

HIS BANNER OVER ME

by

Martha Snell Nicholson

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

WOOD, HAY AND STUBBLE

Feb. 2. Martha,

May I have the pleasure of your company to the Double X Basketball game next Friday evening at the Y.M.C.A.?

T. M.

AND SO, BOYS came into my life, about the middle of my second year in high school. There had been boys who had paid me little attentions: one left a rose on my desk every morning, one tagged me around the halls at school, one had escorted me to class parties. These were all my own age. We had started out to the parties sedately enough and then run races all the way home. But these boys had left me entirely indifferent. Then this epoch-making note was slipped into my hand in the school library, by a boy two years older, and one class above me! This was life at last.

I hurried into my favorite corner, the literature shelves, to read the note over and over. It seemed to mean just what it said. There was only one thing for me to do, and so I did it. Going back to the table where he waited, I slipped into his outstretched hand (under the table) a note which read: "I have to ask my mother first." Surprise and perhaps faint amusement chased each other across his face and I fled back to my class room.

When school was out I made the trip home in record time. Bursting into our living room, I greeted the woman who was helping Mother sew and handed the note to Mother saying breathlessly, "Look! O Mother, may I go, may I go?" After reading the note, Mother replied in an indulgent tone, "We shall see." And her face lighted with the smile which meant she was going to give permission.

The evening of February 2nd must have been one of magic, but I recall little of it except how short the long hill seemed.

From then on, life became more and more thrilling. Boys, instead of being uninteresting creatures with grubby hands and dirty fingernails, became mysterious and fascinating, even perhaps a little dangerous; half friend and half foe.

In my special group of girl friends, bonny Jean, a Scotch girl, was closest to me. What hilarious times we had! It took practically nothing to send us into gales of laughter. I would ask the room teacher, in the few minutes before we passed to classes, if I might speak to Jean. Then some last delicious joke, and we would both be sobbing with laughter, our heads buried in our arms. A bored voice from the teacher, “Miss Snell, you will take your seat, please,” and I would return to my place fairly bowed over with stifled mirth.

“And ye shall give an account of every idle word”. . . I suppose that most of the words I spoke in those years when I was fifteen and sixteen were idle words. I must have laid up only wood, hay and stubble against that day when our works will be made manifest.

In vain I search my memory for any good works I did for Him whose name I bore. To be sure, though I often neglected prayer, other times I prayed passionately for unsaved playmates, and my pastor and the heathen. I faithfully continued my work in the little missionary society in which I had grown up. But I am sure I never testified for my Lord at school. I could have, I suppose, but I was absorbed in school work and no opportunity ever seemed to arise.

The question of dancing was much discussed. In those days the Methodists were not given to dancing and the Presbyterian Church, at least in Tacoma, was considered “worldly.” That was before a minister came to preach to them the second coming of Christ to change forever the history of Presbyterianism in Tacoma.

Personally, I will confess that I longed to dance—but I never did. I compromised with my conscience, telling my mother that since I was class president, I had to be present to make the address of welcome, but I would not dance, of course. She made me a lovely dress, all rose color, since I was so pale. I gave the address, and then when boys asked to fill up my dance program I explained that I didn’t dance, as I was a Methodist. The first boy said he would take the dance anyhow, and sit it out. So the other boys followed suit, and I sat out all the dances, each one with a different boy and a very good time we had. I can’t help wondering if perhaps God smiled a bit over this.

At school every moment of my life was thrilling in spite of my increasingly poor health and frequent absences.

Life seemed to be opening up—almost anything marvelous might happen to me. I skipped a little along each pathway that invited me. Sometimes I wanted to be a missionary, only Mother told me that my health would not permit. Other times I wanted to be a writer, but when I read what others wrote I realized that my well was empty, with nothing in it from which to draw.

My favorite dream was that of learning to be an English teacher after I had graduated from college. Just until I married and had a family. I was very sure about that, there was no hesitancy there. How kind of the Lord to hide from us our future life here! Could I have seen the long years of suffering on a bed of illness, alone except for my dear husband—and then could I have seen the years after he went Home—I could not have faced it all. His grace is sufficient, but I did not know it then. And so I dreamed my dreams . . .

I have a little handful of diaries. I often pick up the ones which record those foolish years and my heart grows light again. Could it be that God meant me to have that long playtime?

The world was so different in those days, so much easier for young people. I never heard a shady story, nor would I have understood it if I had. There were no automobiles, no movies, each with its peculiar temptations. No billboards with suggestive advertising, no lurid magazines.

When I say that there was no petting, such as boys and girls almost universally indulge in today, especially if they have agreed "to go steady for a while," I speak only of my own particular crowd. Other towns may have been different.

I "went with" the same boy for two years and he never even touched my hand. We walked to and from school together, and on Sundays we went to evening services. There were games and launch rides and a few parties. Only in the evening was it "proper" for him to offer his arm. When we walked home from school together he often sat with me for a long time on the front porch, I in the hammock and he on the edge of the porch. I remember one time we had made a clover wreath and he put it on my head for a crown.

Every boy I met, though he did not know it, had a deadly rival in the person of John Halifax, Gentleman. I suppose modern girls have never even heard of that lovely book by Miss Mulock. It had a powerful influence over me. I resolved I would marry no one who was not another John Halifax. And of course my mother early taught us girls that all endearments were to be saved for our husbands.

So, looking back, there are no regrets over those years, those tender, pitiful years when young people must make decisions which affect all their future, and yet they have so little judgment with which to make them.

There is an old poem beginning, "O ye of the little loves, who love with the spendthrift's hand, how shall ye know the great love and how shall ye understand?" When I see present-day young people playing at love, that most beautiful and dangerous of all God's gifts to man, I long to tell them how they are wasting themselves, cheating their whole future years because they will not wait God's time.

So, I thank God that my heart remained in my keeping, and that of John Halifax, until the one God chose for me came along.

I thank Him that I need have no regrets, no shame, mixed with my memories of those days. Foolish we undoubtedly were, but it was all wholesome and harmless. The long lavender twilights were just made for young people. Though we were a little old for it, we loved to play Hide-and-Seek, and Run Sheep Run, Step Tag, and Duck on the Rock, in the dusk. There were occasional school parties, the usual rivalry in basketball games, and track meets. At one of the latter it was rumored that two boys had a fight behind the grandstand to decide which one was to invite me to go to the class party.

I put down my pen and lie here smiling as picture after picture passes by that television, the “inward eye which is the bliss of solitude.” They glow with color and brightness which pierce the clouds and darkness of later years. One by one I live them over, the foolish years. But He knew my frame, He remembered that I was but dust.

Laughter spilling out of the K Street house as young people filled it. My sixteenth birthday party, when Mother and Cathie were in Nebraska for Mother’s first visit back. The picnic table, and I in some ebullient mood throwing a pickle, which, owing to my poor aim, landed in the midst of a table of dignified dentists. The most dignified of all coming in wrath to our table; and one of the boys, like a hero, taking all the blame. I thought that was true chivalry, equal almost to that of John Halifax.

I, collecting alley cats who were afflicted that year with some sort of cat influenza which gave them runny eyes and noses. In an agony of pity I gathered in a dozen feline patients, which later increased in number. I bathed their sore eyes with cold tea or boric acid, the only remedies I knew. I gave them my milk to drink (no real sacrifice, as I didn’t care for milk).

Boys calling, and over-staying to the unheard-of hour of ten. Father going to his room at nine, and as a hint removing his shoes and throwing them down. We young people listening, counting the thuds and going into convulsions of silent laughter, for Father always appeared to have three feet.

Helping the boys put Limburger cheese on the radiators at school. Weekends with Jean at her family’s summer cottage on the beach. We two girls, unable to sleep, getting up at eleven o’clock at night, climbing into clammy bathing suits, still wet from the morning’s bathing, and plunging into the icy waters of Puget Sound; then coming back to lie and shiver and giggle. I, running races, unbelievably fleet of foot for a short distance until my breath failed. Learning, however, that boys did not care to have girls beat them . . . and through some wisdom inherited from Eve, never again making the same mistake.

A gay group of girls sitting every noon on the steps of an adjacent church to eat our lunch, and then going to the nearest candy store where the affluent member of our crowd spent ten whole cents for candy. It hurt the pride of the rest of us never to be able to take our turns, but we could not resist the candy.

Surprisingly, the neighborhood suddenly seemed full of delightful girls and boys. We formed what we called a “club,” its sole object, amusement. It convened once a month at different homes for games and light refreshments.

My parents did not approve. I know they wanted something more worthwhile for their daughters. Their attitude was the cause of Amy’s one rebellion. I can see her yet, putting on her shoes as she sat on the floor in our bedroom, and saying darkly: “We can run away, you know.” This was too much for even me, and we did not pursue the subject further. We were allowed, however, to attend most of the meetings.

I had a ready tongue which was very active, and a quick wit; and certainly the capacity to enjoy myself. I recall with horror that owing to my extreme anemia, I longed for various strange things to eat, especially coal. I was seldom without a piece of coal in my mouth which I would crunch continuously even in church, although my mother shook her head at me if the noise became too loud. Later I pilfered lumps of crude sulphur from the school lab and ate them instead. This was before vitamins were in general use.

The picture of my mother grows a little dim during those years. I felt that I was drinking deeply of the wine of life; God's banner of love was still over me, but I was not so aware of it. The dingy streets of the shabby little town might lead to magic! Small bright flags were fluttering on all life's pathways.

There is one precious moment which I recall with tenderness. On my sixteenth birthday, my parents gave me my Bible. When Mother presented it to me, she bowed her head over it, her lips moving in prayer. I was exceedingly touched, but held in the grip of the family reticence, I was inarticulate. I did stoop and kiss her, however, I am glad to say.

That Summer, Emily and I spent a few days at the farm again. Only a few days, but packed full. Old Nell and Buckskin were gone, but we dearly loved the black mare Cricket. We spent hours driving around the country behind her in a small two-wheeled gig, a simple affair, body made of slats, with no back to the seat.

One morning we drove around the American Lake country, lovely prairie land with many small stumps where oaks had been cut down. Our hearts were young and gay, and I was so absorbed in our conversation that I did not notice whither I was guiding Cricket. One wheel went up over an oak stump. The gig was so tipped that I fell out, dropping the reins to the ground. My feet were caught between the body of the cart and the wheels. Cricket was a good little mare and she accelerated her pace only a little. If she had been skittish and had run away, I would not be writing this. As it was, I was dragged about twenty feet along the gravel road, skinning my cheek. Emily kept her head and perhaps saved my life by jumping out over the wheel and grabbing the dragging reins. Feeling a familiar sensible hand at the rein, Cricket obediently stopped and we managed to get my feet unhooked. Emily and I were considerably shaken, but decided to say nothing about it at home. Naturally, however, my skinned face did not go unnoticed and so the story came out.

We were forbidden further rides unless an older person was driving.

So, deprived of this means of locomotion, Emily and I decided it was high time I learned to ride a bicycle. There were two wheels available and if I could only learn, we could have a glorious time. Lessons were conducted in the lane which ran between the two pastures. Since the road was fairly good, with practically no traffic, I felt safe in removing the heavy ankle length skirt which I wore with my shirtwaist. Even then I felt considerably encumbered by garments and finally I daringly took off my long petticoat. This left me in my little "under petticoat" of light flannel, reaching about two inches below the knee. Years later, even older women wore skirts of this length on the street, but that day I felt excitingly wicked about it.

I was progressing nicely when topping the hill ahead of me appeared another cyclist, a soldier from nearby Fort Lewis. Like a hunted hare I looked about me with darting eyes of despair. Then I steered for the fence. Dropping my bicycle I scuttled through the bars, ran a few steps and flopped flat on my face in the tall grain, my head hidden in my arms. I lay there with fast beating heart not daring to look, but quite sure I heard the soldier nearby. After an eternity Emily began to laugh so I emerged from hiding. She said the soldier had ridden close to the fence and peered over at me lying prone and scantily clad in the bending grain.

This episode seemed to us so very funny that to perpetuate the moment, Emily took some snapshots of me in the fatal costume. She mailed the pictures to me after I had returned to Tacoma. I was delighted with them and ran to share them with Mother. But her reaction was not what I expected.

“That my daughter, my daughter, would allow her picture to be taken in such disgraceful and immodest attire! What do you think the man who printed the pictures thought of you? He probably considered you ‘fast’!”

She held out her hand. “Give me the pictures.” And she tore them in two. “Now write to Emily and tell her to send me the film and any copies she may have. I know Mrs. Hughes will feel as I do.”

So that is why I have none of these pictures in my old kodak book.

If I thought at all, I suppose I had the impression that this fascinating life opening before me would always be filled with laughter and joy. At the end of my third year in high school, tragedy struck. Cathie, the little sister I was just beginning to appreciate, was laid low with a throat ailment so virulent that the doctors of that day could not diagnose it. I recall that later the case was written up in medical journals. For lack of a better name it was called “septic sore throat,” and it was worse, much worse, than diphtheria.

Since it was supposed to be highly infectious, Amy and I were taken in by big-hearted Mrs. Hughes, whose family were living that year in town. Our grandparents, who had just come to spend the summer, were already established in the front bedroom of our next-door neighbor, who offered the room free of charge when she heard of their arrival and realized how crowded we would be. I do not know what they did about their meals after Cathie became ill. Father pitched a tent in the back yard for his own quarters and thus was within call when at home. He ran errands for my mother, who took up her lonely courageous vigil in the sickroom.

I had been neglecting prayer during the past two years but I began to pray desperately. Amy and I were never allowed in the house but we walked past it daily on our way home from school. As we approached the house each day, our hearts would beat with terror, wondering what news there would be for us. We stood just outside Mother’s window as she talked to us. I shall never forget the stench which came through the window, in spite of Mother’s efforts to disinfect the room.

The inside of Cathie's mouth and her tongue were covered with dreadful sores. One terrible day she was in a state of delirium, imagining she saw hideous figures in flames. With almost superhuman strength she grappled with my mother to get away from them. Thank God for the strength from on high with which He endows mothers at such times!

Finally one day as Amy and I stood with fast-beating hearts at Mother's window, she told us that the doctor thought the crisis had been passed, and Cathie would continue her life here as our little sister. My heart was humble and contrite with thankfulness; and I was very sure that never again would I grow careless in my Christian life.

~ end of chapter 22 ~

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