

# HIS BANNER OVER ME

by

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## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### THE LORD GOD MADE A GARDEN

A letter from my mother to my father:

Dear Samuel:

I wrote you yesterday of our safe arrival. We are still with the Hughes', planning to move today into our tent. Martha's cat may prove to be quite a nuisance: last night he got into the pantry and licked the top off two custard pies.

You will be surprised to hear that we are not pitching the tent in the house yard as we had planned. I found Martha crying. She says it won't be like camping unless we get further away into the woods, so the tent is to be pitched at the foot of the hill. This will be in plain sight of the house, although about a distance of a block away. I must confess that I feel a little timid about being alone with the children so far from the house. Perhaps you can bring me a police whistle.

So Mr. Hughes put up our tent and we made camp, and there we were, nicely settled, with even a little strip of carpet between the two beds. The cots were so narrow that if we bent our legs the least bit, our knees stuck out over the edge; but we didn't mind.

The earth slept gently that summer. Whenever I awoke in the night I heard only the faint flutter of the oak leaves, the occasional sleepy twitter of birds, and the sigh of the wind in the treetops. The peace of God was all about; His guardian angels hovered close over the little tent which looked so lonely and unprotected.

Once when the moon was riding high I crept to the tent door and looked out. The earth was flooded with moonlight, the trees, black in the shadows, were edged with silver—my soul was drenched with beauty. Then my mother's voice softly, not to waken the others, "What is it, daughter?" I replied that I was just looking at the moon, and slipped back to bed, and to sleep.

I do not know what price my young mother paid to give me that summer of loveliness. Oh, I hope she did not lie there sleepless every night, starting with each crackling twig, thinking how far she was from help and how dependent were her young children on her frail strength! I hope that she too felt the peace of God about her, that she sought out the secret place of the Most High, the shadow of the Almighty, and consigned herself and her family to His keeping and care.

I usually woke a little earlier than the others, and lay there smiling over the antics of the tiny chipmunks playing on the top of our tent, tumbling over and chasing one another round and round.

It was wonderful to eat breakfast there in the fresh new morning, not even shutting the tent flaps. Even dishwashing and bed making were no chore in such surroundings. Mother must have been quite relieved to have a band of willing workers.

Children are selfish little animals; I doubt if I ever wondered whether my mother was having a happy summer. Often she spent most of the days at the farmhouse with dear Mrs. Hughes. So after breakfast work was done, she started out with empty water and milk buckets, for the house. We trailed along, a little safari, Mischief usually with us, stepping high to protect his feet from the stubble.

Arrived at the farm, our mothers usually packed a lunch for us—jelly sandwiches, applesauce and a pail of milk— and we were off for the day.

The creek (we called it the crick) was usually our first destination. To reach it we skirted the edge of the wood where syringa and spirea were so freighted with blossoms that the branches bent over, forming little flowery caves where we sat, shut in with silence and loveliness with only the murmuring of the bees breaking the stillness.

We never lingered there, for the creek was calling us; singing and making music. A live thing, hurrying along and beckoning us. It was always an unsolved mystery to me. It had its rise right there on the farm.

It began with just a muddy place where the ground was low. I often stood there, pondering its mystery. Just that muddy place, growing swampy. Then water. It didn't seem to bubble up in little geysers, as one might expect. It just was. It grew deeper and deeper till it came to our knees. From what mysterious underground river or reservoir did it come? And how did the minnows get in? What held up the earth over it? Why didn't it get water-soaked and cave in?

Could I really trust the seemingly safe footing? Suppose that underground river sank deeper and deeper until it came to the place where the earth was hot and where fire dwelt. Water and heat make steam. Might not a sudden gush of steam erupt and scald us as we played? No one else seemed concerned; it was just a brook, bubbling along and minding its business.

So I put the conjectures away and joined the sailboat race. My father had supplied us with great sacks of hard tack. I had the idea, which may not have been accurate, that this hard biscuit or "bread" had been used by the gold seekers in the days of the Klondike rush, several years before. The miners must have possessed stronger teeth than we did, for we could not eat it until it was soaked in creek water. While the soaking was in process, we bored little holes in the hardtack, inserted a twig, set a leaf for the sail—and hooray! we were off for the race. It was great sport. Our laughter must have spilled out of the woods like handfuls of shining silver coins tossed carelessly.

To this day I dream of the creek. Only I never see it. I am always starting for it and finding some barrier—a city in the way, or a river between, or even icebergs. Night after night I dream of it and never reach it. When God remakes the earth during the Millennium, surely there will not be much to do to the Farm. It is so lovely as it is (Please, Lord, just a few little touches here and there, but leave the creek untouched! Then some day when I find time from reigning over some small village, may I slip away and with beating heart run down the pathway past the syringa and find my little creek again, and listen as it sings to me? Please, dear Lord).

After we had explored the banks on each side of the creek, and had eaten the soggy sailboats, we usually took our milk bucket and started for the hill, stopping en route at the orchard. The Waxen apples were very fine for cooking but too sour for our stomachs. But in the center of the orchard a friendly Astrakhan apple tree swung its boughs low for youngsters to reach. Up we would climb like a troop of monkeys, to settle down for a good rest; eating apples and counting the seeds:

One I love, two I love,  
Three I love, they say . . .

Only we knew no boys to name on the seeds, so the game fell a bit flat.

Then around noon we retrieved our lunch, now getting warm, and toiled up the hill. We couldn't resist a few slides down the hill, even though we knew our mothers objected. The prairie grass took on a real polish and our shoes became very slick, but we wore out the seats of our little panties, so the sport was not in favor.

We spent a part of every afternoon taking turns riding Nellie, faster and faster, up hill and down dale, the wind in our faces while the scenery fled by on each side. Sometimes we beat our poor steed unmercifully but she never seemed to care—being only a low hanging branch of an oak tree.

I do not know what there was about the hill. We knew how Moses felt surveying the Promised Land, only we could enter into ours. It made me feel very rich indeed, to know that it was mine. I did not care that the deed was in someone else's name; the farm was mine to love and I was sure it loved me in return.

We liked to get back to the house early enough to see the cattle wend their way home from the back pasture, herded by Bulger and Jim, the chore boy. I disliked Jim cordially, and the feeling was mutual. As to the reason, I do not know; perhaps nothing more than, "I do not like thee, Dr. Fell."

The cows stood around the corral waiting their turn to be milked. Catty, named for Cathie, was such a motherly creature that she actually allowed us four little girls to milk her at the same time, standing patiently. If we became too lively and squirted milk at each other, she just walked away a few steps. So many years it has been since I smelled the good barnyard smell, and the fragrant milk . . .

In the late afternoon back at the house, our buckets were filled with water, Mischief separated from his depredation, Mothers newly baked bread gathered up, and we all trailed back to the tent at the foot of the hill. Supper, dishes, and then the long evening of Puget Sound. Sometimes we had “programs” and my mother “spoke pieces.” I recall one which she delivered with much fervor and dramatic effect:

“Come back, come back,” she cried in grief,  
“Across this stormy water,  
And I’ll forgive your highland chief,  
My daughter, O my daughter.”

For some reason we found this highly amusing, and we quoted it often.

I know that the Hughes’ house was an interesting place, but I was very little aware of it. For me, the outdoors came in through the open windows and doors, and the house slunk away.

But on rainy days we enjoyed looking over the various souvenirs in the corner whatnot. Emily’s grandfather had “gone to sea” and there with the bric-a-brac were fascinating shells of various sizes and colors, deep in the heart of which we could hear the roar of breaking waves on some far distant shore.

I read and reread the books in the bookcase. I recall that one had been written by a schoolmate of Mrs. Hughes. I handled it with awe. What must be the sensation of a person who had actually written a book! Even then I seemed to glimpse the responsibility of actually putting a thought into the mind of a reader; perhaps forever changing that person’s character and even destiny. (No written word has ever gone forth from this little room of mine without prayer).

When I get to Heaven and talk things over with my guardian angel, I shall have some apologies to make for I kept him very busy there on the farm. Much of it was my own fault.

One time we four, with some visiting children, were up in the hay mow when someone dared me to jump to the floor below. It looked soft down there and I jumped. The floor leaped up at me, there was a sickening jar and a sharp pain. Investigation showed an extremely thin layer of hay on the floor. My side hurt for a long time, even after school began. Possibly I had cracked a rib and more than likely that jump started the spinal trouble which has invalidated me; but it could have killed me and because it didn’t, I thank you, patient angel.

When Sunday came, a hush settled over the farm. We children stayed at home until time to start for church. Sometimes we walked. Other times, if the horses had not been worked too hard during the week, we drove in the “spring wagon.”

How God must love the little white churches scattered throughout the countryside, their slender spires pointing Heavenward! The people came from all around. I doubt if they were so deeply spiritual, but it was a meeting place— and in those days everyone went to church.

Our preacher must have been a circuit rider, for he came only once in three weeks. I recall only one of his sermons, of which as a rule I could understand nothing. He was preaching on the Lord's Prayer and something about "**forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.**"

Now I had been cherishing a grudge against Jim for a trick he had played on me that week. We had been idling around the yard when Jim came out with a bucket of pig swill; waste water from the kitchen, rinsings from the milk buckets, etc.

It was all right for pigs, no doubt, but disgusting to look at especially since there were some dead flies floating on top.

Jim had dared me to drink some. I was most fastidious about food but a daring plan leaped into my mind: I hated him so badly that I wanted him to drink some and gag and gag. So I said, "I will if you will."

He agreed. "You go first. And don't spit it out."

I chose a place where there were no dead flies. I shut my eyes, put my mouth down and took a mouthful. I even swallowed it, then nausea overtook me. That over, I looked to Jim saying, "Your turn."

But he only laughed and jeered, "You didn't think I'd drink that stuff, did you? I don't like dead flies."

And he went into a fiendish chant which lasted for days, "Martha drinks pig swill, Martha drinks pig swill."

I nearly choked with rage and nausea every time he did this.

And now this preacher was saying that God would not forgive us unless we forgave others! (How little we understood the grace of God!) "**Tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you**"; "**Even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye**"—Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:13).

I am sure no one dreamed that Apollyon was battling with a little girl that day in church. I did achieve a victory of sorts: I couldn't like Jim, but I didn't hate him anymore.

The little church building stood in a grove of pines. The windows were always open and I could hear the breeze sighing through the branches; and as the sun grew hotter, the scent of pine needles nearly intoxicated me with joy. There were only firs and oaks at the farm.

The usually raucous crows muted their calls on Sundays. Who is to say that the birds and animals have no sense of God? What man was ever a bird, to know? Certainly, though living in the midst of peril, they have a sense of security which should put Christians to shame.

Sunday afternoons we spent quietly in our tent. We memorized the 53d chapter of Isaiah and the 103d Psalm. To this day they bring back the sound of birds and the warmth of sunshine. Mother told us they were the favorites of her father, whom we hoped to meet some day. She read to us on those Sunday afternoons and evenings, and told us stories. I liked best the tales about when she was a little girl, though I found it hard to believe that she ever really was.

My favorite of all her stories was the one about her grandparents, and what could have come to pass. Shortly after the Civil War, in which Grandfather had served in the Union Army, he moved his little family to one of the southern states which had greatly attracted him when he had been stationed there. The two children (my mother and aunt) were three and four years old.

Grandfather soon discovered that he was far from welcome. Thinking that the bitterness might wear away, he continued in the place. Then a terrible plague broke out. Mother didn't know what it was, perhaps Yellow Fever. It was especially hard on children, who died like flies. Mother said that she dimly remembered her parents kneeling in prayer by her little bed, seeking guidance—whether to flee to a place of safety with their children, or to stay and help nurse other sick children.

They stayed, and God took care of them. I felt very proud of my grandparents when Mother told me this story.

But I had a strange shivery feeling. Suppose my mother had caught the fever and had died! There would have been no me!

**~ end of chapter 11 ~**

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