

# HIS BANNER OVER ME

by

Martha Snell Nicholson

Copyright © 1953

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### GRANDFATHER'S GIRL

ONE DAY the following September we three girls were alone in the house, impatiently watching the clock and listening for the sound of the streetcar. Mother had gone down to meet the train. When she returned, our grandmother and grandfather whom we had not seen since babyhood, would be with her. I the impatient, argued that the clock was wrong.

"It never goes as slow as this. Maybe the insides are broken," I fretted.

Amy with soothing tone replied, "Now you know it just seems a long time because we are waiting."

"I want night to come so I can sleep in my new bed," sighed Cathie.

We all wandered into the bedroom to view the new sleeping arrangements. When Grandmother and Grandfather had written that they would come from faraway Omaha to stay until after February, it took some planning in our small two-bedroom house. But as usual our mother was equal to any emergency.

"The Girls' Room" was arranged for our grandparents. Then a three-quarter size canvas cot was supplied with a straw tick for Amy and me. That left only the space between our bed and that of our parents. A neighbor had lent us a trundle bed, which was an object of much interest; day-times it could be folded and slipped under Mother's bed. At night it was to be drawn out for Cathie and it just fitted in the vacant space between the beds. So, there we all were, and what could be cozier? Perhaps a little crowded but I thought it was going to be nice to have those I loved close by all night.

We wandered aimlessly back to the living room and I resumed work on the diagram I was drawing of our living room. I wish I had saved it but perhaps I can reproduce it: an ingrain carpet stretched and tacked down. A rather shabby couch which opened into a box for extra bedding. Father's big wooden rocker and Mother's little sewing rocker near "the cutting table," and a small sewing table ordinarily loaded with the sewing which was my mother's constant task. Two beautiful old solid walnut chairs covered with faded tapestry. We children despised them and considered them old-fashioned.

A tall round cast-iron stove which we named Moloch. It consumed great quantities of coal but gave little heat in return. On its top was a black iron boy with his hat set at a jaunty angle.

An open bookcase full of books, which were my joy. A center table with intricately carved base, the despair of the dust rag wielder. On the table were a stereoscope with its magic of making photographs of scenery come alive in three dimensions.

Everyone had what was known as The Shelf, covered with draped "sikolen" in a pretty pattern. Ours was violets. On it were displayed our treasures; a bisque boy and girl, some pieces of Dresden in soft exquisite colors, a rose jar filled with rose petals and spices, a dried starfish which was a favorite of Cathie's because it was faintly odorous of the beach. A metal replica of the Statue of Liberty. The most precious object on the shelf, in my opinion, was a small goblet carved from olive wood, a tree which actually grew in Jerusalem. I had heard that olive trees grew to a great age and there was in my mind the distinct possibility that the Lord Jesus' hand had touched that very tree!

On each end of the shelf were small easel pictures; one of my grandfather and one of my grandmother. I was studying their faces when the streetcar came at last. Jostling each other, we raced to the door and out onto the street. Mother said afterwards that I was whirling my arms like a windmill. There was Mother beaming joyfully and carrying a satchel. And walking beside her were a gray-haired lady and gentleman who must be Grandma and Grandpa! Grandma was comfortably plump with very kindly eyes behind her heavy glasses. She was carrying a small shawl strap. Grandpa looked almost stern. He was dignified, with keen eyes like Mother's. He wore a mustache and a small gray beard. Very erect and lean, he was carrying a large telescope bag.

We girls, overcome with sudden shyness, pulled up short. But Mother said, "Here they are, girls; here they are," and then we were all kissing each other in joyful confusion.

Once inside the house Grandfather laid down his telescope and made for the bookcase, looking over the tops of his glasses to read the titles. Then he turned to Mother saying, "Nice collection of books you have here, Mary," and with that I took my heart right out and laid it at his feet.

The rest of the day was strange. To hear Mother call her parents "Father" and "Mother" was to realize that she had actually been a little girl, like ourselves. There was much laughter, many a "Do you remember?" That first evening after the excitement had somewhat subsided and it was time for family prayers, Papa handed the Bible to Grandfather saying, "You lead tonight, Father." And for the first time I heard my grandfather pray! As we all knelt by our chairs I ventured a peep at him. His eyes were closed and his head raised, and from his expression I was sure that he saw the One to whom he was speaking.

From that day began a magical existence for me. Mother and Grandmother talked by the hour of the family and housekeeping and domestic affairs. I did my share of the work, of course; then at most unusual speed when my chores were done, I was off like a bird to my grandfather's side. It was one of those sudden attachments which come to people of like tastes and traits. Grandfather strolled with me in the underbrush and admired the flowers.

Tacoma had once been a forest on a hill, and many big stumps were left after the giant fir trees had been felled. One of these stumps was on a vacant lot adjoining our yard. As it was the end of the streetcar line, Father had built a rough bench in front of the stump for weary waiters for the car. We called it the Waiting Room. Many of our games centered there. Grandfather and I took over as a sort of lyceum where we carried on our endless discussions. He taught me about stars and flowers and trees and history and a bit of biology.

One day he said, "Notice, Mattie, that this little flower, chickweed, always has eight petals."

I eagerly replied, "Oh, I know I have found ten." For some reason, months ago I had counted them.

Grandfather replied, "You are very sure, aren't you? If you can find one, I will buy you a book."

After a bit of a search, I found one—and that is how I came to be the owner of *Kingsley's Water Babies*.

Grandfather's legs seemed to me to be very long and tireless. He liked to explore the waterfront. I accompanied him as often as I could. What times we had, drinking in the tarry, salty smells around the ships and docks! He especially enjoyed visiting with the fishermen. Sometimes he would bring home a salmon almost as long as his cane, purchased for fifteen cents. The fishermen gave away the delicious salmon row, of which I was very fond and which is quite unobtainable in this day. Indians squatted about the docks with their baskets of freshly dug butterclams. We never could persuade our grandfather to even taste them—it was his opinion that they had too many insides.

It was surprising to me that he enjoyed the great lumber mills. Much as I loved him, I could seldom force myself to go with him. The noise of the machinery was agony to my too-acute ears and I shrank from the power and seeming intelligence of the great machinery.

We girls found that we prospered financially too, by our grandparents' visit. It had long been our task to carry up from the woodshed the wood and kindling which Father split. After Grandfather came, he took over the wood-splitting job, if he was able. Evidently he wearied of our reluctance to do our chores, so one day in October he announced at the table, "If Amy and Martha will keep the wood box full, with no complaining and no reminding, I will give them fifty cents each for Christmas money."

"Lorenzo, not so much," gasped Grandmother.

"Yes, I have promised," replied Grandfather with amazing nonchalance, considering the munificence of his offer. "And what is more, I will give Cathie twenty-five cents if she will keep the kindling box full."

Tacoma was just beginning to feel that it might grow up some day.

On one of Grandfather's long walks he discovered that there was a city library, small but good, in a large upstairs room over the City Hall. This was at the very foot of the long hill, nine blocks down and ten blocks over. There were very few nickels in our household for carfare. Grandfather had been wounded in the Civil War and was no longer able to work or to preach regularly. He had a very meager pension, and he ran a small bookstore back in Nebraska. So we usually walked. But my short legs gladly kept pace with the long legs of Grandfather.

The librarian was an ex-army chaplain, who was confined to a wheelchair. He had beautiful white hair and a kind face. He was always most courteous to the little girl who never wearied of hearing about Sherman's march to the sea, and the Gettysburg Address. Owing to his war injury Grandfather was blind in one eye and his shoulder and arm shook badly, especially under nervous strain or in times of interest or stress. Sometimes in church he shook so much that the whole row of seats vibrated, and he would have to leave the building.

One of my most beautiful memories is Grandfather assisting at the Lord's Supper. It was an altar service, those partaking kneeling about the altar. The y took turns giving an admonition and prayer. When it was my grandfather's turn I was kneeling there, and it seemed as though he brought me into the very presence of God. For the rest of the day I looked at him as at a holy person, set apart.

Some of the solemn words come back to me from those far-off years:

It is very meet, right, and our bounden duty that we should at all times, and in all places, give thanks unto Thee, O Lord, holy Father, almighty, everlasting God.

During the long winter evenings Grandfather read aloud to the other grownups after we children had gone to bed. He read for at least one hour. It was a bitter grief to me that I was not allowed to stay up and listen. Mother never knew that after my sisters were asleep, I softly opened our bedroom door into the dining room. The family were assembled in the living room on the other side of the archway; Grandfather's voice carried well and my ears were very keen, so I missed little of *Lorna Doone*, *Stoddard's lectures* or *Wesley's sermons*, the latter of which were beyond my understanding. One night he read *Kipling's Recessional*. I can still hear his voice, trembling with emotion:

Lord God of Hosts, be with us yet,  
Lest we forget, lest we forget.

Grandfather read to me also, daytimes, but he chose things more suited to me. At least he thought so until I had nightmares from the chapter about the princess in the tower in Dickens' *Child's History of England*. Mother decided we had better not finish the book.

I was getting thin from lack of sleep. Mother did not know that I lay awake listening to the adult sessions. Grandfather finally began *Ben Hur*. From then on I thought of nothing but the book, though of course there was much that I did not understand. Christmas came and passed, and even though I had that wonderful fifty-cent piece to spend, I could hardly get my mind off *Ben Hur*. Finally came the night when Grandfather read about the crucifixion.

I lay rigid in bed, scarcely breathing and trying to restrain my sobs. I dug my fingers into my skinny little ribs. Grandfather's voice unconsciously grew louder and more tense. I realized that I was sobbing and whispering, "O dear Lord Jesus, dear Lord Jesus."

The day before my grandparents were to leave for Omaha, the sun, after weeks of being invisible behind clouds, decided to shine once more. Grandfather and I took a walk to the corner to tell the mountain farewell. On our way back we saw that the "Waiting Room" was steaming. After a little while it seemed dry enough to sit on.

I was unable to talk. The calamity of parting was too dreadful for speech. Finally I burst out with, "Grandfather, what about books?" Who will tell me what to read? And I am too little to go to the library alone."

He replied tenderly, "Your mother can help you a great deal if you will let her. And do you know that you have in your home a Book which is a whole library?"

"Oh, which one?"

"The Holy Bible, the Word of God," said Grandfather solemnly.

I felt slightly disappointed, but he continued, "Who wrote those other books in your library?"

"Why, different men and women."

"Well, who wrote the Bible?"

I replied slowly, "Lots of different people who were living at the times they wrote about."

"No!" said Grandfather positively. "Their hands held the pen, but God wrote the Book. Never forget that, dear. I want you to feel the wonder and the glory of it. Once you really study this Book, you'll never get enough of it. It contains the most beautiful poetry in the world, history, stories, law, philosophy, prophecy; and it shows us the love of God, who sent His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, to die for our sins. You remember that this last summer you girls, to please your grandparents, memorized the 23rd and 103rd Psalms and the 53rd of Isaiah. I promise you solemnly that because you have done this, these verses will grow more precious with every passing year. You love words. It is too soon now to tell, but it may be that this is the talent with which you may glorify God later. Will you prepare for this possible service by filling your heart and mind from this best of all books?"

Grandfather reached over and took my little hand in his own shaking one. My heart nearly turned over with tenderness as I felt the familiar jerking; but somehow the pain of parting lessened and I felt dedicated as I looked up and said, "I promise, Grandfather."

After our grandparents went home, there was a real vacancy in our home. I really ached to see my dear grandfather and I found that I missed Grandmother more than I had thought.

It was my loss that I had been so absorbed in Grandfather that I had failed to appreciate what a splendid woman my grandmother was. Looking back, I see her as the epitome of the word “lady.” It is true that she usually wore very plain and sometimes shabby clothes, yet in my mind’s eye she is robed in black silk with lovely old lace. She had strength and character as well as charm; and a most unusual amount of that rare commodity, common sense.

I fear my emotionalism must have been a trial to Grandmother, though I know now that she loved me dearly. She often told me to try to “cultivate repose of manner.” I liked to curl up in a chair with one foot under me, but she reminded me that a lady sat in a chair with both feet on the floor. She was devoted to my grandfather. Remembering, it amuses me how she coddled his small harmless vanities.

One day, perusing the newspaper she found a familiar name. Investigation proved that this really was an old friend of Grandmother’s; they had been classmates in the Ladies’ Seminary in York state. This lovely lady came to see my grandmother. I was utterly fascinated by the two white-haired old ladies; one in a plain house dress, the other in silk, lace and pearls—the way I knew my grandmother should be clad. They found one of their old school books in our bookcase and over the list of class members they gossiped and laughed together like two schoolgirls. It was a charming picture which I have never forgotten. Grandmother introduced “my husband” as though he were a king, and indeed no king could have had a more courtly manner than my grandfather.

One day Mother gave me a letter which her father had written to her on her eighteenth birthday. She was at home but he had made a little ceremony of handing it to her. Child though I was, I realized what a different place America would be if all fathers were like the one who wrote this letter:

Hamilton Co., Nebraska  
December 31, 1879

My dear Daughter:

May the blessings of thy Father prevail in thy behalf.

This day you enter upon your eighteenth birthday. I have thought of you often as the day has drawn near. And as we, your mother and I, look back along your pathway, we feel that we have had and still have great reason to thank God and rejoice in view of His mercies and goodness in your behalf. We are glad that you have found the wisdom which cometh from above. And also for the evidence we have that you are growing in wisdom and knowledge of the truth as it is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

This day, my dear Mary, marks an important epoch in your life. You have taken a step in advance and stand upon the threshold of a new life. New cares, new duties and new responsibilities are now resting on you and will in the future be your portion. God grant you strength according to your day. Try first of all, to seek for that light and wisdom which cometh from above.

We do not like to feel that you, in passing beyond our legal control and guidance, have passed beyond our counsel and advice.

We shall still watch you and your course with renewed interest and hope, not, without reason, that our mutual regard and appreciation may ever increase with our years. I have but little advice to give but think that little, worthy of your following. It is this: engage in no calling, or form no associations which you feel it is not proper to make a confidante of your Mother. You will ever find her a safe and considerate counsellor, one who would at any time rather bear the evil herself than have it fall upon you. I could ask no personal blessing for you other than that the virtue of your Mother might be yours also.

With this you will receive a ring. May it be to you an emblem of our love and confidence to and in you. And may the blessing of God ever crown your days with praise and your nights with song.

Yours affectionately,  
L. R. Coy

**~ end of chapter 13 ~**

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

\*\*\*