

HIS BANNER OVER ME

by

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

A WAY THEY KNOW NOT

And so, with my graduation from high school, my long childhood ended.

Now, primary classes over, the real lessons must begin. We who are ill are often told that our illness is due to our lack of faith for healing. This seems to me a cruel thing. Surely it is hard enough to be ill without being told that there is something wrong in one's spiritual life. Many times I have known His healing touch upon my body. Doctors who have examined me and know my case history are amazed that I am still alive. The Lord can, and often does, restore health; but the gift of pain is one of the "**all things**" permitted when He is training some of His children for special work.

Almost with the graduation from high school my life changed. The clouds and darkness began to gather on the horizon. With the opening of school in the fall, my health was so poor that it was decided I should remain home and help my mother. Amy was attending C.P.S. and Cathie about to graduate from grade school.

Gone was the light-hearted existence, the carefree crowd of young people. Most of my girl friends went on to college or to work. Even my boy friend was employed out of town. I was frequently very lonely.

Then grief and horror settled down over our family. My adored mother had an operation for cancer. I became housekeeper and nurse. During the dark days of anxiety and desperate weariness I learned a little about leaning on the breast of my everlasting Father.

I prayed desperately for strength, just enough to get the rug swept, the bread kneaded, the cookie jar filled.

Mother seemed to recover, and with the optimism of youth, I thought we would have her with us for many years and my heart lifted. Often, however, my world seemed gray and dull as I toiled among the pots and pans, but God was faithful and never left me in my gray world too long.

"Though ye have lien among the pots yet shall ye be as the wings of a dove covered with silver, and her feathers with yellow gold."

So He gave me daily some bit of His beauty on which to feast. When it became my turn to go to school, and Amy's to keep house, I crammed my schedule full. My mind was ravenously hungry by that time. I took I English, a beloved course in rhetoric, half of it on poetry, Medieval History of Europe, biology with four hours lab a week, economic sociology, and a fascinating semester of psychology of religion.

During my time at home I had already begun reading philosophy. It presented a deep fascination to me. I read Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Renan, Nietzsche, and others. Of course I went deeper and deeper into a morass of man's thinking. It took much patience on the part of God to show me that what I wanted was not a record of man's guesses and theories, but the voice of authority, the Word of God.

Meanwhile in His own way, God was bringing together those whom He had chosen for each other.

Howard Nicholson was working his way through college, doing janitor work in one of the buildings. After school a group of young people gathered about a table and talked, the first time we two had spoken more than a word to each other. As young people will, we spoke of profound subjects: life and love and God and death, I don't remember what.

Howard told me long afterwards that he made up his mind that day to try to make me his wife. I do not know what he could have seen in that foolish, immature child. He was enough older than I that he was already adult. I glimpsed, by God's grace, the sterling qualities, the integrity and strength, the idealism, the virility combined with delicacy which made up the rare person who was to become my husband.

At a school picnic, Howard maneuvered so that he and I missed the streetcar which was packed with the other students. This gave us time for a long talk before we reached the lake. Arrived there, we did not join the others until lunch. We spent most of the afternoon rowing on the lake or sitting on a mossy log discussing weighty topics.

Before he took me home he asked to accompany me to church the following Sunday. And so the sweet old story, ever new, unfolded. Howard never looked at another girl from that time on, but for some reason I was reluctant to take any decisive step. Perhaps I realized my own immaturity.

I was in school at the C.P.S. when my mother's trouble returned. Her courage was beyond belief. She continued teaching her adult Bible class at our church until a few weeks before her death. She was also conducting a Bible class at the C.P.S., for which credits were given to the students. I remember how she stood at her desk, her helpless arm folded across her body, her face gray with the typical cancer pallor.

At home she sometimes walked the front porch, back and forth, back and forth. When she quickened her footsteps, I knew the pain was worse, but she never groaned.

Once I heard her crying in the night when she thought no one was awake, and my heart broke. She did not go to bed until the day before she went Home.

I cannot write of her Homegoing, which was on my birthday. Thank God her passing was easy. I was not rebellious afterward, but utterly crushed and bewildered. Howard and I were engaged by that time, so I had his strong arm on which to lean.

If I had only known that she was alive and well in Heaven. But I had been told that she would sleep for a thousand years. This chilled me to the depths of my heart.

One day I felt impelled to visit her grave. Walking from the streetcar to the cemetery, I passed a bunch of the beloved prairie grass like that which grew on the farm. To my surprise it meant nothing to me. As I pondered over this while I walked along, the lines formed in my mind,

Grief, you have smitten me;
You have taken the things I love,
But even these tiny joys,
Were they in the bargain you drove?

Howard and I could not marry at once, although he began building our little home. In some ways I felt better for a while. Perhaps too optimistically, I went to work in the public library. Two blissful years: people, books, children. I was given charge of a branch library in a very poor district. I put my heart into the work but it wore me out. The last six months of the time Cathie was visiting an aunt in Nebraska, and Father and I were alone in the K Street house, Amy having previously married and become the mother of a baby daughter.

The double task of working and keeping house was very hard on me. I even baked bread on the days when my hours at the library were from one till ten, with an hour off for supper.

One cold after another plagued me. I grew weaker with anemia. Sometimes, before I could get dressed in the morning, I had to bump my head against the wall so the pain would keep me from fainting. Every odd moment I could snatch, I spent in studying, with the desperate hunger of my awakened mind.

Cathie returned home. I collapsed utterly.

A new doctor was called. That evening he gave me his verdict: tuberculosis. It was unbelievable. That was something which happened to other people, not to me! I stayed awake all that night, trying to face my changed future. If the line from Milton, "They also serve who stand and wait" passed through my mind, there was no comfort in it for me.

Howard was a tower of strength. My sisters were loyal and tender. Cathie gave up all the good times a young girl should have, and took care of me. Some of the family were sure I did not have T.B. or that I was not even ill.

"I hear her laughing up there. She can't be very sick."

I sent a letter to the library board requesting a two-months' leave of absence. They replied, giving me six months. I never dreamed that seven long years would pass before I "made a cure."

Six months in bed at home, then three years in Denver, the first year in a T.B. sanitarium, the following two in T.B. boarding houses. I was young and in the "San" quickly found myself in an agreeable and lively crowd of girls and boys. The girls loved to congregate in my room during the hours they were allowed up. I was a bed patient more of the time than were most of the others. We had "dates" with the boys in the evening, for nothing more exciting than to talk together in the sanitarium library. Though I let it be known that I was a Christian, it does not seem to me that I gave a very good testimony. Though I read my Bible, I also studied philosophy. There was something for which my mind hungered, but I did not know what it was.

While a patient in the sanitarium, I had the first of the many operations I was to endure.

I was taken to a hospital in Denver for the surgery and the ensuing ten days of convalescence. It seemed very lonely and forlorn to know that there was no one in the hospital who had ever seen me before, or who cared if I lived or died. Howard was serving on the jury at home, and was locked up on a very important case.

During my entire stay in Denver, Howard wrote to me nearly every day, though he was working very hard.

The operation did not accomplish the hoped-for result. I left the sanitarium thinner and paler than when I entered.

The next two years were spent in boarding houses. Perhaps I can best describe them by quoting what I overheard my landlady say to a friend over the telephone, "Yes, I'm making money off this bunch of boarders. They are all too sick to hunt another place, so I don't have to feed them very well."

I learned a great deal while in Denver: the impact of other minds on mine, the knowledge that I must stand on my own feet and make my own decisions. I often remembered what my mother once told me, that I might like other people but I need not be like them.

At last the doctors decided that the altitude of Denver was too high for my heart and I was allowed to return home. Telegram to Cathie thus:

Arrive Friday 7:45 PM Hooray

Cathie said that the exuberant "Hooray" quite shamed her when it was read aloud to her over the telephone. "But," she added loyally, "it showed me that you are the same old Martie."

After the joy of reunion was over, it soon became evident that my long stay in Denver had not improved my condition. A heavy cold put me back in bed. A new doctor was called. The old familiar routine:

“Say one-two-three cough, one-two-three cough,” and a blue pencil outlining spots on my back and chest. My temperature continued to rise every afternoon, as it had done daily since my first collapse.

Blackness settled down on my usually buoyant spirit. I had saved some money while working in the library but it had been used up long since. Now I was dependent on my father, and the knowledge that I was a burden was very bitter.

The future looked dark indeed. We were often heartsick with hopes deferred. I spent nearly four more years in that little upper room. God often met with me there, however. While in Denver I had finally given up my reading of philosophy. Whatever pennies came my way, I still spent for books. Satan must have directed this for I collected quite a few on the social gospel, not realizing what was the trouble. I loved the Lord dearly by this time and I spent hours pouring over my Bible. But there was always something else, some mental satisfaction for which I longed. This was, of course, before the days of radio.

One of my greatest pleasures was my collection of “white hyacinths.”

If you have two loaves of bread, sell one
And for your soul buy a white hyacinth.

My friends supplied me with old magazines and newspapers, from which I clipped poems. The verse of that day was much better than that of today. I pasted them in large ledgers. I even copied in many long poems from library books.

I really steeped myself in poetry, thus laying the foundation for my future work. Perhaps I unconsciously absorbed a little of the skill I was to need when the time came for me to be able to say something worthwhile. I still have four of these scrap books, which are really valuable anthologies.

I nearly wore out some of the pages in my Bible during those hard days. It seemed to me it was always raining, and the street below was dreary with bent figures facing the rain and wind. Then something transpired which began a new chapter in my life. Dr. Clarence Weyer came to the Presbyterian Church in Tacoma as pastor. I was then just beginning to understand the difference between fundamentalism and modernism. Of the book of the Revelation, I knew nothing. Dr. Weyer began preaching a series on the end times, using the books of Daniel and the Revelation. So great was the interest that people thronged the church and listened at the open windows. The dead church came to life. Obviously I could not attend, but Cathie seldom missed. Before she fairly got up the stairs to my room I would inquire eagerly, “What will happen next?”

God has promised a special blessing to those who will study this book of the Revelation of Jesus Christ. He surely poured that blessing out upon me in those days. I lived amid wonder and glory and joyful anticipation. Any moment we might be with the Lord, or more than that, any moment we might be LIKE Him—mystery still unsolved.

It was good that this came to us just when it did, for I was daily growing weaker. Weeks grew into months, and months into years. Cathie married, and while I was glad for her happiness it was a terrific blow. We had been through so much together and I missed her terribly. Amy and her family came back to the K Street house to live. Howard and I wanted so much to make a home for each other. Despair often gripped us both. At last a consultation of doctors decided that I could live only a month or two more. My only hope lay in a very serious operation. Two doctors declined to perform the surgery on account of the danger.

I have little recollection of the first few days. I was seven weeks in the hospital, with a private nurse for three weeks. My doctor ordered a cot to be installed in the hall for Howard, with the thought that if I began to drift away, he could call me back. I verily believe he did this at one time.

After I returned home, I began to gain strength. A year in the country to convalesce, and then on January 31, 1919, our wedding day! Running true to form, a few days before I came down with the flu, not a severe case. My aunt called up to say, "You surely are not going ahead with it, are you?"

I replied, "We are going to be married if I have to be propped up against the wall for the ceremony."

We had already bought our furniture, mostly secondhand. Cathie and Howard had to move it in and settle it. I was disappointed not to have the fun of doing it myself, but the influenza prevented.

We were married at home, very quietly. No one present but the two families. By a miracle I had a nice new suit, blue broadcloth. And a velvet hat. Wonderful to have something new and becoming after seven years of made-overs and hand-me-downs.

"Howard, do you take this woman?"

"Martha, do you take this man? . . . I pronounce you man and wife."

Then Cathie's voice trying to stem the threatening tide of emotion, "Martie, where are your flowers?"

I had left them upstairs, my lovely white roses!

No honeymoon, just the drive in a cousin's car through the quiet streets to our little honeymoon house. Why do not more couples do that? Nothing could have looked more beautiful to me than that living room with the yellow silk curtains, when Howard put the key into the door and swung it open, and turned on the light. Home at last. Do the walls still echo to the sound of my husband's steady voice that night as he read from the last chapter of the Revelation about the other Home we would share some day?

Unbelievable days in our “house of dreams come true,” where we tried in vain to grasp the fact that God at last had led us to our desired haven.

Mrs. Howard Wren Nicholson, engraved on my calling cards. Was there ever a lovelier name? Mrs. Nicholson, no longer languishing on a sick bed, but cooking meals and washing dishes for my husband. Being introduced at the bank proudly as “my wife” and being given a checkbook. Mrs. Nicholson, ordering groceries, putting up fruit and vegetables from our own garden. Entertaining my doctor and his wife at dinner, and letting him crawl under the house to see the jars I had put up. Hearing him say, with tears in his eyes, “I never would have believed this day would come.”

The little house had only three rooms but we were not at all crowded. There was ample room for the four of us— our two guardian angels, Howard and me. I fancied I caught them smiling at each other in a satisfied way, those angels, as though they had personally brought it all about. But they hadn't. It was God Himself.

~ end of chapter 26 ~

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