

Chapter 1

The Trial Begins

Ever since the day I learned about the foot-pound I've had a grudge against physics. The foot-pound, as I recall, is a unit for measuring work—the name for a little piece of energy—enough to raise one pound one foot.

“So if you're digging a ditch,” the teacher explained, “and want to know how much you're working, you weigh your shovelful of dirt, measure the distance you throw it, multiply the two numbers...” The teacher's voice droned on, and I began wondering.

Maybe it was my feminine mind which led me to picture myself fooling around with scales and yardsticks without ever getting that ditch dug, but I was quite happy about the foot-pound. Here at last was one thing in physics I understood, or at least I thought I did until one of the boys spoke up.

“I'd like to ask a question,” he said. “Say I'm trying to push a car out of the mud, but I can't budge it an inch. I'm pushing, say, fifty pounds heavy. How much am I working?”

The teacher smiled slowly. “According to the formula,” he said, “you wouldn't be working at all.”

Well, that was enough for me. Here was the one thing in physics I thought I understood, and it didn't make sense. It seemed very clear to me that a new measurement for work was needed. I could think of a dozen things that I considered work—mending, babysitting, studying, even going to the dentist. In none of those would you find more than one or two foot-pounds altogether. Why, even when studying physics itself, just about my hardest labor, I didn't do a single foot-pound of work. That formula, I decided, was lacking somewhere, and to this day, despite atomic submarines and guided missiles, physics and I are not on good terms.

I've done a lot of thinking on this subject of work, and I've come to the conclusion that it needs a broader definition. In my opinion work is anything that requires effort and teaches you something.

If you think that over carefully you'll soon see that you've worked a lot more in your life than you once thought. It came to me as a great surprise one day when I realized I'd begun working for my education when I was six years old. How well I remember the frightful morning

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when with lunch pail in hand I tottered off to school. How fervently I longed to break a leg or at least be hit by a car; but no such kindly fate intervened, and I soon found myself at the gate of the little country school. Slipping through the gate, I hoped to get to the building by creeping along the fence, but to my horror somebody spied me, and everyone stopped playing to stare.

“What’s she skeered of?” I heard one say.

“Hey, Bunny,” giggled a big toothy girl with thick glasses, “what’s yer name?” She looked so much like a rabbit herself that I wondered if that was why she called me “Bunny.”

A fat, very freckled boy pointed at me. “What ya got fer lunch?” he called. He looked at least nine feet tall, and I froze solid on the spot.

“Come on. Whatsamatter, Goofy?”

I stared at the ground, finger in mouth, not daring to move. At that moment nothing could have induced me to say a word. I felt like something low and crawling that you find under a stone after the rain. If a kindly sixth grader hadn’t rescued me, I’d probably still be there.

“Don’t mind them, dear,” she soothed. “They don’t mean nothin’. What did y’ say y’r name was?” And from that moment I began to view the world in a different light.

Now, I know the physics book would never call that ordeal work, but it took more adrenalin than any ditch digging, and it taught me not to be quite so stupidly sensitive. Since it fulfills my formula, I, therefore, call that experience work.

I was not born with a natural love for work of any kind, whether you measure it in foot-pounds or adrenalin. In fact, it was work that decided me to run away from home when I was eight years old. We had moved to an isolated farm by that time, where thick woods enclosed the few fields, and bears were not unknown. On a lovely June morning, mom had asked my younger sister, Iris, and me to do the breakfast dishes. I loathed washing dishes and let it be known in loud lamentation.

“Dishes,” I howled. “Why do we have to do dishes on such a nice day? Dishes, when the sun’s out! Why-“

“You eat whether it’s rainy or sunny,” mom reminded me as she went to make the beds. But I was not to be easily pacified. My voice rose a note higher. “I don’t care. I hate doing dishes, especially on such a-“

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“Let’s run away,” Iris put in. It was her first word since the fracas had started and seemed so practical a suggestion that I stopped crying and brightened immediately.

“Let’s,” I agreed, sniffing, and wiping my eyes on my skirt. “Then when we never, never come back, she’ll be sorry.” I had a fleeting vision of a frantic search being made while we lay cold and pale under some alder bush. Somehow I found the thought comforting.

“Let’s go really, really far,” I whispered as we started down the steps. Iris said nothing, but she swallowed and looked anxiously back at the house.

We ran as far as the barn; then we began walking because the hay was high and the sun was hot. “Don’t look back so much,” I snapped.

“But the house is getting so small,” came the wail. We went on, but our steps slowed as the alders thickened. When the dense, dark woods loomed in front of us, we sat under a bush to meditate awhile and consider our next move. Usually I loved the soft sighing of the wind in the firs. I liked to think that if angels ever whispered it would be like that; but now the sad sound made me want to cry. We were both thinking of the same thing—a few days earlier in the muddy road that passed our house papa had shown us a real bear track.

“That must have been an awful big bear,” I said, speaking almost to myself.

“Do you—do you s’pose it could come this far?” Iris faltered.

“Of course; bears walk miles and miles sometimes.”

Iris looked in the direction of the house, but it was hidden behind the slope. In the trees the wind rose, rustling and whistling with a ghostly sound. Wide-eyed and pale, we stared at each other. I thought again of lying cold and white under some bush, and this time, strangely enough, found it not at all comforting. Suddenly somewhere in the woods a twig snapped. That was too much for our tense nerves. And both jumping up at once, we scampered home without a backward glance. We found, a little to our discomfiture, that mom hadn’t even missed us. At least, if she had, she wisely said nothing and we sheepishly did the dishes without another word.

Life was soon to teach us that there are quite a few things worse than washing dishes. That very summer papa set us to work picking potato bugs. And to this day, for the most revolting of all jobs I nominate trudging along a dusty row of potato plants picking up crawly potato bugs and dropping them into a pail of kerosene. There’s only

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one comfort in it. You know it's tougher on the potato bugs than it is on you.

There were times, though, when we began to realize that work can be a pleasure. A few months later those same potatoes had to be harvested. Frost came early in that part of New Brunswick, and one afternoon in late September papa said, "Folks, there's going to be a hard frost tonight. Every one of these potatoes has to be picked before we can go to bed." So all afternoon we toiled, papa going ahead digging with the hoe, and the rest of us following with our baskets.

We were soon tired, but being at the age that hates going to bed we were happy at the prospect of staying up later than usual, even if it meant working. As the afternoon wore on our backs and legs ached, but somehow it was very satisfying even to us children to sniff the solid smell of the black earth and to see the neat bags of potatoes pile up, secure from the frost.

By sundown there were still plenty of potatoes scattered over the slopes, but papa leaned on his hoe a moment to look at the flaming sky. As the brightness touched his face he seemed to be seeing the last veil before the face of God. "Bless the Lord, O my soul," we heard him say softly, and we knew that God's ear was so close he didn't have to speak any louder. Little by little the glory faded and the whole sky deepened and sparkled like the clear blue heart of a sapphire.

We kept on digging and gathering, and soon the stars gleamed out, and the moon came up, mellow and round and yellow. Though utterly weary, we found a strange, happy excitement in working fast to race the frost while the air grew colder and colder.

It must have been eight o'clock when we gathered in the last sack, and papa called out, "Good work, girlies I Let Mr. Frost freeze away now," while we all trooped into the warm kitchen. We sat down to steaming potato soup, johnnycake, and baked apples, and I never hope to feel any more content if I find all the gilt-edged securities at the end of all the rainbows.

That winter, the main work I did couldn't be measured in foot-pounds, but it took plenty of effort and gave me just about the most valuable thing I ever learned, for I taught myself to read. Using mom as a dictionary I followed her all around the house spelling but words in the accumulated copies of *Our Little Friend*.

One day as I scanned our bookcase for something simple I hadn't read, papa came along and put his arm around me. "Someday you'll be able to read all those by yourself," he promised.

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Incredulously, I gazed at the fat church histories, the source books, the big, heavy commentaries, and wondered. But papa had said it; so it would have to come true, I decided. From that moment began my determination to get an education.

Even in later years as I toiled through dry histories and endless commentaries for some research paper, I sometimes smiled a little to myself, feeling a bit proud, even then, to be fulfilling papa's prophecy.'

By the time I'd reached fourteen, I considered myself quite accomplished, having mastered cooking (potatoes and boiled eggs), child care (much wisdom gleaned from babysitting), piano (two hymns by ear), and sewing (three bushels of dolls' clothes as well as several aprons no one wore).

But despite this dizzying list of achievements I had yet to learn about what papa persisted in calling "real work." My father, I'm afraid, was more inclined to agree with the physics book in his definition of work. "Never mind," he kept repeating ominously, "your time will come."

When our family moved near an academy and I read the school catalogue, I suddenly realized that "my time" had, indeed, come. To my dismay, I found that school would cost money and that education from now on would mean work-the kind measured in foot-pounds.

But I had learned one thing in the years since I'd run away from the dishes, namely, that most really worthwhile things are acquired by work. And so the long, long trial began.