

HIS BANNER OVER ME

by

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CHAPTER TWO

IN THE BEGINNING

I WAS BORN in Fullerton, Nebraska, the second daughter of Samuel Forey Snell and Mary Coy Snell. My father was the son of a Pennsylvania Dutch merchant, a prominent member of the Methodist Church, who often entertained the bishops. Grandfather later moved to Lincoln, Nebraska opening a nursery business, where my father helped him. There are many trees around Lincoln which are planted by my father.

My mother was the oldest daughter of Lorenzo and Sarah Coy. Her father, a Civil War veteran, was a local preacher in the Methodist Church. He came from rock-ribbed New England, and my grandmother from "York State," as it was called in those days. Scotch, English and a little Irish mingled in my mother's veins. Because my grandmother had been reared in a home of comparative affluence, not having been required to learn how to keep house, she found the years hard while my grandfather was in the war.

At the time of my birth, my father owned a small grocery store in Fullerton. His older brother, then recently graduated from law school, had located in Tacoma, Washington, and was sending home glowing reports of the young thriving city on the hills of Puget Sound. The call of the West tugged at Father's strong pioneer spirit. After much consideration he sent a precious \$1,000 to my uncle, for the purchase of a modest home for us in the young raw town which was being hewn out of the forest. Since I was but two years old, I have no recollection of the trip out from Nebraska, on what was called the "immigrant train." My first memories concern happenings in this little house in Tacoma. What determines the permanence of recollections of a child? My sister Amy, two years older, has memories of events of which I recall nothing, and vice versa. We are utterly different in nature. Was the difference in our recollections the cause or the result of our memories?

The cottage (which is still standing and in good repair) consisted of three rooms; bedroom, living room and kitchen, with a tiny dark pantry. No plumbing except an iron sink on the long back porch. An iron pipe paralleling the railing, brought the water up the steep back stairs. The rest of the plumbing was housed in a little edifice which we modestly called "the bathroom," at the foot of the back yard. It was connected with the sewer which served only a part of the young city.

One of my earliest recollections concerns my "cry pillow." (After all these years, I recently gave it to my little namesake).

Although I was a fat baby, weighing more than nine pounds at birth, I was not nourished properly, with the result that I was easily moved to tears. Later the doctors in a sanatorium found unmistakable signs of early rickets. I know that I was probably too emotional. When I cried I wanted to hide my head in my mother's skirts. Since she did not always have time for me, she made a small pillow with a blue calico cover and explained to me that it was for crying purposes. It was a satisfactory substitute and became a great comfort.

I recall a battle with my stubborn Dutch will. Across one corner of the living room hung a rope hammock made by my aunt. Amy and I had been playing with buttons. We were told to pick them up before we could get into the hammock. Amy, who was usually a good child, had picked up her share, but I refused to obey. I wanted to dreadfully but something in Amy's expression—a sort of smug righteousness—infuriated me, and we had quite a time over the matter. Fragmentary pictures emerge from the mists of the past. Amy burning her leg against the kitchen stove. Father being a hero and riding the cow catcher of a locomotive. Myself, falling down the long back stairs, bump-ety-bump; then picking myself up intact at the bottom, only to be chased by a terrifying black dog. A neighbor child giving me a suck from a luscious sugar tit, which was promptly confiscated by my horrified mother. I remember a brownstone crock containing apples. I wanted to pick out the best ones each time, but Mother explained that we must cut out the spots of the old ones and eat them first. Bewilderedly I kept saying, "It's not the way." Was I trying to formulate a philosophy of life, to choose always the best?

In those days ladies called on one another in the afternoons, properly equipped with calling cards. Amy was such a good child that she could be left with a neighbor but I was a Mama baby who tagged along, clinging to my mother's free hand. With her other hand she held up her long skirts as she picked her way through the muddy streets. Having arrived at our destination one day, I soon grew bored and started on a tour of exploration. We had been taught not to touch things, and usually obeyed. But on a window sill there was a piece of yellow molasses taffy tempting me beyond my power to resist. I popped it into my mouth only to discover it was a piece of soap! there was one house I would not enter. I called it the Cancer House, because a woman was dying there of cancer. I begged my mother to do something for her. It was a long time before I could resign myself to the tragedy of the inevitable.

My mother was the center of my life. It grieves me that I cannot recall her face in those early days. She was in her latter twenties and I know from her pictures that she was lovely, with aquiline features, keen eyes and wavy dark hair, nearly black. But I see her in those early days as only a shadowy figure. I cannot visualize her face in the little house, although I distinctly remember the blank flat face of a wax doll which had been left out in the sun too long.

Just beyond the Cancer House was the local "fire engine house." I was not so much interested in the bright red engine as I was in the huge gray horses which leaped into the harness and pulled the engines. And best of all, a little dog named McGinty, who sat up on the back of a horse and smoked a pipe. After some discussion by the family, this latter accomplishment of McGinty was deemed a bad influence upon us, and we were forbidden the fire house, especially after Amy and I had disgraced the honor of the family by sitting church and dealing out cards with all the nonchalance of hardened gamblers.

This prohibition nearly broke my heart, for I had cherished a secret ambition that someday I might be taken down the “greased pole” by one of the firemen.

Two things about the life in the little house puzzle me. One was the time my mother cried. Perhaps there had been a milk shortage, I do not know. It cannot be that we were too poor to buy milk. But anyway, Amy and I were having bread and milk in our silver mugs. It seemed to be something new and I found it delicious. When there was only an inch of milk left in my cup I asked for another slice of bread to crumble in it. Mother cried for a moment, then told me there wasn’t enough milk for the additional bread. But Amy in elderly sister kindness told me that if I would crumble it in and then beat it with my spoon it would “make more.”

The other puzzling thing is the fact that all the time I lived there until I was nearly five years old, I had no more knowledge of God and the Lord Jesus than had a young Hottentot. Yet surely there had been religious instruction, for my parents were Christians. Amy tells me that she remembers a game we played. She had assumed the role of God and the bed was Heaven. I was the death angel and the dolls were people. In my official capacity as each one died, I passed it up to God. One limp body He examined thoroughly and said, “This one isn’t dead yet.” There ensued some indecision as to proper procedure until Amy, as Omniscience, found a sort of back stairs to Heaven. As God, she stuffed the unfortunate individual down behind the bed. The death angel then scrambled under the bed, dragging out the man, who must have been terrified by this time. The death angel then became the executioner and cracked it smartly over the head, handing it back to God.

Where we had heard of the death angel, I do not know. I do not remember prayer nor any Bible reading, yet we must have had them. Strangely enough, I recall vividly a little book called *Mother Truth’s Melodies*, which told all about the various bones in the human body and the millions of tiny pores which would become clogged if we did not bathe frequently. I lived in terror of this catastrophe for quite a while.

Amy remembers a large building near us which was in process of construction. During a windstorm it fell down with a loud crash while my uncle, the owner, was inside making an inspection. It is strange that I do not remember that accident, yet I have a vivid recollection of marveling one day at the beauty of a fragile green fern growing in the brown earth under the sidewalk.

As far back as I can remember, I cannot recall the time when I did not have a sense of something lovely waiting just around the corner. Even now I frequently waken with quick wonder in my heart. What bright gift is God sending to me with His new day?

~ end of chapter 2 ~

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