

# HIS BANNER OVER ME

by

Martha Snell Nicholson

Copyright © 1953

## CHAPTER SIX

### LADDER OF LEARNING

ON CHRISTMAS DAY when I was five years old, there was born in my heart a great desire to read.

Two little playmates, Harry and his sister Mamie, came over to see what we had received for Christmas. I was hugging a large copy of *Mother Goose Rhymes* replete with fascinating pictures. Harry with all the aplomb of his eight years ordered in a commanding tone, "Give it here." I meekly handed my book to him. Harry sprawled on the floor on his lordly stomach, propped head in hands and read my book to himself, not out loud to me! I asked him at intervals to read me a little, but he declined.

After that I could scarcely wait to start school and learn to read. In spite of the fact that Amy was more than two years older than I, for some reason I soon outstripped her in height. Mother had always dressed us alike and while we were the same size people often mistook us for twins. So Mother had thought it would be nice for us to be in the same class at school and she had kept Amy at home until I was old enough to attend. By that time, however, I was larger than Amy and sometimes taken for the elder.

The following September we started to school. It seems odd that I have no recollection of that first day. I do have a vivid memory of my teacher's face. She seemed to me very old. Perhaps she was, as she had a peculiar habit of moving her mouth like a rabbit nibbling. For some reason she frequently kissed me, which I found exceedingly distasteful; partly because of my shyness, and partly her halitosis.

After a few months of school one day I overheard some ladies say as they were leaving after a visit with my mother, "Mrs. Snell will never raise that second child; she is very delicate."

I repeated this to Mother, asking the meaning of that word "delicate." I do not recall her reply.

I had frequent headaches, and every winter there were long bouts with tonsillitis. About this time there began what my mother called "bilious spells"—times of nausea and dizziness. Then one morning just out of the blue, Mother said, "Don't put on your school dress today; you are not going to school."

In amazement I asked, “How long do I have to stay out of school?”

Mother was noncommittal, and I was content to be out of doors exploring the vacant lots and discovering the flowers which are so beautiful in Puget Sound country. I do not know if I stayed out a whole year or just a term.

I remember best the second grade. I have a photograph of the classroom with the teacher and the children, and to this day I recall the names of most of the pupils. The school building—dear old Lincoln School on 17 and K Streets—was dreary and ugly and dingy. The building and surrounding yard covered half a block. There was no plumbing and I fail to recall electric lights. A big round stove heated the room somewhat unevenly. The windows were opened a bit to the edge of “baffle boards,” which rattled in the wind as the rain came down in sheets outside. It seemed always to be raining. On pleasant days we played “ring games” in the yard: London Bridge is Falling Down, King William was King James’ Son, and others of distinctly British origin and flavor.

Then there was the fad for “Poppy Shows.” A peep hole was cut in one end of a covered shoe box, and the magnificent price of one pin was charged for the privilege of viewing the supposedly lovely show within. Mostly there was tinsel and cutouts from old Christmas and Easter cards. But my mother made me a Poppy Show which was quite different. She took a piece of broken mirror, which became a lake surrounded by moss and trees. At the shore line a deer from my box of animals lifted its graceful head. I loved it, but found to my chagrin that the other children preferred the tinsel and cards.

Owing to my frequent sore throat, my father bought me stout shoes—really boy’s shoes. In a day when little girls wore shoes of thin leather or kid, my heavy footgear caused me great agony of embarrassment. I often sat in the dark basement with my feet tucked under the bench to keep them out of sight. In spite of the hated boy’s shoes, I had many attacks of tonsillitis. The headaches still continued and I was often overcome by nausea. Up would come my meal before I could get out of the room. I sat in utter humiliation as I numbly watched the disgusted janitor clean up the mess. This janitor was distinguished mostly by his obvious dislike of all children, and by the wet sponge he wore over his mouth and nose while sweeping up great clouds of dust.

We used the phonetic system, which still seems to me the only sensible way of learning to read.

The children came from different sorts of homes. The little city of Tacoma was trying to find itself. In juxtaposition the better residential district almost elbowed a tract which was settled by “squatters’ rights” and where the people were very poor. Then there were blocks like ours, with humble but neat little homes. There must have been real poverty in those days, but there was sturdy pride. If someone of necessity went “on the County,” there was only hushed comment about it and much shame on the part of the recipients, who became self-supporting again as soon as they were able.

I remember Richard, who habitually wore a man’s ragged coat to school, but held his head high. His sister’s dresses were held together precariously.

In sharp contrast was the boy named Paul whose mother, very much of a lady, drove him to school in a carriage with long silky fringe around the top. There were the twin girls who sang duets, the first time I had ever heard alto. Then Dolly, the one-legged girl, with peg leg and crutch. The sweetest-faced child I ever saw was a little hunchback. Long years later I met her on a downtown street and as we talked, I found that she knew and loved the dear Saviour.

The edges of our slates were wrapped with cloth to keep down the noise. There was a sponge for erasing and cleaning purposes, fastened to each desk. It was the task of the monitor to go from desk to desk wetting the sponges from a bucket of water. This was supposed to be an honor, but I dreaded my turn. Some of the children had the habit of spitting on their sponges, and in no time the odor was sickening.

Another custom caused me much grief. The brighter students were allowed to sit with the duller ones to correct the arithmetic and spelling lessons on the slates. As I am still hopeless in arithmetic, I could hardly have been asked to do this service, but I was always a good speller. A boy named Frank smelled as if he had never taken a bath. Moreover, he reeked of garlic. When I corrected his work, I sat as far as possible on the edge of his seat.

This bothered my conscience, as I knew God loved all of these children and I truly wanted to be like Him but I could not feel the proper affection for them. I settled it after a while with a rational explanation—God could not smell them way up in Heaven, so it was easier for Him to love them.

However, since my conscience still hurt to some extent, in order to do penance I decided to be good to a girl who was always neglected by the others. Moreover, she squinted and snuffled. She never seemed to have a handkerchief. So one day I brought her a pretty card. Next day she brought me one. The following day I gave her some other little gift. Then the race was on. Some of my choicest possessions disappeared and I had in return a motley collection of shoddy and dingy gifts, including some faded paper flowers which I detested. Finally Mother found me sobbing as I prepared to sacrifice the little cream pitcher of my doll's tea set. She insisted on hearing the story. Then she quietly told me to tell Bessie that it was over: no more exchanging of gifts. Bessie, however, was greatly grieved, insisting that I was one ahead and still owed her something.

In the third grade I adored my gentle young teacher. Although she never spoke about it, I was certain that she "loved Jesus." Toward the end of the first term she died. This first experience with death was a terrific shock to me. It was planned that the class would attend her funeral services in a body. The very thought filled me with such terror and dismay that I worried myself sick over it. Finally my mother decided to keep me at home. I brooded deeply over this experience. How could anything so alive as life suddenly terminate? But my wise mother taught me that life did not terminate and my teacher was living on eternally.

The new teacher was strangely enough her cousin, which made her sacred in my sight. I seemed to sense somehow that this teacher did not "love Jesus." I was greatly distressed, and experienced faint stirrings of missionary spirit.

In our reader the word “God” appeared. I longer to hear my teacher’s voice pronounce that thrilling name. Perhaps it would turn her thoughts towards Him whom I loved. But she never read the passage aloud. So one day I took a pin and scratched out the “o” in the middle of the word “God,” leaving just a little round hole in the paper. Then I flung up my hand asking to go to her desk. With her consent I walked up, my reader in hand, and asked with timid voice, “What is this word? It is scratched out.”

She looked at me oddly and replied, “The word is ‘God.’”

My mission accomplished, I returned to my seat thrilling with joy, seemingly unaware that deceit like this could hardly be pleasing to Him Who is the Truth.

**~ end of chapter 6 ~**

<http://www.baptistbiblebelievers.com/>

\*\*\*