Aunt Matilda. Let us make this into our home – just yours and mine – and live here."

"We are in nobody's way – nobody will even know where we are," said Robin. "Nobody ever asks, you know. Meg, it will be just like our own. We will live here." And so they did. On fine days, when they were tired of playing, they climbed the ladder to rest on the heap of yellow straw; on wet days they lay and

told each other stories, or built caves, or read their old favorite books over again. The stack was a very high one, and the roof seemed like a sort of big tent above their heads, and the barn floor a wonderful, exaggeratedly long, distance below. The birds who had nests in the rafters became accustomed to them, and one of the children's chief entertainments was to lie and watch the mothers and fathers carry on their domestic arrangements, feeding their young ones, and quarrelling a little sometimes about the way to bring them up. The twins invented a weird little cry, with which they called each other, if one was in the Straw Parlor and the other one entered the barn, to find out whether it was occupied or not. They never mounted to the Straw Parlor, or descended from it, if any one was within sight. This was their secret. They wanted to feel that it was very high, and far away from Aunt Matilda's world, and if any one had known where they were, or had spoken to them from below, the charm would have been broken.

This afternoon, as Meg pored over her book, she was waiting for Robin. He had been away all day. At twelve years old Robin was not of a light mind. When he had been only six years old he had had serious plans. He had decided that he would be a great inventor. He had also decided – a little later – that he would not be poor, like his father, but would be very rich. He had begun by having a savings bank, into which he put rigorously every penny that was given to him. He had been so quaintly systematic about it that people were amused, and gave him pennies instead of candy

and toys. He kept a little banking book of his own. If he had been stingy he would have been a very unpleasant little boy, but he was only strict with himself. He was capable of taking from his capital to do the gentlemanly thing by Meg at Christmas.

"He has the spirit of the financier, that is all," said his father.

Since he had been with Aunt Matilda he had found opportunities to earn a trifle rather frequently. On the big place there were small, troublesome duties the farm hands found he could be relied on to do, which they were willing to pay for. They found out that he never failed them.

"Smart little chap," they said; "always up to time when he undertakes a thing."

To-day he had been steadily at work under the head man. Aunt Matilda had no objection to his odd jobs.

"He has his living to earn, and he may as well begin," she said.

So Meg had been alone since morning. She had only one duty to perform, and then she was free. The first spring they had been with Aunt Matilda Robin had invested in a few chickens, and their rigorous care of them had resulted in such success that the chickens had become a sort of centre of existence to them. They could always have any dreams of the future upon the fortune to be gained by chickens. You could calculate on bits of paper about chickens and eggs until your head whirled at the magnitude of your prospects. Meg's duty was to feed them, and show them scrupulous attentions when Robin was away.

After she had attended to them she went to the barn, and,

finding it empty, climbed up to the Straw Parlor with an old "Pilgrim's Progress," to spend the day.

This afternoon, when the light began to redden and then to die away, she and Christian were very near the gates. She longed so to go in with him, and was yearning towards them with breathless eagerness, when she heard Robin's cry below, coming up from the barn floor.

She sprang up with a start, feeling bewildered a second, before she answered. The City Beautiful was such millions – such millions of miles away from Aunt Matilda's barn. She found herself breathing quickly and rubbing her eyes, as she heard Robin hurrying up the ladder.

Somehow she felt as if he was rather in a hurry, and when his small, black shock head and wide-awake black eyes appeared above the straw she had a vague feeling that he was excited, and that he had come from another world. He clambered on to the stack and made his way to her, and threw himself full length on the straw at her side.

"Meg!" he said – "Hallo, you look as if you were in a dream! Wake up! – Jones and Jerry are coming to the barn – I hurried to get here before them; they're talking about something I want you to hear – something new! Wake up!"

"Oh, Robin!" said Meg, clutching her book and coming back to earth with a sigh, "I don't want to hear Jones and Jerry. I don't want to hear any of the people down there. I've been reading the 'Pilgrim's Progress,' and I do wish – I do so *wish* there *was* a City

Beautiful.”

Robin gave a queer little laugh. He really was excited.

“There is going to be one,” he said. “Jones and Jerry don’t really know it, but it is something like that they are talking about; a City Beautiful – a real one – on this earth, and not a hundred miles away. Let’s get near the edge and listen.”

II

They drew as near to the edge as they could without being seen. They did not understand in the least. Robin was not given to practical jokes, but what he had said sounded rather as if there was a joke somewhere. But she saw Jones and Jerry enter the barn, and saw, before they entered, that they were deep in talk. It was Jones who was speaking. Jones was Aunt Matilda's head man, and was an authority on many things.

"There's been exhibitions and fairs all over the world," he was saying, "but there's been nothing like what this will be. It will be a city, that's what it will be, and all the world is going to be in it. They are going to build it fronting on the water, and bank the water up into lakes and canals, and build places like white palaces beside them, and decorate the grounds with statues and palms and flowers and fountains, and there's not a country on earth that won't send things to fill the buildings. And there won't be anything a man can't see by going through 'em. It'll be as good as a college course to spend a week there."

Meg drew a little closer to Robin in the straw.

"What are they talking about?" she whispered.

"Listen," said Bob.

Jerry, who was moving about at some work below, gave a chuckling laugh.

"Trust 'em to do the biggest thing yet, or bust, them Chicago

people," he said. "It's got to be the biggest thing – a Chicago Fair."

"It's not goin' to be the Chicago Fair," Jones said. "They're not goin' to put up with no such idea as that; it's the World's Fair. They're going to ring in the universe."

"That's Chicago out an' out," said Jerry. "Buildin's twenty stories high, an' the thermometer twenty-five degrees below zero, an' a World's Fair. Christopher Columbus! I'd like to see it!"

"I bet Christopher Columbus would like to see it," said Jones. "It's out of compliment to him they're getting it up – for discovering Chicago."

"Well, I didn't know he made his name that way partic'lar," said Jerry. "Thought what he prided hisself on was discoverin' America."

"Same thing," said Jones, "same thing! Wouldn't have had much to blow about, and have statues set up, and comic operas written about him, if it had only been America he'd discovered. Chicago does him full credit, and she's goin' to give him a send-off that'll be a credit to her."

Robin smothered a little laugh in his coat-sleeve. He was quite used to hearing jokes about Chicago. The people in the country round it were enormously proud of it, and its great schemes and great buildings and multi-millionaires, but those who were given to jokes had the habit of being jocular about it, just as they had the habit of proclaiming and dwelling upon its rush and wealth and enterprise. But Meg was not a jocular person. She was too

intense and easily excited. She gave Robin an impatient nudge with her elbow, not in reproof, but as a sort of irrepressible ejaculation.

"I wish they wouldn't be funny," she exclaimed. "I want them to tell more about it. I wish they'd go on."

But they did not go on; at least, not in any way that was satisfactory. They only remained in the barn a short time longer, and they were busy with the work they had come to do. Meg craned her neck and listened, but they did not tell more, and she was glad when they went away, so that she could turn to Robin.

"Don't you know more than that?" she said. "Is it true? What have you heard? Tell me yourself."

"I've heard a lot to-day," said Robin. "They were all talking about it all the time, and I meant to tell you myself, only I saw Jones and Jerry coming, and thought, perhaps, we should hear something more if we listened."

They clambered over to their corner and made themselves comfortable. Robin lay on his back, but Meg leaned on her elbows, as usual, with her cheeks resting on her hands. Her black elf-locks hung over her forehead, and her big eyes shone.

"Rob," she said, "go on. What's the rest?"

"The rest!" he said. "It would take a week to tell it all, I should think. But it's going to be the most wonderful thing in the world. They are going to build a place that will be like a white, beautiful city, on the borders of the lake – that was why I called it the City Beautiful. It won't be on the top of a hill, of course – "

“But if it is on the edge of the lake, and the sun shines and the big water is blue and there are shining white palaces, it will be better, I believe,” said Meg. “What is going to be in the city?”

“Everything in the world,” said Robin. “Things from everywhere – from every country.”

“There are a great many countries,” said Meg. “You know how it is in the geography. Europe, Asia, and Africa, as well as America. Spain and Portugal and France and England – and Sweden and Norway and Russia and Lapland – and India – and Italy – and Switzerland, and all the others.”

“There will be things – and people – brought from them all. I heard them say so. They say there will be villages, with people walking about in them.”

“Do they walk about when they are at home?” exclaimed Meg.

“Yes, in the queer clothes they wear in their own countries. There’s going to be an Esquimaux village.”

“With dogs and sledges?” cried Meg, lifting her head.

“Yes; and you know that place in Italy where the streets are made of water – ”

“It’s Venice,” said Meg. “And they go about in boats called gondolas.”

“And the men who take them about are called gondoliers,” interrupted Robin. “And they have scarfs and red caps, and push their boats along with poles. There will be gondolas at the Fair, and people can get into them and go about the canals.”

“Just as they do in Venice?” Meg gasped.

"Just as they do in Venice. And it will be the same with all the other countries. It will be as if they were all brought there – Spanish places and Egyptian places and German places – and French and Italian and Irish and Scotch and English – and all the others."

"To go there would be like travelling all over the world," cried Meg.

"Yes," said Rob, excitedly. "And all the trades will be there, and all the machines – and inventions – and pictures – and books – and statues – and scientific things – and wonderful things – and everything any one wants to learn about in all the world!"

In his excitement, his words had become so rapid that they almost tumbled over each other, and he said the last sentence in a rush. There were red spots on his cheeks, and a queer look in his black eyes. He had been listening to descriptions of this thing all day. A new hand, hot from the excitement in Chicago, had been among the workers. Apparently he had heard of nothing else, thought of nothing else, talked of nothing else, and dreamed of nothing else but the World's Fair for weeks. Finding himself among people who had only bucolic and vague ideas about it, he had poured forth all he knew, and being a rather good talker, had aroused great excitement. Robin had listened with eyes and ears wide open. He was a young human being, born so full of energy and enterprise that the dull, prosaic emptiness of his life in Aunt Matilda's world had been more horrible than he had been old enough to realize. He could not have explained why it had seemed

so maddening to him, but the truth was that in his small, boyish body was imprisoned the force and ability which in manhood build great schemes, and not only build, but carry them out. In him was imprisoned one of the great business men, inventors, or political powers of the new century. But of this he knew nothing, and so ate his young heart out in Aunt Matilda's world, sought refuge with Meg in the Straw Parlor, and was bitterly miserable and at a loss.

How he had drunk in every word the man from Chicago had uttered! How he had edged near to him and tried not to lose him for a moment! How he had longed for Meg to listen with him, and had hoarded up every sentence! If he had not been a man in embryo, and a strong and clear-headed creature, he would have done his work badly. But he never did his work badly. He held on like a little bulldog, and thought of what Meg would say when they sat in the straw together. Small wonder that he looked excited when his black head appeared above the edge of the straw. He was wrought up to the highest pitch. Small wonder that there were deep red spots on his cheeks, and that there was a queer, intense look in his eyes, and about his obstinate little mouth.

He threw up his arms with a desperate gesture.

"*Everything*," he said again, staring straight before him, "that any one could want to learn about – everything in all the world."

"Oh, Robin!" said Meg, in quite a fierce little voice, "and we —*we* shall never see it!"

She saw Robin clinch his hands, though he said nothing, and it made her clinch her own hands. Robin's were tough, little, square-fingered fists, brown and muscular; Meg's hands were long-fingered, flexible, and slender, but they made good little fists when they doubled themselves up.

"Rob," she said, "we never see anything! We never hear anything! We never learn anything! If something doesn't happen we shall be Nothings – that's what we shall be – Nothings!" And she struck her fist upon the straw.

Rob's jaw began to look very square, but he did not speak.

"We are twelve years old," Meg went on. "We've been here three years, and we don't know one thing we didn't know when we came here. If we had been with father and mother we should have been learning things all the time. We haven't one thing of our own, Rob, but the chickens and the Straw Parlor – and the Straw Parlor might be taken away from us."

Rob's square jaw relaxed just sufficiently to allow of a grim little grin.

"We've got the Treasure, Meg," he said.

Meg's laugh had rather a hysterical sound. That she should not have mentioned the Treasure among their belongings was queer. They talked so much about the Treasure. At this moment it was buried in an iron bank, deep in the straw, about four feet from where they sat. It was the very bank Robin had hoarded his savings in when he had begun at six years old with pennies, and a ten-cent blank-book to keep his accounts in. Everything

they had owned since then had been pushed and dropped into it – all the chicken and egg money, and all Robin had earned by doing odd jobs for any one who would give him one. Nobody knew about the old iron bank any more than they knew about the Straw Parlor, and the children, having buried it in the straw, called it the Treasure. Meg's stories about it were numerous and wonderful. Sometimes magicians came, and multiplied it a hundred-fold. Sometimes robbers stole it, and they themselves gave chase, and sought it with wild adventure; but perhaps the most satisfactory thing was to invent ways to spend it when it had grown to enormous proportions. Sometimes they bought a house in New York, and lived there together. Sometimes they traded in foreign lands with it. Sometimes they bought land, which increased in value to such an extent that they were millionaires in a month. Ah! it was a treasure indeed.

After the little, low, over-strained laugh, Meg folded her arms on the straw and hid her face in them. Robin looked at her with a troubled air for about a minute. Then he spoke to her.

"It's no use doing that," he said.

"It's no use doing anything," Meg answered, her voice muffled in her arms. "I don't want to do this any more than you do. We're so lonely!"

"Yes, we're lonely," said Robin, "that's a fact." And he stared up at the dark rafters above him, and at some birds who were clinging to them and twittering about a nest.

"I said I wished there was a City Beautiful," Meg said, "but it

seems to make it worse that there is going to be something like it so near, and that we should never get any nearer to it than a hundred miles."

Rob sat up, and locked his hands together round his knees.

"How do you know?" he said.

"How do I know?" cried Meg, desperately, and she lifted her head, turning her wet face sideways to look at him. He unlocked his hands to give his forehead a hard rub, as if he were trying either to rub some thought out of or into it.

"Just because we are lonely there *is* use in doing things," he said. "There's nobody to do them for us. At any rate, we've got as far on the way to the City as the bottom of the Hill of Difficulty."

And he gave his forehead another rub and looked straight before him, and Meg drew a little closer to him on the straw, and the family of birds filled the silence with domestic twitters.

III

During the weeks that followed they spent more time than ever in their hiding-place. They had an absorbing topic of conversation, a new and wonderful thing, better than their old books, even better than the stories Meg made when she lay on the straw, her elbows supporting her, her cheeks on her hands, and her black-lashed gray eyes staring into space. Hers were always good stories, full of palaces and knights and robber chiefs and fairies. But this new thing had the thrill of being a fairy story which was real – so real that one could read about it in the newspapers, and everybody was talking about it, even Aunt Matilda, her neighbors, and the work-hands on the farm. To the two lonely children, in their high nest in the straw-stack, it seemed a curious thing to hear these people in the world below talk about it in their ordinary, everyday way, without excitement or awe, as if it was a new kind of big ploughing or winnowing machine. To them it was a thing so beautiful that they could scarcely find the words to express their thoughts and dreams about it, and yet they were never alone together without trying to do so.

On wet, cheerless days, in which they huddled close together in their nest to keep from being chilled, it was their comfort to try to imagine and paint pictures of the various wonders until, in their interest, they forgot the dampness of the air, and felt

the unending patter of the rain-drops on the barn roof merely a pleasant sort of accompaniment to the stories of their fancies.

Since the day when they had listened to Jones and Jerry joking, down below them in the barn, Rob had formed the habit of collecting every scrap of newspaper relating to the wonder. He cut paragraphs out of Aunt Matilda's cast-aside newspapers; he begged them from the farm-hands and from the country store-keepers. Anything in the form of an illustration he held as a treasure beyond price, and hoarded it to bring to Meg with exultant joy.

How they pored over these things, reading the paragraphs again and again, until they knew them almost by heart. How they studied the pictures, trying to gather the proportions and color of every column and dome and arch! What enthusiast, living in Chicago itself, knew the marvel as they did, and so dwelt on and revelled in its beauties! No one knew of their pleasure; like the Straw Parlor, it was their secret. The strangeness of their lives lay in the fact that absolutely no one knew anything about them at all, or asked anything, thinking it quite sufficient that their friendlessness was supplied with enough animal heat and nourishment to keep their bodies alive.

Of that other part of them – their restless, growing young brains and naturally craving hearts, which in their own poor enough but still human little home had at least been recognized and cared for – Aunt Matilda knew nothing, and, indeed, had never given a thought to it. She had not undertaken the care

of intelligences and affections; her own were not of an order to require supervision. She was too much occupied with her thousand-acre farm, and the amazing things she was doing with it. That the children could read and write and understood some arithmetic she knew. She had learned no more herself, and had found it enough to build her fortune upon. She had never known what it was to feel lonely and neglected, because she was a person quite free from affections and quite enough for herself. She never suspected that others could suffer from a weakness of which she knew nothing, because it had never touched her.

If any one had told her that these two children, who ate her plentiful, rough meals at her table, among field-hands and servants, were neglected and lonely, and that their dim knowledge of it burned in their childish minds, she would have thought the announcement a piece of idle, sentimental folly; but that no solid detail of her farming was a fact more real than this one was the grievous truth.

"When we were at home," was Meg's summing-up of the situation, "at least we belonged to somebody. We were poor, and wore our clothes a long time, and had shabby shoes, and couldn't go on excursions, but we had our little bench by the fire, and father and mother used to talk to us and let us read their books and papers, and try to teach us things. I don't know what we were going to be when we grew up, but we were going to do some sort of work, and know as much as father and mother did. I don't know whether that was a great deal or not, but it was something."

“It was enough to teach school,” said Robin. “If we were not so far out in the country now, I believe Aunt Matilda would let us go to school if we asked her. It wouldn’t cost her anything if we went to the public school.”

“She wouldn’t if we didn’t ask her,” said Meg. “She would never think of it herself. Do you know what I was thinking yesterday? I was looking at the pigs in their sty. Some of them were eating, and one was full, and was lying down going to sleep. And I said to myself, ‘Robin and I are just like you. We live just like you. We eat our food and go to bed, and get up again and eat some more food. We don’t learn anything more than you do, and we are not worth as much to anybody. We are not even worth killing at Christmas.’”

If they had never known any other life, or if nature had not given them the big, questioning eyes and square little jaws and strong, nervous little fists, they might have been content to sink into careless idleness and apathy. No one was actively unkind to them; they had their Straw Parlor, and were free to amuse themselves as they chose. But they had been made of the material of which the world’s workers are built, and their young hearts were full of a restlessness and longing whose full significance they themselves did not comprehend.

And this wonder working in the world beyond them – this huge, beautiful marvel, planned by the human brain and carried out by mere human hands; this great thing with which all the world seemed to them to be throbbing, and which seemed to

set no limit to itself and prove that there was no limit to the power of human wills and minds – this filled them with a passion of restlessness and yearning greater than they had ever known before.

"It is an enchanted thing, you know, Robin – it's an enchanted thing," Meg said one day, looking up from her study of some newspaper clippings and a magazine with some pictures in it.

"It seems like it," said Robin.

"I'm sure it's enchanted," Meg went on. "It seems so tremendous that people should think they could do such huge things. As if they felt as if they could do anything or bring anything from anywhere in the world. It almost frightens me sometimes, because it reminds me of the Tower of Babel. Don't you remember how the people got so proud that they thought they could do anything, and they began to build the tower that was to reach to heaven; and then they all woke up one morning and found they were all speaking different languages and could not understand each other. Suppose everybody was suddenly struck like that some morning now – I mean the Fair people!" widening her eyes with a little shiver.

"They won't be," said Rob. "Those things have stopped happening."

"Yes, they have," said Meg. "Sometimes I wish they hadn't. If they hadn't, perhaps – perhaps if we made burnt offerings, we might be taken by a miracle to see the World's Fair."

"We haven't anything to burn," said Rob, rather gloomily.

“We’ve got the chickens,” Meg answered as gloomily, “but it wouldn’t do any good. Miracles are over.”

“The world is all different,” said Robin. “You have to do your miracle yourself.”

“It will be a miracle,” Meg said, “if we ever get away from Aunt Matilda’s world, and live like people instead of like pigs who are comfortable – and we shall have to perform it ourselves.”

“There is no one else,” said Robin. “You see, there is no one else in the world.”

He threw out his hand and it clutched Meg’s, which was lying in the straw near him. He did not know why he clutched it – he did not in the least know why; nor did she know why a queer sound in his voice suddenly made her feel their unfriendedness in a way that overwhelmed her. She found herself looking at him, with a hard lump rising in her throat. It was one of the rainy days, and the hollow drumming and patter of the big drops on the roof seemed somehow to shut them in with their loneliness away from all the world.

“It’s a strange thing,” she said, almost under her breath, “to be two children, only just twelve years old, and to be quite by ourselves in such a big world, where there are such millions and millions of people all busy doing things and making great plans, and none of them knowing about us, or caring what we are going to do.”

“If we work our miracle ourselves,” said Rob, holding her hand quite tight, “it will be better than having it worked for us.

Meg!" – as if he were beginning a new subject – "Meg!"

"What?" she answered, still feeling the hard lump in her throat.

"Do you think we are going to stay here always?"

"I – oh, Robin, I don't know."

"Well, I do, then. We are *not*– and that's the first step up the Hill of Difficulty."

IV

All their lives the children had acted in unison. When they had been tiny creatures they had played the same games and used the same toys. It had seemed of little importance that their belongings were those of a boy and girl. When Robin had played with tops and marbles, Meg had played with them too. When Meg had been in a domestic and maternal mood, and had turned to dolls and dolls' housekeeping, Robin had assumed some masculine rôle connected with the amusement. It had entertained him as much at times to be the dolls' doctor, or the carpenter who repaired the dolls' furniture or made plans for the enlargement of the dolls' house, as it had entertained Meg to sew the flags and dress the sailors who manned his miniature ships, and assist him with the tails of his kites. They had had few playmates, and had pleased each other far better than outsiders could have done.

"It's because we are twins," Meg said. "Twins are made alike, and so they like the same things. I'm glad I'm a twin. If I had to be born again and be an *un*-twin I'm sure I should be lonely."

"I don't think it matters whether you are a boy or a girl, if you are a twin," said Robin. "You are part of the other one, and so it's as if you were both."

They had never had secrets from each other. They had read the same books as they grew older, been thrilled by the same stories, and shared in each other's plans and imaginings or depressions.

So it was a curious thing that at this special time, when they were drawn nearest to one another by an unusual interest and sympathy, there should have arrived a morning when each rose with a thought unshared by the other.

Aunt Matilda was very busy that day. She was always busy, but this morning seemed more actively occupied than usual. She never appeared to sit down, unless to dispose of a hurried meal or go over some accounts. She was a wonderful woman, and the twins knew that the most objectionable thing they could do was not to remove themselves after a repast was over; but this morning Meg walked over to a chair and firmly sat down in it, and watched her as she vigorously moved things about, rubbed dust off them, and put them in their right places.

Meg's eyes were fixed on her very steadily. She wondered if it was true that she and Robin were like her, and if they would be more like her when they had reached her age, and what would have happened to them before that time came. It was true that Aunt Matilda had a square jaw also. It was not an encouraging thing to contemplate; in fact, as she looked at her, Meg felt her heart begin a slow and steady thumping. But, as it thumped, she was getting herself in hand with such determination that when she at last spoke her chin looked very square indeed, and her black-lashed eyes were as nearly stern as a child's eyes can look.

"Aunt Matilda," she said, suddenly.

"Well?" and a tablecloth was whisked off and shaken.

"I want to talk to you."

“Talk in a hurry, then. I’ve no time to waste in talk.”

“How old were you when you began to work and make money?”

Aunt Matilda smiled grimly.

“I worked out for my board when I was ten years old,” she said. “Me and your father were left orphans, and we had to work, or starve. When I was twelve I got a place to wash dishes and look after children and run errands, and I got a dollar a week because it was out in the country, and girls wouldn’t stay there.”

“Do you know how old *I* am?” asked Meg.

“I’ve forgotten.”

“I’m twelve years old.” She got up from her chair and walked across the room and stood looking up at Aunt Matilda. “I’m an orphan too, and so is Robin,” she said, “and we have to work. You give us a place to stay in; but – there are other things. We have no one, and we have to do things ourselves; and we are twelve, and twelve is a good age for people who have to do things for themselves. Is there anything in this house or in the dairy or on the farm that would be worth wages, that I could do? I don’t care how hard it is if I can do it.”

If Aunt Matilda had been a woman of sentiment she might have been moved by the odd, unchildish tenseness and sternness of the little figure, and the straight-gazing eyes, which looked up at her from under the thick black hair tumbling in short locks over the forehead. Twelve years old was very young to stand and stare the world in the face with such eyes. But she was not a

woman of sentiment, and her life had been spent among people who knew their right to live could only be won by hard work, and who began the fight early. So she looked at the child without any emotion whatever.

"Do you suppose you could more than earn your bread if I put you in the dairy and let you help there?" she said.

"Yes," answered Meg, unflinchingly, "I know I could. I'm strong for my age, and I've watched them doing things there. I can wash pans and bowls and cloths, and carry things about, and go anywhere I'm told. I know how clean things have to be kept."

"Well," said Aunt Matilda, looking her over sharply, "they've been complaining about the work being too much for them, lately. You go in there this morning and see what you can do. You shall have a dollar a week if you're worth it. You're right about its being time that you should begin earning something."

"Thank you, ma'am," said Meg, and she turned round and walked away in the direction of the dairy, with two deep red spots on her cheeks and her heart thumping again – though this time it thumped quickly.

She reached the scene of action in the midst of a rush of work, and after their first rather exasperated surprise at so immature and inexperienced a creature being supposed to be able to help them, the women found plenty for her to do. She said so few words and looked so little afraid that she made a sort of impression on them.

"See," she said to the head woman, "Aunt Matilda didn't send

me to do things that need teaching. Just tell me the little things, it does not matter what, and I'll do them. I can."

How she worked that morning – how she ran on errands – how she carried this and that – how she washed and scrubbed milk-pans – and how all her tasks were menial and apparently trivial, though entirely necessary, and how the activity and rapidity and unceasingness of them tried her unaccustomed young body, and finally made her limbs ache and her back feel as if it might break at some unexpected moment, Meg never forgot. But such was the desperation of her indomitable little spirit and the unconquerable will she had been born with, that when it was over she was no more in the mood for giving up than she had been when she walked in among the workers after her interview with Aunt Matilda.

When dinner-time came she walked up to Mrs. Macartney, the manager of the dairy work, and asked her a question.

"Have I helped you?" she said.

"Yes, you have," said the woman, who was by no means an ill-natured creature for a hard-driven woman. "You've done first-rate."

"Will you tell Aunt Matilda that?" said Meg.

"Yes," was the answer.

Meg was standing with her hands clasped tightly behind her back, and she looked at Mrs. Macartney very straight and hard from under her black brows.

"Mrs. Macartney," she said, "if I'm worth it, Aunt Matilda will

give me a dollar a week; and it's time I began to work for my living. Am I worth that much?"

"Yes, you are," said Mrs. Macartney, "if you go on as you've begun."

"I shall go on as I've begun," said Meg. "Thank you, ma'am," and she walked back to the house.

After dinner she waited to speak to Aunt Matilda again.

"I went to the dairy," she said.

"I know you did," Aunt Matilda answered. "Mrs. Macartney told me about it. You can go on. I'll give you the dollar a week."

She looked the child over again, as she had done in the morning, but with a shade of expression which might have meant a touch of added interest. Perhaps her mind paused just long enough to bring back to her the time when she had been a worker at twelve years old, and also had belonged to no one.

"She'll make her living," she said, as she watched Meg out of the room. "She's more like me than she is like her father. Robert wasn't worthless, but he had no push."

Having made quite sure that she was not wanted in the dairy for the time being, Meg made her way to the barn. She was glad to find it empty, so that she could climb the ladder without waiting. When she reached the top and clambered over the straw the scent of it seemed delightful to her. It was like something welcoming her home. She threw herself down full length in the Straw Parlor. Robin had not been at dinner. He had gone out early and had not returned. As she lay, stretching her tired limbs,

and staring up at the nest in the dark, tent-like roof above her, she hoped he would come. And he did. In about ten minutes she heard the signal from the barn floor, and answered it. Robin came up the ladder rather slowly. When he made his way over the straw to her corner, and threw himself down beside her, she saw that he was tired too. They talked a few minutes about ordinary things, and then Meg thought she would tell him about the dairy. But it appeared that he had something to tell himself, and he began first.

"I've been making a plan, Meg," he said.

"Have you?" said Meg. "What is it?"

"I've been thinking about it for two or three days," he went on, "but I thought I wouldn't say anything about it until – till I tried how it would work."

Meg raised herself on her elbow and looked at him curiously. It seemed so queer that he should have had a plan too.

"Have you – tried?" she said.

"Yes," he answered, "I have been working for Jones this morning, and I did quite a lot. I worked hard. I wanted him to see what I could do. And then, Meg, I asked him if he would take me on – like the rest of the hands – and pay me what I was worth."

"And what did he say?" breathlessly.

"He looked at me a minute – all over – and half laughed, and I thought he was going to say I wasn't worth anything. It wouldn't have been true, but I thought he might, because I'm only twelve years old. It's pretty hard to be only twelve when you want to get

work. But he didn't, he said, 'Well, I'm darned if I won't give you a show;' and I'm to have a dollar a week."

"Robin," Meg cried, with a little gasp of excitement, "so am I!"

"So are you!" cried Robin, and sat bolt upright. "*You!*"

"It's – it's because we are twins," said Meg, her eyes shining like lamps. "I told you twins did things alike because they couldn't help it. We have both thought of the same thing. I went to Aunt Matilda, asked her to let me work somewhere and pay me, and she let me go into the dairy and try, and Mrs. Macartney said I was a help, and I am to have a dollar a week, if I go on as I've begun."

Robin's hand gave hers a clutch, just as it had done before, that day when he had not known why.

"Meg, I believe," he said, "I believe that we two will always go on as we begin. I believe we were born that way. We have to, we can't help it. And two dollars a week, if they keep us, and we save it all – we could go almost anywhere – sometime."

Meg's eyes were fixed on him with a searching, but half frightened expression.

"Almost anywhere," she said, quite in a whisper. "Anywhere not more than a hundred miles away."

V

They did not tell each other of the strange and bold thought which had leaped up in their minds that day. Each felt an unwonted shyness about it, perhaps because it had been so bold; but it had been in each mind, and hidden though it was, it remained furtively in both.

They went on exactly as they had begun. Each morning Meg went to her drudgery in the dairy and Robin followed Jones whithersoever duty led. If the elder people had imagined they would get tired and give up they found out their mistake. That they were often tired was true, but that in either there arose once the thought of giving up, never! And they worked hard. The things they did to earn their weekly stipend would have touched the heart of a mother of cared-for children, but on Mrs. Jennings's model farm people knew how much work a human being could do when necessity drove. They were all driven by necessity, and it was nothing new to know that muscles ached and feet swelled and burned. In fact, they knew no one who did not suffer, as a rule, from these small inconveniences. And these children, with their set little faces and mature intelligence, were somehow so unsuggestive of the weakness and limitations of childhood that they were often given work which was usually intrusted only to elder people. Mrs. Macartney found that Meg never slighted anything, never failed in a task, and never forgot

one, so she gave her plenty to do. Scrubbing and scouring that others were glad to shirk fell to her share. She lifted and dragged things about that grown-up girls grumbled over. What she lacked in muscle and size she made up in indomitable will power that made her small face set itself and her small body become rigid as iron. Her work ended by not confining itself to the dairy, but extended to the house, the kitchen – anywhere there were tiresome things to be done.

With Robin it was the same story. Jones was not afraid to give him any order. He was of use in all quarters – in the huge fields, in the barn, in the stables, and as a messenger to be trusted to trudge any distance when transport was not available.

They both grew thin but sinewy looking, and their faces had a rather strained look. Their always large black eyes seemed to grow bigger, and their little square jaws looked more square every day; but on Saturday nights they each were paid their dollar, and climbed to the Straw Parlor and unburied the Treasure and added to it.

Those Saturday nights were wonderful things. To the end of life they would never forget them. Through all the tired hours of labor they were looked forward to. Then they lay in their nest of straw and talked things over – there it seemed that they could relax and rest their limbs as they could do it nowhere else. Mrs. Jennings was not given to sofas and easy-chairs, and it is not safe to change position often when one has a grown-up bedfellow. But in the straw they could roll at full length, curl up or stretch

out just as they pleased, and there they could enlarge upon the one subject that filled their minds, and fascinated and enraptured them.

Who could wonder that it was so! The City Beautiful was growing day by day, and the development of its glories was the one thing they heard talked of. Robin had established the habit of collecting every scrap of newspaper referring to it. He cut them out of Aunt Matilda's old papers, he begged them from every one, neighbors, store-keepers, work hands. When he was sent on errands he cast an all-embracing glance 'round every place his orders took him to. The postmaster of the nearest village discovered his weakness and saved paragraphs and whole papers for him. Before very long there was buried near the Treasure a treasure even more valuable of newspaper cuttings, and on the wonderful Saturday nights they gave themselves up to revelling in them.

How they watched it and followed it and lived with it – this great human scheme which somehow seemed to their young minds more like the scheme of giants and genii! How they seized upon every new story of its wonders and felt that there could be no limit to them! They knew every purpose and plan connected with it – every arch and tower and hall and stone they pleased themselves by fancying. Newspapers were liberal with information, people talked of it, they heard of it on every side. To them it seemed that the whole world must be thinking of nothing else.

“While we are lying here,” Meg said – “while you are doing chores, and I am scouring pans and scrubbing things, it is all going on. People in France and in England and in Italy are doing work to send to it – artists are painting pictures, and machinery is whirling and making things, and everything is pouring into that one wonderful place. And men and women planned it, you know – just men and women. And if we live a few years we shall be men and women, and they were once children like us – only, if they had been quite like us they would never have known enough to do anything.”

“But when they were children like us,” said Robin, “they did not know what they would have learned by this time – and they never dreamed about this.”

“That shows how wonderful men and women are,” said Meg. “I believe they can do *anything* if they set their minds to it.” And she said it stubbornly.

“Perhaps they can,” said Robin, slowly. “Perhaps *we* could do anything we set our minds to.”

There was the suggestive tone in his voice which Meg had been thrilled by more than once before. She had been thrilled by it most strongly when he had said that if they saved their two dollars a week they might be able to go almost anywhere. Unconsciously she responded to it now.

“If I could do anything I set my mind to,” she said, “do you know what I would set my mind to first?”

“What?”

“I would set my mind to going to that wonderful place. I would set it to seeing everything there, and remembering all I could hold, and learning all there was to be learned – and I would *set it hard*.”

“So would I,” said Robin.

It was a more suggestive voice than before that he said the words in; and suddenly he got up, and went and tore away the straw from the burying-place of the Treasure. He took out the old iron bank, and brought it back to their corner.

He did it so suddenly, and with such a determined air, that Meg rather lost her breath.

“What are you going to do with the Treasure?” she asked.

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