

HIS BANNER OVER ME

by

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CHAPTER THREE

K STREET HOUSE

A FEW MONTHS before my fifth birthday, we moved six blocks up the steep hill to the house on K Street. Since J Street was the actual top of the hill, it was level ground at our new home. I do not remember the moving at all. We seemed suddenly to be there, and my mother was vigorously scrubbing and cleaning. She remarked that never before had she had to clean up other people's dirt. For a long time I felt crawly, as though there were bugs around. I believe, however, that the house was only three months old and had been occupied by a nice young couple.

K Street was not graded nor paved. It was just a muddy road in winter and a dusty one in Summer. We had two 25-foot lots. The community was laid out in lots, but most of them were vacant and filled with brush and stumps.

I lived in this house until I was married. I think of it with the deepest nostalgia, and frequently revisit it in memory, room by room. The house still stands and it seems to me that it must be tangled in rainbows by day, or flooded with moonlight and sprinkled with Stardust by night. But my sisters, who saw it recently, tell me that it is in a sad state of disrepair. And so, I will conceal its address; I will protect it as one would shield from the curious public gaze the disfigured face of a loved one. Dear old home! Place of laughter and tears, of growth, of battles lost and victories won, of glory and despair, of death and weddings. Place where five people were knit together into the sacred bonds of the Christian family. Place where three sisters learned of love from the three stalwart men who came courting them. The scent of the sweet briar rose beneath my mother's window still blows down to me.

This house, like the first one, consisted of three rooms; a living room, bedroom and kitchen. But twice, as our needs grew, Father built additions. The first time was shortly after we had moved in. My only recollection of it is hearing my mother say in a tone of finality, which I knew meant business, "The men are starting today and if you want to save those peas, you had better get to work." Amy and I went out to our little garden: Amy's inch-high row of peas neat and flourishing; mine, straggling and stunted from neglect. Amy decided they were too small to survive transplanting, but I was seized with a passionate pity for the underdog, which trait was to plague my life. So, with an old twisted kitchen fork given me by Mother, I slaved in the hard ground, endeavoring to save the peas from the terrible fate of being shut away from the sun and the sky under the new kitchen.

The new addition consisted of two rooms—a bedroom and kitchen. Our old kitchen became a bedroom; and our old bedroom, a bathroom. The bathroom contained nothing but a tin tub but it was connected with the plumbing and it was such fun to pull out the stopper and watch the little round whirlpool of water run away. There was but one faucet—with cold water. When we wanted a bath, we heated water on the big wood and coal range in the kitchen. Later a small tin or zinc tank was installed, which fitted under the warming oven of the range. It was kept filled with water. There was a small faucet in the tank, through which the heated water poured into a bucket, when needed. Since Mother did not consider it “nice” to have the toilet in the house, it was in the back yard, although connected with the sewer.

On my fifth birthday Mother said I might invite a playmate over. I was given two toy shovels and to my wonderment and rapture, I was to give one to Daisy! This was the first time I remember experiencing the joy of giving. I remember that my pleasure in watching Daisy with her shovel far outweighed my own happiness of the day.

When my sister Catharine was born, my father was evidently disappointed that she was not a boy for the only entry in his diary reads, “Baby born.” The manner of her birth is worth recording, however: since the doctor had not arrived in time, my mother sat up in bed and officiated in his capacity.

That morning Amy and I had unaccountably wakened in the bedroom of a good neighbor instead of our own little brown bed. Amy dressed and ran home but I dawdled as usual over buttoning my shoes. Then I heard a noise in the hall outside my door. Silence, which grew and grew! No human voice nor footsteps, only a repetition of that mysterious sound. I was positive by then that it was the dreadful wolf in Red Riding Hood.

I was rooted to the spot with fear— unable to move. It did not occur to me to call for help; I knew that I must open that door and face the wolf, and then run down the stairs to the good neighbor. At last I summoned courage to open the door. The hall was empty. But the wolf might have slipped into one of the other bedrooms to lie in wait for me. I raced down the stairs and fell sobbing into the lap of the puzzled woman. At last she took me home to see my mother and the new baby, who was very red and squalling and obviously not at all suitable for a playmate.

And so, there were five of us, each under the watch and care of his or her guardian angel. (**Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation?** Hebrews 1:4) It is no wonder the little house fairly burst at its seams.

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