

HIS BANNER OVER ME

by

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CHAPTER TWELVE

SERPENT IN EDEN

The LONG HAPPY SUMMER was nearly over. The lovely face of the farm was changing, as the face of a beautiful woman changes with her moods. The once green fields were golden now; the blue bells which had nodded on the hill were asleep until another Spring and in their places the velvet-hearted prairie sunflowers swayed. Elderberry bushes which had been so covered with lacy branches of blossom, now hung heavy with blue fruit. Even a few oak leaves were beginning to flutter down to earth.

Father had come and gone, after a precious two weeks' vacation with his family. How the load must have lifted from my little mother's heart during those two weeks of his protective care!

We were still camping, since my parents were pleased over the way we children thrived under it. One morning when there was just a week of vacation left, and I was savoring every moment, my mother said, "Children, do you want to walk to Hillhurst? I have to mail a letter to your father."

Hillhurst was the nearest "town." It was a mile and a quarter from the house, consisting of a railway station, two houses and a most fascinating general store which contained everything. I loved to wander down the length of the store, inspecting the shelves. Plows, china, coffee, dishes, bran and shirts, bolts of yardage cloth; a barrel of pickles around which hovered dozens of the little vinegar flies. I could hardly tear myself from the vicinity of the barrel, for I had a passion for sour pickles. Then we hung captivated by the candy counter, which contained a very slim variety of candy. Knowing better than to beg, we looked hopefully at Mother. Sure enough, after mailing the letter she slipped up to the counter and bought a five-cent sack of brightly colored hard candy.

Just above the store, on the second story of the building, was the hall where people used to gather on Saturday nights for what was called "The Literary." We usually attended, and I had even "spoken a piece." We all walked home afterwards, if the horses were too tired to be taken out after their day's work. There was a special magic about the starry skies. My feet frequently stumbled because my eyes were tracing God's footsteps in the heavens.

After Mother had bought the candy and slipped it into her pocket, I grinned at her to let her know that I knew. Then I asked if we couldn't go up to the hall, to see if it looked the same in daylight. Halfway up the long flight of stairs I begged to carry the candy, and Mother consented.

The hall was empty, as we had known it would be; and it was disappointingly dusty and shabby-looking without the happy people and the row of lighted kerosene lamps which served as footlights. So we started down again.

On the way Satan, that gentleman with whom I had dealings before and about whom I was well posted, whispered to me, "Take one out. No one will know."

So I took a peek. There were two of the most luscious-looking candy fish, clear as ruby crystal, on top of the other candy. I took one out with trembling fingers and decided to filch another to give to Cathie. But as I glanced over at her, she looked so innocent and sweet that I couldn't bear to involve her in this sinful deed.

I popped the red fish into my mouth and sucked its cool smooth goodness for a moment. Then fearing my mother's sharp eyes would see me, I slipped it into my coat pocket. Occasionally I put my hand in to see if it was still there. It always was, and it grew heavier and heavier and stickier and stickier. I lost all desire to eat it and only longed to get rid of it. As we passed an ant hill I dropped the fish on its top, knowing that the busy ants would make short work of it.

After a quarter mile of walking we came to the mossy log where we always stopped to rest. Mother said, "Now we will divide the candy." This was our custom, to avoid quarreling, I suppose.

So Mother counted them out: one for Emily, one for Cathie, one for Amy, one for Martha. Among those thus counted out were three candy fish. As Mother laid down the last piece of candy she looked at me saying, "That's queer. I saw the candy fish and had Mr. Hunt put in four of them, one apiece for you."

My wicked heart about to be found out in its sin, nearly stopped beating. I tried to assume a look of innocence and offered, "Perhaps Mr. Hunt only put in three fish."

But Mother in her decided way said, "No, I saw him put in four," with a piercing look which I tried to ignore.

Nothing more was said, and the girls had not paid much attention to this conversation. They each had a fish.

But the beautiful communion between my mother and myself was broken. All the long day I wandered in a maze of wretchedness and guilt. It was not that Mother was cold or unkind; in fact she gave me an extra good-night kiss, which nearly melted my heart, but not quite. Something was missing, however, and I knew she was hurt. And I knew God was hurt, and dear, dear Jesus. And there was that strange other Person whom I could not understand, the Holy Spirit. I knew He had His feelings hurt very easily.

The next day everything was wrong. I, usually so sunny and lively, was quarrelsome, and moped around with a book all day.

That night we had an early Fall rain. It seemed as though the very skies fell. The tent leaked and being at the bottom of the hill, it got the drainage. We had to light a candle and pick up all we could and put it on the beds which were already too crowded. I knew what was the matter, of course. God was sending us another, a small flood on account of my sin. And there was no ark for my family.

At the break of dawn Mr. Hughes drove up with the spring wagon and took us to the house, together with some of the easily portable possessions. The tent was too wet to move.

The next day the sun came out brightly and dried everything. And I thought, "Maybe God didn't care so much after all."

But my unhappiness and that of the two families, persisted.

"I'm afraid you will be glad to get rid of us tomorrow," I overheard my mother remark.

Kind Mrs. Hughes replied, "Of course not, but I do wonder what has got into the children. Maybe they are sickening with something."

I am sure my mother did not tell on her wayward daughter.

Arrived in town, the house looked dusty and dirty after a summer of Father's housekeeping, and we were all glad to work hard and clean it up. The yard seemed terribly small and I was sick with longing for the farm, and sicker with the sin in my heart.

My bed was too hot and felt as though it was full of prickles. I listened until I heard Mother alone in her room.

Then I burst in and threw my arms around her, sobbing, "O Mama I took the fish! I took the fish!"

As she kissed me, the dreadful burden rolled away. She said, "Have you asked Jesus to forgive you?" and I replied "I will."

So I did, and my sin which had been scarlet became as white as snow. The lie still lives in my memory and there is a small scar on my heart. But God has forgotten it and will remember it against me no more.

~ end of chapter 12 ~

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