



Ririro

READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

Baa the first

Louise M. Alcott

They didn't look at all like heroines, those two shabby little girls, as they trotted down the hill, leaving a cloud of dust behind them. Their bare feet were scratched and brown, their hands were red with berry stains, and their freckled faces shone with heat under the flapping sun-bonnets. But Patty and Tilda were going to do a fine piece of work, although they did not know it then, and were very full of their own small affairs as they went briskly toward the station to sell berries.

The tongues went as fast as the feet; for this was a great expedition, and both were much excited about it.

"Don't they look lovely?" said Tilda, proudly surveying her sister's load as she paused to change a heavy pail from one arm to the other.

"Perfectly delicious! I know folks will buy 'em, if we ain't too scared to offer 'em," answered Patty, stopping also to settle the two dozen little birch baskets full of red raspberries which she carried, prettily set forth, on an old waiter, trimmed with scarlet bunch-berries, white everlasting, and green leaves.

"I won't be. I'll go right along and holler real loud,--see if I don't. I'm bound to have our books and boots for next winter; so just keep thinking how nice they'll be, and push ahead," said stout-hearted Tilda, the leader of the expedition.

"Hurry up. I want to have time to sprinkle the posies, so they'll look fresh when the train comes. I hope there'll be lots of children in it; they always want to eat, ma says."

"It was real mean of Elviry Morris to go and offer to sell cheaper up to the hotel than we did, and spoil our market. Guess she'll wish she'd thought of this when we tell what we've done down here." And both children laughed with satisfaction as they trudged along, never minding the two hot, dusty miles they had to go.

The station was out of the village, and the long trains carrying summer travellers to the mountains stopped there once a day to meet the stages for different places. It was a pleasant spot, with a great pond on one side, deep forests on the other, and in the distance glimpses of gray peaks or green slopes inviting the weary city people to come and rest.

Every one seemed glad to get out during the ten minutes' pause, even if their

journey was not yet ended; and while they stood around, enjoying the fresh air from the pond, or watching the stages load up, Tilda and Patty planned to offer their tempting little baskets of fresh fruit and flowers. It was a great effort, and their hearts beat with childish hope and fear as they came in sight of the station, with no one around but the jolly stage-drivers lounging in the shade.

"Plenty of time. Let's go to the pond and wash off the dust and get a drink. Folks won't see us behind those cars," said Tilda, glad to slip out of sight till the train arrived; for even her courage seemed to ooze away as the important moment approached.

A long cattle-train stood on a side track waiting for the other one to pass; and while the little girls splashed their feet in the cool water, or drank from their hands, a pitiful sound filled the air. Hundreds of sheep, closely packed in the cars and suffering agonies from dust and heat and thirst, thrust their poor noses through the bars, bleating frantically; for the sight of all that water, so near yet so impossible to reach, drove them wild. Those farther down the track, who could not see the blue lake, could smell it, and took up the cry till the woods echoed with it, and even the careless drivers said, with a glance of pity,--

"Hard on the poor critters this hot day, ain't it?"

"Oh, Tilda, hear 'em baa, and see 'em crowd this side to get at the water! Let's take 'em some in our pickin' dishes. It's so dreadful to be dry," said tender-hearted Patty, filling her pint cup, and running to offer it to the nearest pathetic nose outstretched to meet it. A dozen thirsty tongues tried to lap it, and in the struggle the little cup was soon emptied; but Patty ran for more, and Tilda did the same, both getting so excited over the distress of the poor creatures that they never heard the far-off whistle of their train, and continued running to and fro on their errand of mercy, careless of their own weary feet, hot faces, and the precious flowers withering in the sun.



They did not see a party of people sitting near by under the trees, who watched them and listened to their eager talk with smiling interest.

"Run, Patty; this poor little one is half dead. Throw some water in his face while I make this big one stop walking on him. Oh, dear! There are so many! We can't help half, and our mugs are so small!"

"I know what I'll do, Tilda,--tip out the berries into my apron, and bring up a nice lot at once," cried Patty, half beside herself with pity.

"It will spoil your apron and mash the berries, but never mind. I don't care if we don't sell one if we can help these poor dear lammies," answered energetic Tilda, dashing into the pond up to her ankles to fill the pail, while Patty piled up the fruit in her plaid apron.

"The train is coming!" cried Patty, as a shrill shriek woke the echoes, and an approaching rumble was heard.

"Let it come. I won't leave this sheep till it's better. You go and sell the first lot; I'll come as quick as I can," commanded Tilda, so busy reviving the exhausted animal that she could not stop even to begin the cherished new plan.

"I don't dare go alone; you come and call out, and I'll hold the waiter," quavered poor Patty, looking sadly scared as the long train rolled by with a head at every window.

"Don't be a goose. Stay here and work, then; I'll go and sell every basket. I'm so mad about these poor things, I ain't afraid of anybody," cried Tilda, with a last refreshing splash among the few favored sheep, as she caught up the tray and marched off to the platform,--a very hot, wet, shabby little girl, but with a breast full of the just indignation and tender pity that go to redress half the wrongs of this great world.

"Oh, mamma, see the pretty baskets! Do buy some, I'm so thirsty and tired," exclaimed more than one eager little traveller, as Tilda held up her tray, crying bravely,--

"Fresh berries! fresh berries! Ten cents! Only ten cents!"

They were all gone in ten minutes; and if Patty had been with her, the pail might have been emptied before the train left. But the other little Samaritan was hard at work; and when her sister joined her, proudly displaying a handful of silver, she was prouder still to show her woolly invalid feebly nibbling grass from her hand.

"We might have sold everyone,--folks liked 'em so much; and next time we'll have two dozen baskets apiece. But we'll have to be active, for some of the children fuss about picking out the one they like. It's real fun, Patty," said Tilda, tying up the precious dimes in a corner of her dingy little handkerchief.

"So's this," answered the other, with a last loving pat of her patient's nose, as the train began to move, and car after car of suffering sheep passed them with plaintive cries and vain efforts to reach the blessed water of which they were in such dreadful need.

Poor Patty couldn't bear it. She was hot, tired, and unhappy because she could do so little; and when her pitying eyes lost sight of that load of misery, she just sat down and cried.

But Tilda scolded as she carefully put the unsold berries back into the pail, still unconscious of the people behind the elder-bushes by the pond.

"That's the meanest thing I've ever seen; and I just wish I was a grown-up so I could do something about it. I'd put all the railroad folks in those cars, and keep 'em there hours and hours and hours, going by ponds all the time; and I'd have ice-cream, too, where they couldn't get a bit, and lots of fans, and other folks all cool and comfortable, never caring how hot and tired and thirsty they were. Yes, I would! And then we'd see how *they* like it."

Here indignant Tilda had to stop for breath, and refreshed herself by sucking berry-juice off her fingers.

"We *must* do something about it. I can't be happy to think of those poor lammies going so far without any water. It's awful to be dry," sobbed Patty, drinking her own tears as they fell.

"If I had a hose, I'd come every day and hose all over the cars; that would do some good. Anyway, we'll bring the other big pail, and water all we can," said Tilda, whose active brain was always ready with a plan.

"Then we won't sell our berries," began Patty; for all the world was saddened to her just then by the sight she had seen.

"We'll come earlier, and both work real hard till our train is in. Then I'll sell, and you go on watering with both pails. It's hard work, but we can take turns. What ever shall we do with all these berries? The under ones are smashed, so we'll eat 'em; but these are nice, only who will buy 'em?" And Tilda looked at the spoiled apron and the four quarts of raspberries picked with so much care in the hot sun.

"I will," said a pleasant voice; and a young lady came out from the bushes just as the good fairy appears to the maidens in old tales.

Both little girls started and stared, and were covered with confusion when other heads popped up, and a stout gentleman came toward them, smiling so good-naturedly that they were not afraid.

"We are having a picnic in the woods, and would like these nice berries for our supper, if you want to sell them," said the lady, holding out a pretty basket.

"Yes, ma'am, we do. You can have 'em all. They're a little mashed; so we won't ask but ten cents a quart, though we expected to get twelve," said Tilda, who had an eye to business.

"What do you charge for watering the sheep?" asked the gentleman, looking kindly at Patty, who at once retired into the depths of her sun-bonnet, like a snail into its shell.

"Nothing, sir. Wasn't it horrid to see those poor things? That's what made her cry. She's real tender-hearted, and she couldn't bear it; so we let the berries go, and did what we could," answered Tilda, with such an earnest little face that it looked pretty in spite of tan and freckles and dust.

"Yes, it was very sad, and we must see about it. Here's something to pay for the berries, also for the water." And the gentleman threw a bright half-dollar into Tilda's lap and another into Patty's, just as if he was used to tossing money about in that delightful manner.

The little girls didn't know what to say to him; but they beamed at every one, and surveyed the pretty silver pieces as if they were very precious in their sight.

"What will you do with them?" asked the lady, in the friendly sort of voice that always gets a ready answer.

"Oh, we are saving up to buy books and rubber boots, so we can go to school next winter. We live two miles from school, and wear out lots of boots, and get colds when it's wet. We had *Pewmonia* last spring, and ma said we *must* have rubber boots, and we might earn 'em in berry-time," said Tilda, eagerly.

"Yes, and *she's* real smart, and *she's* going to be promoted, and *must* have new books, and they cost so much, and ma ain't rich, so we get 'em ourselves," added sister Patty, forgetting bashfulness in sisterly pride.

"That's brave. How much will it take for the boots and the books?" asked the lady, with a glance at the old gentleman, who was eating berries out of her basket.

"As much as five dollars, I guess. We want to get a shawl for ma. It's a secret, and we pick every day real hard, 'cause berries don't last long," said Tilda, wisely.

"*She* thought of coming down here. We felt so bad about losing our place at the hotel, and didn't know what to do, till Tilda made this plan. I think it's a splendid one." And Patty eyed her half-dollar with immense satisfaction.

"Don't spoil the plan, Alice. I'm passing every week while you are up here, and I'll see to the success of the affair," said the old gentleman, with a nod; adding, in a louder tone, "These are very fine berries, and I want you to take four quarts every other day to Miller's farm over there. You know the place?"

"Yes, sir! yes, sir!" cried two eager voices; for the children felt as if a rain of half-dollars was about to set in.

"I come up every Saturday and go down Monday; and I shall look out for you here, and you can water the sheep as much as you like. They need it, poor beasts!" added the old gentleman.

"We will, sir! we will!" cried the children, with faces so full of innocent gratitude and good will that the young lady stooped and kissed them both.

"Now, my dear, we must be off, and not keep our friends waiting any longer," said the old gentleman, turning toward the heads still bobbing about behind the bushes.

"Goodbye, goodbye. We won't forget the berries and the sheep," called the children, waving the stained apron like a banner, and showing every white tooth in the beaming smiles they sent after these new friends.

"Nor I my lambs," said Alice to herself, as she followed her father to the boat.

"What will ma say when we tell her and show her this heap of money?" exclaimed Tilda, pouring the dimes into her lap, and rapturously chinking the big half-dollars before she tied them all up again.

"I hope we won't be robbed going home. You'd better hide it in your breast, else some one might see it," said Patty.

"There goes the boat!" cried Tilda. "Don't it look lovely? Those are the nicest folks I ever saw."

"She's perfectly elegant. I'd like a white dress and a hat just like that. When she kissed me, the long feather was as soft as a bird's wing on my cheeks, and her hair was all curling round like the picture we cut out of the paper." And Patty gazed after the boat as if this little touch of romance in her hard-working life was delightful to her.

"They must be awful rich, to want so many berries. We shall have to fly round to get enough for them and the car folks too. Let's go right off now to that thick place we left this morning, else Elviry may get ahead of us," said practical Tilda, jumping up, ready to make hay while the sun shone. But neither of them dreamed what a fine crop they were to get in that summer, all owing to their readiness in answering that pitiful "Baa! baa!"