HIS BANNER OVER ME

by

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CHAPTER SEVEN

HOURS AT HOME

Bedtime came early at our house. Seven-thirty for Cathie, eight for Amy and me, and nine for our parents. There was no use begging for just a little while longer: our mother's word was law.

Ordinarily I hated to go to bed, but Sunday was different; and I was glad to get it over. For I had been bored and tired all day.

First, the mile walk to church. Then a long church service. We had to stand to sing the hymns. I was usually so tired from the walk that I was breathless and could not join in the singing, much as I loved it. Then at last, after a sermon I could not understand, the great pipe organ burst out into such loud rejoicings that it fairly shook the building. By that time my head was aching badly, and the noise didn't help. Following that, though I was weak from hunger, came the Sunday school session.

I am sorry I have to be so critical of my teachers, but it does seem strange that my eager mind learned nothing. All that I recall seems to be that the disciples walked so many miles to this village and then so many miles to another one— and I was sitting there in misery, not caring whether they did or didn't.

There was the long walk homewards; and usually boiled chicken at about two o'clock. I really thought that boiled chicken and headache went together. We were allowed no games, no company when we were very young. The afternoon was dull, to say the least, and I have no doubt that we children became very disagreeable.

In the evening after family prayers, we brightened up a bit and began to prepare for wash day. We children were set to shaving a cake of yellow Lennox soap. Mother sorted the clothes, and until the washing was over we had to tiptoe around and over the piles of clothing. Father carefully laid the fire; kindling, paper, wood and coal, in the kitchen range. Then he put on the boiler and filled it about half full of cold water. In went the soap and part of the clothes to soak overnight. And we all went to bed.

I rather enjoyed the excitement next morning, with always the possibility of the clothes boiling over into the cocoa and toast. Breakfast was simple, as there was little space left on the stove to cook it. Father brought in the tubs and then left for work. We children went on to school.

Years later we were the proud possessors of a washing machine: a wooden contraption operated by man power, or rather "girl power." A large wheel which we turned round and round. Then we pulled a plug and emptied the water into a bucket and hoisted it to the sink to empty. This was usually beyond my strength, but I loved that machine.

One time it betrayed my love. While I was trying to empty the machine it slipped on the wet floor and turned over, spilling water and clothes in a flood from the opened top. I burst into gales of helpless laughter, an irritating habit I seem to recall my family frequently shouting to me in exasperation, "Quit laughing and do something."

I will say for myself though, that when I worked, I worked more or less like a whirlwind. I have never been able to understand where my frail body found its energy (Many years later in a sanatorium in Denver I was to hurry down the hall with a despairing nurse calling after me, "Slow down, slow down. I don't see how you can go so fast with a hemoglobin of less than 30%!")

My mother instituted what she called "blowing off steam" for me when I seemed near the bursting point, and she was cooped up with a bunch of children on a rainy day. She would tell me to go out on the back porch and shout. I did this, and it always helped.

Sometimes Mother must have found me hard to understand. One September morning, just about time for us to start for school, there came a sudden heavy rainstorm breaking the drought of the long summer. I ran out of doors, stood for a moment flinging my arms skyward and breathing the fragrance of the newly washed dust. Then I bent forward till the great drops could pelt on my back. For a wonderful moment I was one with the sky, the rain, the thirsty earth. Then my mother's voice, "What are you doing? Come in at once!" and my moment was gone. I was just a little girl who had displeased her mother and who had to have dry clothes before she could start to school.

Mother's little sewing rocker always stood beside the heavily laden "cutting table," piled with interminable sewing for three little girls. (O Mother, your needle-pricked fingers!) Sometimes when I could not contain my joy over life and the beauty of the world, I would stand on the front rung of Mother's chair, holding to the back and rocking myself back and forth at a terrific speed. Mother must have thought she had brought forth a "fey" child, but her dear heart usually understood. We three children sometimes climbed up on the roof of the woodshed and hen house. We took with us combs and paper to sing through, and for our bodily refreshment, apples and hard-boiled eggs. We sang lustily "My Bonnie Lies over the Ocean," "Jesus Lover of My Soul," "I'm Captain Jinks of the Horse Marines" and "Sweet Horn: of Prayer" with fine impartiality.

The tie between us sisters has always been very close, thank God, and it still is. I am ashamed to admit, however, that when we were children Cathie and I fought furiously. Indeed, for some years my mother dared not go down town and leave us alone together. (My precious sister, grown so dear through the long hard years which came later, how can I ever thank you for the sacrifices you made?)

As I have said before, Amy was a good child. Just the same, in spite of, or perhaps because of her goodness, I privately thought she led a much duller life than I did. I can recall nothing wrong she did except steal sugar. I didn't, but it was probably only because I did not care for it.

Amy and I both stole coffee, however. Mother was the only member of the family who drank coffee. Amy and I craved it and watched Mother enviously as she drank her second cup. We hoped against hope there would be a little left in her small coffee pot. Then we did some teamwork. One would clear the table and drink half the remaining coffee, while the other acted as decoy to keep Mother occupied. It was a point of honor that the first drinker did not take more than her share. I have no doubt now that our sharp-eyed mother knew all about it, though she said nothing. But some day we will talk it over and have a good laugh about it.

We children shared the little bedroom off the kitchen: Amy and I in one bed, and Cathie in another. I was never a good sleeper and often heard my parents talking in the kitchen after I was supposed to be asleep. Once I heard my father grieving to my mother because Cathie and I didn't get along together. And then I sat up in bed astounded, for my mother said, "I know it is unpleasant but I don't worry too much about it. Have you ever noticed that Cathie copies everything Martha does or says?"

I think I changed a little from that day. Could it be that my little sister really cared anything for me?

Although I felt it a little below my dignity because of the difference in our ages, we often played together. Amy considered our games childish but I really enjoyed playing with Cathie more than with Amy because I felt the latter had no imagination. Father made us a lath playhouse and Cathie and I concocted the furniture, including a brick stove, wherein we baked mud pies.

One time it seemed very important that we dig through to China and we must have burrowed two feet before Father put a stop to it. I had heard that China was directly opposite us, and I was sure that if I dug far enough I would find a little Chinese girl, with the sole of her foot rubbing against the sole of my foot!

Cathie was named for an aunt who, because of this, gave her at every Christmas the material for a new dress. The entire family took a wholehearted joy in opening the package each year. One time it was soft red wool, thin and fine. Mother made it up beautifully, with narrow black velvet trimming. I was very proud of my pretty little sister, who looked like a robin redbreast.

It hurt me terribly that my lovely mother did not have pretty clothes to bring out her beauty. One time she had to refuse an invitation to a formal luncheon because she had nothing suitable to wear. It grieved me bitterly for weeks to think of it.

Like all children, we loved the snow. It did not come as often as we wished. Mother had saved up our heavy worn-out cotton stockings and we put them on over our shoes for leggings. A great ball of snow would eventually gather on the heel and have to be knocked off before we could walk.

One never hears of chilblains any more, but we had them badly. One time poor Amy's little blue toe fairly burst open. Mine always itched like fury during family prayers, some of Satan's work, I was certain. On cold nights we took heated flatirons to bed, wrapped in paper, to keep our feet warm.

The blackboard was quite an institution in the family. This large board was nailed to the wall on one side of the dining room. We used it for a memorandum, or Mother wrote messages for us and set tasks for us to do after school. On holidays I got colored chalk and tried to draw appropriate pictures, achieving an artistic effect with holly. When Mother was encouraging me to read Dickens and I became confused with his numerous characters, we made a game of listing them on the blackboard. An occasional Bible verse appeared if it was applicable, after some sin of ours; and too often Mother wrote on the board some slang phrase she had heard us use. She made no comments, but we did not use the expression again very soon.

A neighbor once asked my mother, "Mrs. Snell, how do you make your children mind so well?" And Mother replied with a flash of her keen eyes, "I expect them to mind."

Mother was insistent that we keep up our standard of living, even in a neighborhood where the family often ate in the kitchen on oilcloth. We always ate in the dining room, on white linen, with napkins (later rolled into napkin rings) and with silver cutlery, some of it very old. I remember the small individual butter dishes, the salt dishes; and when we needed them, the curved bone dishes.

Father always served, for Mother said even if we were not rich, we could live like ladies and gentlemen.

For a long time I think my father only earned fifty dollars a month but this seemed ample in those days. I have an old notebook of grocery accounts which shows that the food bill varied from twelve to sixteen dollars a month. Our chickens kept us supplied with meat and eggs, and the yard was full of fruit. Every Fall we would lay in about eight sacks of flour, and a small sack each of cornmeal and graham flour, and a little bag of hominy grits.

My museum afforded me great pleasure and profit for many years. It was housed in my doll trunk, the dolls having been summarily dispossessed, until it outgrew the small confines (I never cared much for dolls anyway, preferring cats and dogs which could love me back).

My museum was a motley accumulation of such specimens as dead dragonflies, birds' eggs, silkworm cocoons, bottles of sand from beaches on far-off palm-fringed shores, polished stones, including my beloved agate collection, beads from the wrapping of a mummy, souvenirs of the Spanish-American War, and a stone marked "From the breastworks of the only gun that fired on Dewey in the Manila Bay."

Family friends were kind enough to give me many treasures for the little museum and in time I had a creditable collection, which opened my eyes to the wonder that is the world.

We liked games at our house. At least we children did, and Mother and sometimes even Dad, played with us. A favorite was Authors. To this day I am indebted to it for accurate knowledge of the authorship of some book. There was another game, played like Authors, only the cards were exquisite reproductions of famous paintings. We learned much from this. I would give a good deal to possess that game now. While Chess was a favorite of my grandfather's, none of us cared for it. There was Halma, played on a homemade board marked off into squares like a checker board.

We played Flinch, Checkers and Dominoes, later acquiring a crokinole board.

We gathered around the table, around the Rochester oil lamp. There was a blessed feeling of being all-there-together-safely. I felt this even as a tiny child, although I had no words for it. Years later I would give an occasional contented grunt, and Cathie would ask, "What are you grunting about?" and I would say, "Just gloating, that's all."

And to her inquiry, "What about?"

I would reply, "Just everything; just all of us, just life."

Looking back now, I can see that there was about us as a family, a general air of innocence. Even my father was singularly untouched by the evil which presumably existed in the world. Not that we were so deeply spiritual but there was something of other worldliness about all of us, and no evil came nigh unto our dwelling.

~ end of chapter 7 ~

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