

HIS BANNER OVER ME

by

Martha Snell Nicholson

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

MERRY-GO-ROUND

ONE SUNNY JUNE MORNING, when I was about twelve, Father exploded a bombshell at the breakfast table.

“You know I bought that twenty acres, sight unseen, on Fox Island. Who wants to go with me to inspect it?”

Without waiting for details I promptly said, “I do,” but Amy cautiously inquired, “Would we have to stay all night? Where would we sleep?”

“Oh,” Father replied airily, “we’d take a blanket apiece and maybe we could find an old shed some place.”

This just suited me, and I exclaimed with awe, “Just like pioneers.”

Mother laughingly declined, saying that she would stay comfortably at home with Cathie, who wasn’t quite old enough for such a trip. So it was settled, and the very next morning Father, Amy and I made an early start. Each carried a blanket, cup, plate and spoon, and Father had an additional “telescope” containing a little cooked food, hard-boiled eggs, sandwiches, can opener and frying pan.

As we walked down the long hill to the wharf, my eager spirit ran ahead of my feet. We were just in time, and boarded the little stern wheeler Typhoon, which plied between Tacoma and Fox Island. The trip, an hour and a half, seemed all too short to us. At just ten o’clock the boat landed us on the tiny dock at Sylvan, and the whole golden day was ahead!

Father explained, “You know I bought this land from Old Man Jones, and he has the waterfront, but my land is directly back of him, inland. I understand he lives about a quarter of a mile down the beach, so let’s start.”

But this seemed far too tame for me. A quarter of a mile was no distance at all, and what would we do with the rest of the day? I was out for adventure and a wonderful idea popped into my mind. Fairly stammering with eagerness I begged, “Oh Papa, let’s go the other way along the beach! If we just keep going, we’ll finally get to the Jones’ place.”

I could see that this appealed to my father. His eyes twinkled, but he objected, "It's seven miles around the inland. Are you girls sure you can do it?" I did some hasty mental arithmetic, and came up with, "Only six and three quarters miles, and we can rest all night at the Jones' place."

"Once we start we will have to keep going," warned Father. But Amy and I were sure we could do it. I sternly crushed down the knowledge that I'd have the old familiar hammering heart and weary limbs, but as so often in my life, I decided it was worth it.

The beach was enticing, the air bracing. We stepped out briskly. I found some lovely agates to add to my collection, and was half wild with joy.

The island was heavily wooded, trees grew almost to the water's edge. Unlike good pioneers, we had neglected to take a water bottle, but just as we grew thirsty, we came to the first of the many cool little streams. We stopped at noon and ate up most of the cooked rations. Amy warned us about supper, but we had worked up tremendous appetites; and besides, as I explained, it was easier to carry the food inside us than on our backs.

We had taken many walks together and always I had hated the return trip, over ground with which we were familiar. There was something magic about this, knowing that we would arrive at our destination and back to the starting place, without retracing our steps.

By late afternoon we were becoming weary, and of course had no means of knowing how far we had gone. And . . . we had entirely forgotten to take into consideration the tide, which had turned and was coming in inexorably. Father looked a little anxious and led us up into the woods, but the growth of underbrush was so luxuriant that we could make no progress. So we kept to the beach, even though the line of sand and gravel grew narrower and narrower, finally disappearing altogether.

"Will we drown, Papa?" I quavered.

He reassured us, "Oh no, you know Puget Sound doesn't have breakers; just mild little waves."

At this place the banks above us were too steep to climb. Before long we girls were wading almost up to our knees, carefully holding our blankets above our heads as we picked our way along. We were uncomfortable and wet, but though a little worried, we were not really frightened since Father was there. I recall that I frequently burst into the gales of laughter with which I had irritated my family for years.

At long last when dusk was falling and we were all feeling forlorn, came a break in the timber line—a clearing with a tiny house and a group of shacks. The Jones' place! Papa introduced us to Mr. Jones and his Indian wife.

Mrs. Jones had a great bonfire going, of driftwood from the beach, and Amy and I gratefully removed our shoes and stockings to dry them. I loosened my long heavy hair from its braids and shook it to dry out the dampness.

To my horror I saw the Indian woman emerge from the house with a knife in her hand, and glide toward me! Tales of scalping rushed into my head and I began to tremble. The woman came closer and finally laid her hand on my hair. With that I burst into a frightened, "PAPA!"

Mrs. Jones laughed and spoke to her husband in Chinook, whereupon he too laughed and explained, "She thinks your hair is pretty and she wants to Stroke it."

Then he told us that she had steamed some clams for us. She brought them to us piping hot. Never was food more delicious. When we added big dishes of wild blackberries and warm milk from the cow they had just milked, we felt as though we had indeed feasted.

Mr. Jones gave us permission to sleep in the old tool house and loaned us a lantern. So after getting toasty warm by the fire, we lay down in a row in the shed making ourselves as comfortable as possible on our blankets.

I was too excited and weary to get to sleep at once, but was just dropping off when there was a fearful commotion. Mr. Jones had forgotten to tell us of the great rat trap he had set someplace in the shed. After the snap, there was dreadful squealing and the thrashing of a tortured body. Father jumped up and lighted the lantern, telling Amy to hold it while he killed the rat with a hammer. But Amy wailed, "I can't, I can't!" and crawled under the blanket. "You then, Martha," said Father.

It seemed as though I too could not, but I knew someone had to do it. My love of animals extended even to ugly old rats and I wanted it put out of its misery; so covering my head, I held the lantern out with a shaking arm. I quailed with each blow Father gave the cornered animal. At last it was over, and we lay down again, rather badly shattered by the experience.

Father seemed fresh as a daisy in the morning, but we girls admitted that the muscles in our legs were sore. Father suggested breezily, "The best thing for that is more walking."

So after a sketchy breakfast, we followed a shady road inland to view the twenty acres. The land was quite satisfactory and we had some real thrills out of the knowledge that it and its trees and lovely underbrush really belonged to us.

We returned to the Jones' to bid them good-bye and gather up our packs. As we thanked them for their hospitality, I blushed with shame when I saw kind Mrs. Jones looking at my hair again.

Then the last quarter mile of beach and there we were back at Sylvan, our starting place, without having to retrace a single step. "Like a merry-go-round," I thought.

The little Typhoon took us aboard again and landed us in due time on the Tacoma dock. Amy and I were looking sadly up the long hill when Father announced, "We will go on the cable this time, for I think our legs are tired enough."

So up we rode on the little open cable car, feeling like millionaires as we slowly jogged past the pedestrians toiling upward such a little way from us.

Mother and Cathie were eagerly awaiting us. We poured forth the story of our adventures, which become in time another of our beloved family archives.

Thereafter, every time I looked at the map and saw Fox Island, I remembered with pride, “I walked all around that island.”

~ end of chapter 18 ~

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