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THAT WHICH IS PROFITABLE

Some twenty years ago the Woman's Home Companion was good enough to publish an essay of mine called, "The Twenty Cent Dinner." The title and the circumstance which called out the piece had their origin in a pathetic and much discussed tragedy of that day. A young Chicago working girl had attempted to take her life. "Why did you do it?" exclaimed the Doctor who was working fruitlessly to save her. And her answer was,

"Doctor, did you ever eat twenty cent dinners?"

The poignant episode was used widely by those who were interested in raising the country's standard of living. Deeply as I, myself, sympathized with the effort to raise the standard of living I could not see that the girl's act was satisfactorily accounted for by the quality of her dinner. I felt and wrote that she had attempted to make way with herself because she had worked out no pattern for her life, had no real reason for living. She had taken on none of those obligations which inspire us to effort; she had no opening

ahead, no path to better dinners. She had no faith that there was for her ^{future} satisfaction ahead worth struggling for. ✓

Fifty cent dinners, dollar dinners, ten dollar dinners would not have prevented her act if she had eaten them unsavored by hope. Those who would prevent such tragedies must I felt look deeper than the dinners.

In the course of my argument, that it was not the dinner which was at fault, I fell back on personal experiences. Did I not know what I was talking about? Had I not for the major part of three "happy and profitable" years lived in the city of ^{Paris} on what amounted to twenty cent dinners?

This assertion brought a flood of protests from correspondents.

"What do you mean?" more than one of them challenged. "Of course you may be so abnormal that you can be happy on cheap food, but how can you say that years so spent are 'profitable?'"

Apparently my correspondents interpreted my experience only in terms of the money I had ^{to} spend. To their way of thinking profits were measured by income and if I had so little that I had to cut down the price of my dinners to twenty cents it was something like profanity to them for me

to use the word "profitable." Moreover, they resented my notion that I could say I was happy. I could not have been.

Of course it was my word against theirs, but as a truth whatever unhappiness there may have been in those years was certainly not connected with my dinners.

Many times in the last five hard years I have recalled the stout resistance of my correspondents of twenty years ago to my arguments, recalled it because I have met it in so many people, young and old, who have been forced to re-adjust their lives to a new scheme of living, come down to twenty cent dinners - which usually means of course - it did in my case - ten cent breakfasts and fifteen cent suppers or luncheons.

Not a few people in such situations have asked my advice about what to do and I fear they have thought me unsympathetic when I have urged that they treat their situation as an opportunity, start afresh to build up a stronger equipment, higher craft, skill for their trade or profession. Or if not that launch something of which they may have long dreamed.

Almost invariably they have declared that I was impractical, that one must be financed these days if he undertook a new business, started anew on anything - a business

venture - a new book - a course of study - that life is too complicated for men to trust any longer to themselves.

Well, I am inclined to believe the more complicated things are the more we must trust to ourselves to find our way about.

I am convinced, too, that when we get over this long discouragement that we are going to find numbers of people have come out on top because in full depression they had dared to start something, they have dared to do it on the celebrated shoe string where ~~each has been willing to eat bread without butter~~ and they have beaten the depression. There are not a few cases of that conspicuous in the business world. We will see more of them later as the returns come ^{these} in from the young who have met/hard days with defiance in their eye and determination in their heart.

No, I am more convinced even than I was twenty years ago that I was right in saying in my Woman's Home Companion piece that the three years I had eaten twenty cent dinners were "happy and profitable." How profitable? Perhaps I can best explain by offering the experience itself. Here it is in brief:-

Around about thirty years of age I found myself "out of a job." I had had a college education and a few years on an excellent inland magazine, all of which had

served to show me how little I really knew about what I wanted to do. I wanted to write and I had as a beginning a definite field in mind, the field of French Revolutionary History. I wanted to do writing suitable for American magazines, make a magazinist of myself along historical and biographical lines.

In the reading and studying I had done I had come to admire enormously the way the French collected their materials, the orderly sequence in which they marshalled them, the clarity and verve with which they presented them. I wanted to know more of their methods. I felt that if I could go to Paris and listen to the men at the Sorbonne and the College de France whose studies I had read with such admiration, acquaint myself with the libraries, perhaps find a place in some little group of actual workers in the field to which my eye had been turned with envy, then I might learn to practice the craft which so invited me well enough to find a publisher for my wares.

But how go to Paris? I had only the smallest of savings. It was at the beginning of the tragic '90's and those years before the panic of 1893 which were much more alarming, threatening, than those before the panic of 1929. I could not ask my family for money. They were having enough

to do to weather the storm which had struck their industry.

If it were to be done I must finance myself for I knew the first few weeks would exhaust my savings. Could I do that by writing for American newspapers and magazines? I was no writer, but what better way to prove that I never could become one than to give myself the acid economic test of trying to sell on the American side what I might write in Paris? I realize now better than I did then how dubious was my chance. If I were to sell my wares it must be in New York. I had no acquaintance with New York editors. I was too shy and too unacquainted with the ways of the publishing world to make connections before I sailed. But I decided to risk it.

I think we are all inclined to overlook the profit that comes merely from making a decision to do a hard thing which we hope will lead in the direction we want to go for the decision taken then comes the exhilaration of preparing for the campaign, ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ That decision to go to Paris to study aroused me as almost nothing I ever had set myself to do. I took it as a challenge to my endurance, resources, and I prepared for it with the utmost care. Thus from the ^{very start} the undertaking was profitable.

It was my first trip abroad and nobody could have enjoyed one more. Certainly there has never been another like it. The uncertainty as to what was going to happen to me in the next few months seemed to add zest rather than anxiety to my voyage.

I soon found I was better prepared to live in Paris on a few dollars a week than I had known. I had not studied maps and guide books for nothing. I knew all about the cheap chambre meubles of the Latin Quarter and there I made my way. There are few experiences of my life in which I look back with more amusement than those in which I settled in Paris and learned how to make sure of twenty cent dinners which would be wholesome and palatable. I was so serious about it - counted so carefully my sous!

I had been accustomed always to the lavish American table with its inevitable wastes. The care I saw taken on all sides with food, housekeepers never buying an egg or chop or roll more than needed, the skill and pleasure and the success of the humblest in making the simplest food savory, were a discovery to me. It was my first lesson in the vulgarity of waste, the artistry of economy. I might have lived in luxury among my compatriots for months in Paris and never had had a glimpse of this fundamental strength and

beauty in the French Nation. ~~I sensed for the first time~~
~~the difference between thrift and niggardliness.~~ It
made all excess forever distasteful to me. It was a profit.
I had not reckoned this education in values, in the art of
living cheerfully on what you have, however little.

My first problem was solved. I could live
happily in Paris on twenty cent dinners as long as it was
necessary. But there was a second problem. Could I earn the
money to buy them? I didn't want more. But could I earn
that and still have time and strength to do the studying I
had come to do?

I was lucky at the start. For the first and
almost the only time in my life, liberated I suppose by
my adventure, I wrote a bit of fiction and sent it to New York
to Scribners magazine, the magazine which of all others I
admired, and in which I thought there might be some hope for
me since there was a real feeling for French life, art and
history. At least they would look at anything that came from
Paris, of that I felt sure, and Scribners was the only publica-
tion of which I felt sure on that point. And so my little
story traveled over and then came a great and wonderful day
when I received an envelope marked, "Scribners Magazine."

I opened it to find, oh, such a kind letter and a check for \$100.00. I have never received one since that looked half so big.

But there was a larger profit in that story after its publication than the money I received for it, profitable as that seemed, I used ^{it as} a card of introduction to the New York editors of whom I had been so afraid and to whom I had now begun to send my pieces. You will find a story of mine in Scribner's Magazine for _____ I wrote with pride and it generally arrested attention if not acceptance.

But I had not started to write fiction; it was too uncertain for my definite purpose. I had selected, before I sailed, the field in which I thought I might succeed with short articles.

I had been deeply interested before I left the United States in the lively discussions then going on over the health, the housing, the sanitation, the transportation, the parks and the amusements of our American cities. How did Paris take care of these things? I had an idea from what I had read that she was more successful than we had ever been and that possibly her experience might be useful if reported in short and lively articles. I saw at once that I had not been

wrong. She did do many things better than we did. I liked the way she looked after her streets, her trees, her rivers, even her beggars. I was filled with enthusiasm for the detailed reports she made and published of her expenditures. You knew where every cent of the money went in those days. And what pleased me particularly was that so much of what she did reached down to the needs of the humblest. And so Paris and her housekeeping became my pet theme.

I was lucky finally with these little articles. I had heard of an organization called, "McClure's Syndicate." What it was, I had no idea, but I knew it published short things as well as long ones, things about human beings and their activities as well as great literature such as Stevenson and Hardy wrote. And so as I was experimenting with editors I sent a little article to McClure's Syndicate, New York City - no street - no number - and it found two men who were to be henceforth not only my editors but my friends - Mr. S. S. McClure and Mr. John S. Phillips. It wasn't much of an article, but it had a title that caught their eye, awakened curiosity - "The King of Paris." Who could he be? And the matter which told about him seemed to have been sufficiently interesting for acceptance and so I was off in that quarter.

It soon became a permanent connection. Before the end of my first year I ^{was} sure of a twenty cent dinner, and if the checks were slow coming in or if as sometimes happened the article came back and I had to wait until I found somebody who did like the piece, why there was my friend the Mont-de-piété, the Pawn Broker.

Do not be shocked. If people put up their securities to raise more margin for stock speculation and think it clever why isn't it equally clever when you are after a little more knowledge which you badly need to put up a bit of jewelry, a garment? I did it more than once while waiting for my little checks to travel across the Atlantic and after the first shock had fun doing it. It was always a colorful experience; if sometimes distressing, often heartening. I met old ladies and young students while waiting my turn on the benches that I shall never forget. What were they doing? They were doing what you do when you take out a mortgage on your house, put up your securities for a loan.

The French, wisest of people in money matters, know there are times in the lives of all simple working people, in those who are struggling to fit themselves for careers or establish a business, when a small loan will save the day and they have made it possible to borrow at low rates and on

long
 terms in their municipal pawn shops - Mont-de-piété - they
 call them - mountains of piety - and I know no better form
 of piety. ✓

While my housekeeping and my financing were
 being settled I was considering how I could best
 do that which I had come to do, that is make a thorough study
 of the ^{French} methods of the craft in which I was interested. ✓

I determined after much looking about and
 following lectures in the great institutions that the most
 practical method for me was not working for a degree which
 I am quite sure I might have taken but write a book - a study
 of Madam Roland of the French Revolution was what I decided
 upon. Such a study would give the experience in research
 which I sought and I would write with French models before me.

A train of unexpected and happy circumstances
 put me in touch with the great grand daughter of Madam Roland.
 Here I found at once a friend - one of the dearest friends that
 I have ever had. It was she who directed me to a great
 collection of documents and letters - all unpublished - covering
 the Revolutionary work both of Madam Roland and her husband in
 the years when the Revolution was making as well as through
 the terrible days up to the point when she lay headless at the
 foot of the guillotine. My friend's kindness brought me into

one of the most stimulating groups intellectually that I have ever known. Profitable? There wasn't money enough in France to buy that relation. It could only have come about through a sympathy and understanding of ambitions - a desire to help. The fact that I ate twenty cent dinners and wore gowns that before the end of this enterprise were, I must confess, pretty seedy never made any difference so far as I could tell with my friends.

I had been going on for something over two years getting out my pot boilers, working on my book, eating my twenty cent dinners when suddenly one day Mr. S. S. McClure appeared at the top of my four flights of stairs, watch in hand, to tell me that he wanted to talk to me about a magazine he was about to issue, that he had just twenty minutes. Well, as I remember Mr. McClure and I talked two hours or more about ~~this magazine~~ before he put up his watch and went home. And I began at once to write articles for that journal of the future.

A few months of this and I came back to America to be at once invited by Mr. McClure to undertake a piece of biographical work for his magazine and to have my manuscript of Madam Roland accepted by the house of all others I wanted to publish it - Scribners.

I wonder if I had told this experience to my doubting correspondents of twenty years^{ago}/if even they might not have admitted that I was right in declaring my three years on twenty cent dinners to have been "happy and profitable."

How do you measure profit? Certainly not by money only or principally. I am inclined to think that it is the most deceptive measuring stick we use, one which easily can defeat the pleasure in earning it and even stop its flow.

In any activity the first and essential profit is a reason for the effort - reason enough to give relish for the task, and be sure there will be no relish unless the effort leads to something - has a future in it.

There was the real tragedy of the situation of the girl which started me on my discussion of twenty years ago. She had no relish for her twenty cent dinners because she saw nothing ahead. I relished mine because I thought I did.

I remember a correspondent who felt that it was unfair to compare the two cases, that a girl who worked in a factory on a low wage could have no interest but in her food.

I am often impressed by what seems to me strangely unreal notions of men and women in factories on the part of some of those who work endlessly, devotedly, even passionately to better their lives. They do not think of them as having ^{in some degree at least} the same bravery, cowardice, ambitions and dreams which sway all human beings whatever the size of their incomes.

I have known many women who worked at machines all their lives with stimulating purposes which made them cut their dinners below even the twenty cent point and do it cheerfully, convinced it was worth while.

I remember a timid, but a valiant little woman of forty, whom I met years ago working in a textile mill which I was studying. There was a content about her which you could not escape. She was shabby to be sure. Her mates with whom I talked, young girls as a rule - she was one of the few "old girls" about the place - said, "But she is so stingy; she won't go to shows; she never buys a new hat; she never takes anything but a glass of milk and a hunk of bread for lunch. Of

course she is nice and she is kind, but look at her clothes."

Well, I saw a certain shine in her eyes which convinced me there was something behind what her young companions were seeing, convinced me she "had" something or that she was "after" something. What could it be?

Lucy was not one to tell her heart's desire to the first comer, but by piecing together shy confidences and talking her over with the intelligent woman charged with looking after industrial relations I found that the something which I did not understand in her was a dream - a dream of a little white house of her own! It was that for which she was saving, had been saving for years. And she was glad at the time I knew her because she had almost enough. She would not venture with an "almost" however. Lucy had known all the ups and downs of industry; she worked always with her eye on possible shut-downs; she must have all her money before she bought her house. But that purpose and the realization which she saw slowly ^{coming} had sustained her through years of self-denials, had always been enough to give appetite to her "glass of milk and hunk of bread," make her ^{un}mindful of patched shoes. Why should she think of her shoes, she who walked on air dreaming of a little white house?

No, profit cannot be measured by money alone. You must know that the thing you are after is worth self-denial, skimping, turning your old coat, wearing your old shoes. You must be convinced that ahead of you is something so really profitable that you can gaily, or if you are not of a temperment to do anything gaily, at least determinately put through your sacrifice.

Those whose lives are really profitable live always on two planes, the one to which they are giving all their efforts and the one for which they are sacrificing - the one of which they dream. It is this which gives zest, hope. It is only when you see no second plane that the one on which you are living becomes intolerable.

I once sat at dinner beside the richest man I have ever known, a very rich man indeed. He took his dinner out of his pocket, a Swedish wafer and nibbled it while he played with his knife and fork. Anxiety? - ~~not about money!~~ Not about making money of course but, as I discovered as we talked, what to do with what he had. His accumulation had become too great to invest soundly. How to give it away? It is quite as easy to do harm as to do good in giving money away, he confided. ~~knew~~. I had an idea as we talked of one thing and another that he was ^{as} humiliated by his Swedish biscuit

as I was certainly embarrassed by my hearty appetite. It seemed bad manners to flaunt my good digestion in his face. I would have shared it ^{with him} /if I could and I am sure he would have bought it if he could. But we were both helpless.

What was the trouble? I had my explanation. Always he had worked with the idea that if he had money, much money, all things he desired would be added unto him. But the truth seems to be that in practice this formula ^{often} works the other way. You may get the money and still not get what you want. The little white house - knowledge - craft - skill - discovery - invention - appreciation - experience - must be the things you are working for, denying yourself for. Held those first, money will come, perhaps not in quantity but enough to string you real treasures on. The other way around and you are in danger of getting all string and no treasure. And when that happens there is no zest for further effort. My rich man had no more relish for his dinner than the girl who killed herself because she could no longer eat twenty cent dinners. And for the same reason he saw no future in things, ^{the} nothing-but/same old grind, putting away money in investments which might turn out unsafe, giving away money which might corrupt rather than upbuild those who profited.

It was this fundamental want of a reason, the thing which gives relish to self-denial that convinced me that those who used the girl's case as propaganda for higher wages, needed enough to be sure and still needed, would have been nearer the crux of the matter if they had demanded from the employer ^s an industrial organization in which the girl at the machine could clearly see both the meaning of the thing her machine turned out and beyond what she was doing - a higher grade ^a and better paid task. One of the stupidest mistakes of industrial organization is sitting a worker at a task which to her is meaningless and keeping her at it in an apparent impasse. It is that which is more responsible for making a worker want to kill herself than meagre meals. You can bear anything if there is an opening ahead in the road.

Industry can be so organized - is so organized in certain factories. I have been in a factory in where a girl's first day was spent in going from top to bottom of the plant under an instructor in an effort to acquaint her with the parts of the product and how they are brought together into the great speciality of the place.

When she sits down to learn to feed or punch her machine she knows the meaning of the wheel, the screw, the

disk, the rod, she turns out. She knows if she improves the quality and the quantity of her product she will have a chance when there is a vacancy at a more complicated and higher paid job, may even rise to be an instructor, a forewoman. I have known not a few women in factories who have risen to such positions. But here was management which had the brains to know that there is no such thing as first class work if there is no hope in the worker. My own conviction is that organized labor - Labor Boards - would better serve those who labor, ^{by} insisting on an industrial organization which frees and stimulates the worker than they ever will by confining their efforts to wages and hours. ~~These will come if you first give a chance - an opening to the operator.~~ ✓

If a hopeful look into the future is the best appetizer for twenty cent dinner and the best tonic for continued effort there are always by-products of one's efforts which sustain, keep alive the conviction that it is worth while. The by-products, of my Paris experience were enormous; chief among them after the friends I made was the revelation of the city itself.

For the first time in my life I was in a great city and a city which had for me a charm - well the kind of charm that an adoring Frenchman has described as that a beautiful woman may have for a man. *I was infatuated* ~~I fell in love~~ at first sight - in love with Paris.

In those days I would have gladly pledged myself to eat twenty cent dinners all my life to be sure I could always live in that town and have the ten centimes for a daily ride in one direction and another on the top of an omnibus.

The wealth of beauty and interest that you could get in Paris without a sou if you had eyes, if you were willing to work with the books a bit; - pictures - great music - interest past and present ^{were} - beyond belief. All of this took me by storm, thrilled me so that there were days that it was necessary to use a very firm hand to get myself down at my desk. Profitable? It was my first great experience in beauty outside of that of nature. Such a realization was worth all the money on earth. Men spend fortunes to come to it and never do it - alas. Here then was a profit of a kind I had not foreseen.

I recall that Lucy, my factory friend, saving for her little white house had a similar experience. "If I never get it," she told me, "I shall still have had the fun of working for it, planning for it. I study the magazines, those beautiful plans they give for little homes, little gardens, pretty curtains, just how much they cost. It's lots of fun!"

A parallel to the fun I had in discovering Paris.

There are other profits which go along with following a purpose, cost what it may. There is the great discovery that daring pays big dividends, that it pays to be always tackling something hard, something which demands self-denial. Pays since after each struggle you have added to your capacity for labor, increased your sense of values, enlarged your judgment and your appreciation. You are more of a person and you have been made so by something men are trying to persuade themselves these days they can get along without that splendid quality which Herbert Hoover, one of the foremost benefactors of the world of the last twenty years calls, "rugged individualism."

I confess I do not see much happening in a life or a society without rugged individualism. It is the man or woman who without ever losing his consideration for his fellows, chiselling in on a code of fair dealing, goes after what he wants for himself and for others with daring and determination who makes the greatest social returns, proves best that which is profitable.