

THE  
Master's  
TRADE

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REBECCA MARTIN

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...chapter 1...

# The Truth About Meg

GOLDEN YELLOW SHAVINGS curled away as John plied his planer. It was just a rough, homemade tool—a block holding a crudely forged iron blade—but it was the best the village smithy could do in this year of 1755. Twelve-year-old John had to use all his strength to smooth the piece of lumber fastened in the vise.

Suddenly John stopped and raised his head. Someone was walking over the frozen, snowy ground toward the workshop. John smiled as he recognized the footsteps. Nobody else walked like his nine-year-old sister Margaret: clip-clump, clip-clump, clip-clump.

Her small, pinched face lighted up as she peeked around the door. “Here you are! I was looking everywhere for you. I should have known you’d be in the shop.” Meg closed the door and perched on a wooden barrel.

“And what did you need me for?” wondered John, sending the shavings flying.

“Nothing. I was just bored.”

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“Oh,” he responded, a catch in his throat. This was the girl whose greatest joys had been to climb trees and rocks, or run around in the pasture—and now she had to spend most of her time sitting down.

The accident had happened on Meg’s ninth birthday. “I’m afraid my leg is broken,” she had moaned as John and Father carried her into the house. From the way her leg hung twisted, anyone could see it was broken. They had put Meg on the couch in the front room. While they waited for Dr. Piller to arrive, Meg had mourned, “I shouldn’t have crawled out on that branch.”

That was the trouble with Meg—or at least it used to be



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the trouble. The higher the happier! But this tree had been old, with treacherous rotten branches that sent Meg hurtling to the forest floor.

John wished he could forget Meg's screams as Dr. Piller tried to set the broken bone, but even today, more than six months later, he seemed to hear them. He could also hear Mother trying to soothe the poor little girl, reminding her that now the bone would heal straight and be as good as new.

Only it didn't turn out that simple. Today, Meg's leg was still not straight, which was why she had to walk with a clip-clumping gait. No day passed without pain for her.

"Your leg bothering you?" John asked sympathetically.

"Oh, it could be worse," Meg answered, kicking at the pile of shavings with her good leg. "I never dreamed it would take this long for a broken leg to heal, though."

"I didn't either," murmured John.

"Oh, well, surely by my next birthday I'll be as good as new." Squinting past the December sunshine that streamed in the window, Meg changed the subject by asking, "What are you making, anyway?"

"Nothing, really. I can't make much with the tools we've got," John replied. "I wish we had as many tools as Grandpa Rittenhouse."

"What tools?" wondered Meg.

John's eyes gleamed. "He must have a dozen different kinds of saws and chisels! And four or five steel planers. Don't you remember? You were in Grandpa's workshop when we visited there a few years ago."

Meg shook her head. "I don't remember much at all. I was

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only five, you know. I think the only part I remember is the long, bumpy ride in the stage wagon.”

“Huh, I’d forgotten that part. But Grandpa’s workshop! I felt jealous of Uncle Dan, to think that he can be in a shop like that every day,” John admitted.

“Uncle Dan—was that the young man with the red hair?” Meg wanted to know.

John nodded. “Dan’s our half-uncle, actually. We’ve told you before that Father’s first mother died a long time ago, then Grandpa married again to Grandma Vera. Dan is their son. It seems funny to call him Uncle, since he’s only five years older than I am.”

Just then Mother’s voice came floating down from the house. “Meg, where are you?”

Meg stumbled down from the barrel. “Oh, yes, I’m to mind Aaron while she scrubs the porch!” Clip-clump, clip-clump went her footsteps up the snowy walk.

Slower and slower fell the shavings as John dreamed some more about that visit to Grandpa. Eighty miles is a long, long trip by stage wagon, and that was why the Rittenhouse family didn’t often get to see their grandparents. Years ago, when John’s parents were newly married they had chosen to go pioneering northward up the Lehigh River valley, starting a new settlement along with some other families. Grandpa and Grandma had remained near Germantown, where Father had been born 35 years ago in 1720.

The shop door opened again, and this time it was Father. He had a mop of sandy hair—just like John’s—and blue, blue eyes the color of the sky. (As for John, everybody said he



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had his mother's brown eyes.)

"Making something?" Father asked, his eyes on the block of wood in the vise.

"Not really." John looked up. "Say, Dad, when do you think Meg's leg will heal nice and straight? Her foot is still twisted the wrong way."

Father sat down slowly on the barrel Meg had occupied minutes before. "Think about it, John. If a bone hasn't healed straight in half a year's time, how could it suddenly straighten out on its own?"

John put down the planer with a thump. "You mean it's not going to be straight? Meg has to go lame for—forever?"

A tiny smile touched Dad's lips. "Not forever, John. Nobody's going to be sick and lame in heaven. But it appears Meg will be lame in this life. We've put off telling Meg because we want to talk to Dr. Piller first. It seems he wasn't able to set the bone properly, which is why it healed crooked."

"That's terrible," whispered John. Up to now he'd always figured Meg would get better. This made it seem so much worse.

Dad patted his shoulder. "Please don't take it too hard, John. When the time comes for Meg to face the truth, she'll manage. God loves a lame child just as much as one who isn't lame."

"I know," said John, still in a whisper. "But. . ." He could feel his throat tightening the way it did when he had to cry. He swallowed hard. He was getting too big to cry.

Then he saw the tears running down Father's cheeks into

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his golden beard. Suddenly John didn't mind his own tears. Amazing how they helped to wash away the sad, hopeless feelings.

Father cleared his throat. "The sun's going down, John. We'd better start feeding the cattle. I'll let you do the hay tonight." He strode through the other door, which led to the barn.

John thought hard as he climbed into the sweet-smelling hayloft. What could he do to soften the blow for Meg? What gift could he make for her?