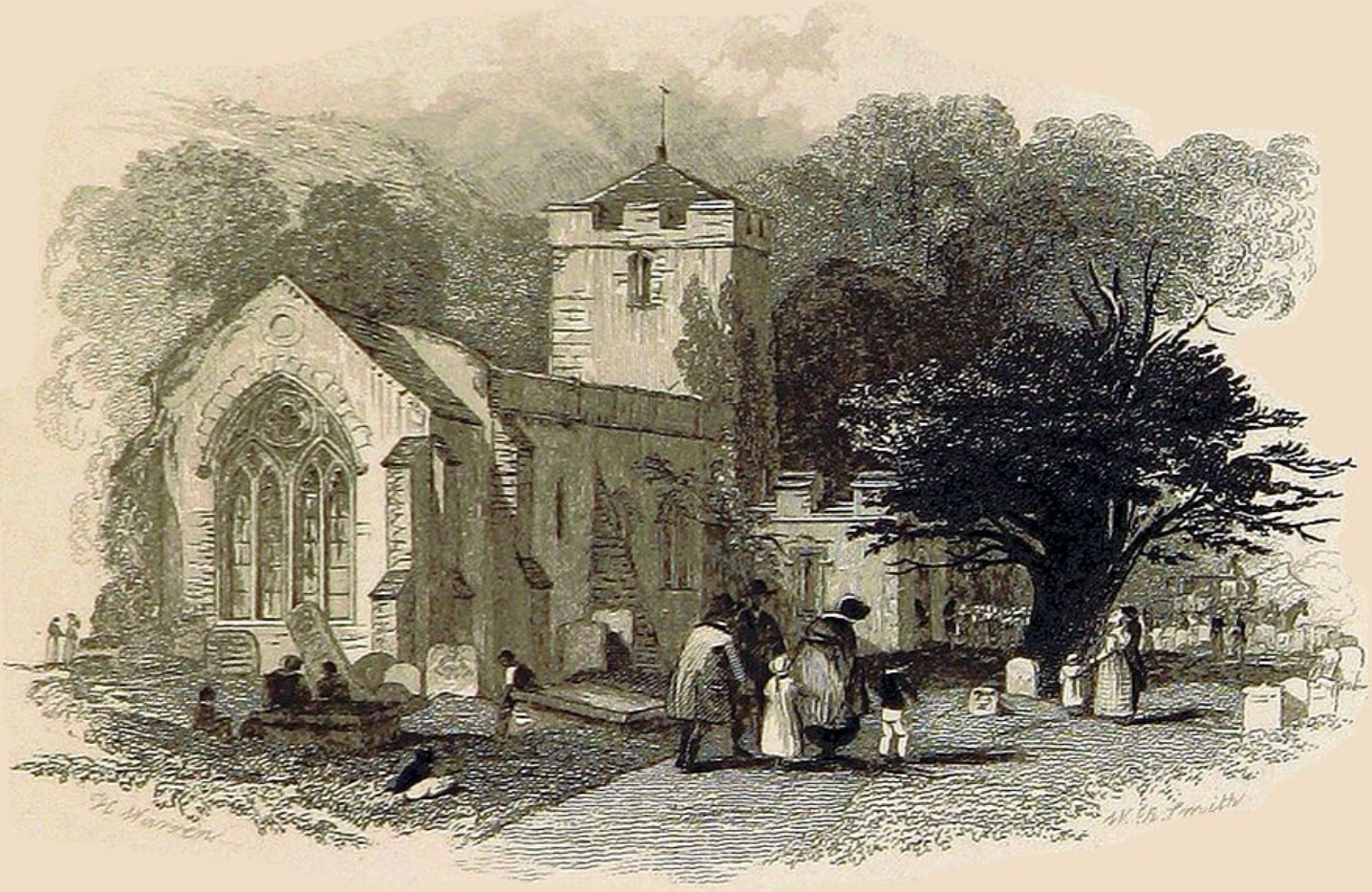
FRANCES HODGSON BURNETT



TWO LITTLE PILGRIMS' PROGRESS

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CONTENTS:

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 preempted 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.”