HIS BANNER OVER ME

by

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CHAPTER NINE

NEIGHBORS

Although as a family we were so closely knit, we were not without neighbors and playmates.

Mother, believing that we should learn to be content with just ourselves for part of the day, ruled "No children in the yard until noon." The result was a row of neighbor children perching on the fence like blackbirds, waiting for the noon whistle to blow so they could jump into the yard.

Cathie's first playmate was a little boy named Freddie. They were both towheads. I can see her still; somehow she always had a well-scrubbed look. Her deep dimple still shows plainly. The two children were devoted to each other and practically inseparable. Nor did they ever quarrel. Years later when reading the immortal story of Paul and Virginia and looking at the pictures of the children in their childhood, I was reminded of Cathie and Freddie.

There was another child, Lyddy, about Cathie's age. They played and squabbled together. Although Cathie and I quarreled, I flew into a rage when someone called her a scratch cat.

There were fewer children in the K Street neighborhood. Our principal playmates were the Muller girls. The family was of German extraction. Mr. Muller, a dark, silent man, was a skilled carpenter. He had a carpenter shop at the rear of the lot and I remember how the long crisp fragrant curls of wood fascinated us all. Mrs. Muller, plump and jolly and unruffled, was very patient with us—our three and her two of the same age as Cathie and Amy. There was an older girl quite too old to be of interest to us, probably all of eighteen.

Her main attraction was the way she constantly sang "After the Ball."

> After the ball is over, after the break of day,
> Many the hearts that were broken,
> A-a-a-fter the ball.

I wondered why they went to the ball if they had their hearts broken.

Mabel, the next girl, though only a few months older than Amy, was mature for her age. She was larger, stronger; and steady as a rock. Mother often said that she felt perfectly safe about us if Mabel was with us.

Recently we found a letter written by my mother to a friend, about us three children:

> Amy is a rather odd child; quiet, self-contained, never worried, not hurried about anything. Yet she is always on hand, as steady as a clock. Martha is lively, quick to see and quick to forget; a heedless, loving child not yet ten years old. Cathie is some like one and some like the other, with ways of her own.

Mrs. Muller frequently had a gathering of her friends, called a Kaffeeklatsch. The house was filled with the fragrance of coffee and fresh hot bread with cinnamon on it. I hope we did not hang around looking too wistful. I remember I could not tear myself away from the pickle jars. Great fat, juicy dill pickles!

We knew the neighbors for blocks around. Faithful friendliness and Mother's strength and helpfulness made them both beloved. People in trouble came to Mother for help, spiritual or physical. She would fling her brown shawl about her shoulders and go to their homes to help. The town extended for only two blocks back of us. Then came the dense growth of tender green, the brush which always sprung upon logged-off land: alder, hazel nut, spirea, dogwood, a few maples, and the lower growing huckleberry, salal and Oregon grape.

In the Spring we went out in little bands to search for trilliums. As we grew older we ventured farther. One day we found a cave—a great hole in a granite rock where blasting had been done. We were intrigued by this and begged our mothers for potatoes and matches so we could cook like real campers. With many warnings about the matches, and admonitions to do as Mabel said, we trooped out to the cave. The little pieces of wood and bark we gathered were too damp to start a fire but we finally got it going with a piece of old newspaper. Mabel was sensible and cautious. She directed that the fire be built only on the rock foundation, and cautioned us not to get too close to it with our light dresses.

The sauce of adventure helped us to down the potatoes, black on the outside and almost raw in the middle. We sat around the fire afterwards, enjoying the apples from our home tree.

"Just think," I said blissfully, "tramps live like this all the time."

We fell to talking enviously of tramp life: no school, no dishes, no dusting. Tramps didn't even have to brush their teeth! And when they got tired of one place, they could pick up their tin can and move on. Why couldn't we form a little club and cook lots of our meals out here? One girl even suggested we speak to the next tramp we saw and ask him for pointers.

Mabel put a stop to this. It seems she had heard some mothers talking at the Kaffeeklatsch about a tramp who had killed a little girl. Laid her on a stump and cut up her body into little pieces. Then he put them in a sack and carried them away. The little girl was never found.

Suddenly the woods grew wide and lonely. The sun went under a cloud. We looked about uneasily and then panic seized us. We fled tumbling over each other. We felt very small and unprotected, and only began to breathe easily when we reached a graded street and civilization.

But to our utter horror and consternation there was a poorly dressed man (surely a tramp!) And on his back was a most sinister looking gunny sack. We all saw it at once. No words were necessary.

“Blood!” I gasped, drawing on my imagination.

At once we all seemed to see a gory trail of drops. Fear gave wings to our feet. We raced two blocks to a grocery store, a band of foolish maidens fleeing when no man pursued.

The grocery man was singularly unperturbed by the panting, excited children who invaded his store and told him a wild story. After a while we calmed down. I think we knew all along that we were in no danger, but the terror had been delicious while it lasted.

I remember those long lavender evenings just around the turn of the century when we gathered on a wide front porch, watching the stars come out and chatting over the fence with our neighbors. For blocks around neighbors knew each other. There were few places of entertainment; no movies, no cars. People either stayed at home or visited each other. There were a few families with whom we exchanged visits which included the evening meal. One of these families spread a long table out in the garden among the raspberry bushes.

Our parents had bought this K Street house thinking that the neighborhood would become the very desirable university district for the infant Methodist University of Puget Sound.

Unfortunately the university became involved in financial difficulties and lost the building (a stone construction only a few blocks away), which was taken over by the city. It became Logan School. The new residential district, as so often happens, was finally located far away.

We made many new friends in our church and exchanged pleasant visits back and forth.

I recall with amusement one dinner table. Our host in addition to his beautiful home, possessed a cook. We were overcome by such unwonted elegance.

A roast turkey was proudly carried in and placed on the table. We children began to swallow in anticipation. The host rather prided himself on his carving, so was nicely at it. The drumsticks were sliced off. The great silver spoon was reached in to where the dressing was waiting in succulent gobs (we hoped).

Suddenly a strange look came over his face. He fixed his wife with a glare and exclaimed with a shocked voice, “Helen, this fowl has not been drawn!”

I do not know how we contained our pent-up laughter. I believe they telephoned out for steaks, but we never forgot the richness of the joke. For years afterwards we had only to glare at the meat platter and exclaim in sepulchral tones, “Helen, this fowl has not been drawn,” to get a big laugh.

We entertained a great deal of company ourselves. Food was inexpensive and we had our own eggs and delicious Plymouth Rock hens. There was plenty of fruit, canned or made into Mother's delicious sweet pickles; peaches, crab apples or watermelon.

The lawyer uncle who had preceded us to Tacoma was married and had a family. When I was about twelve, my father's other brother, a school principal, moved out from Nebraska. He was delightful, full of fun. His wife was motherly and unperturbed, regardless of the antics of us children. Their daughter was just the age for us girls and the four of us had wonderful times together. She became as dear as a sister.

There was a deep bond between Father and his brothers, which lasted until their death.

And with the coming of the new family there began some joyous times: family picnics, family reunions of all sorts. What loaded baskets, but what happy hearts, as we walked down the long hill to take either a tiny boat or a streetcar to some beach for a long healthful day in the open!

Every Fall when the fruit was ripe, the clan gathered for a day at my uncle's farm in the country. Blackberries, plums, apples, pears—we came home with full baskets after the lunch had been eaten. We cousins, eluding the eyes of our elders, stole cream from the great cans standing in the little stream which ran through the milk house. We drank and drank, taking our fill.

The farm was a mile and a half from the streetcar and I well remember how my legs and back ached, but I never thought of mentioning it, for it was worth all that and more.

Looking back to those picnics, it startles me to realize that a perfect time for seventeen or eighteen people was obtained without the expenditure of one cent, except for the five or ten-cent carfare apiece.

There were Sunday school picnics, school picnics, neighborhood picnics. I thought never was a family so rich in friends.

Then one day rummaging in a box of old letters, I found one addressed to my grandmother when, judging from the date, she was a bride. It was from her mother. I asked Mother if I might read it and after glancing it over, she gave her permission. It was not very interesting until I came to this sentence:

> Sarah, you speak of having a good many callers. In a town of that size there can hardly be many people who are fit associates for you. You must remember to keep aloof from the rabble.

I flung the letter down in disgust.

"Didn't she like people, Mother? I do, I like everyone."

Mother said, “That is right. Like people, but you don’t have to be like them all. Keep your own standard high.”

“What is rabble, Mother?” I inquired.

She said there was no such thing. Later she gave me a framed motto: “Every man I meet is my master in some point, and in that I learn of him.”

~ end of chapter 9 ~

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