HIS BANNER OVER ME

by

Martha Snell Nicholson

CHAPTER NINETEEN

PIONEERS

ONE BRIGHT SUNDAY MORNING in early summer we lingered at the breakfast table talking, though it was nearly time to get ready for church. Father's vacation was to begin the next morning so we were all wild with excitement. For some reason we were not to go to the farm, but planned to camp at Gig Harbor, one of the little inlets not far from Tacoma.

Father, who read the *Ralston Health Magazine*, had become a staunch supporter of the benefits of physical culture. This led to pioneering, in general. Just now he was riding his hobby: "Frontiersmen, they were the he-men of America. Greely was right when he said, 'Go West, young man, and grow up with the country.'"

"But, Papa," interrupted Amy, "we can't go West; we are already there, right on the Pacific Ocean."

Father looked a little bewildered, but said hastily, "It's the essence, the principle of the thing. One can live the life of a frontiersman any place, if he wants to make a few sacrifices of comfort. Look how we go to camp; tents, beds, camp stoves, pillows, a wagon load of stuff for the expressman to haul to the boat!"

Turning to Mother, he proceeded, "I tell you, Mary, it is roughing it which will make strong men and women out of our children . . . er, that is, strong women."

Then before anyone could laugh, he asked, "How about it? Are you willing to rough it for a couple of days?"

Mother looked a little anxious, Amy doubtful, but I was already pitching my tent in the forest primeval . . .

"Well, you know that twenty acres we bought last year. Its almost virgin forest, or second growth anyway. Amy and Martha have seen it but Mama and Cathie haven't. Will you be game to take just a blanket apiece, a few matches and dishes, a little food and stay there a few nights?"

Mother began to figure, "It will cost quite a bit; boat fare for five. And suppose we can't stand it? It will be as expensive for one night as for a week."

“But,” said Father, “I guarantee we will all like it. We may want to spend our entire vacation there.”

At last Mother consented. I was delighted, for all pleasure was doubled for me if Mother shared it. Anything the preacher said that morning at church went in one ear and out the other as far as we three girls were concerned.

Somehow the loads were larger than the ones we girls and Father had packed the year before, so Father said that we had better ride down hill on the cable car. On Tuesday morning there we were finally on the wharf, sniffing the good salty air and waiting for the little stern wheeler Typhoon. By the time we arrived at Fox Island, the chilly fog had been penetrated by the warm sun.

We disembarked at Sylvan, a tiny but lovely little settlement on a point of land. Mother was distressed because there was no store but Father inquired sternly, “Did the early settlers have stores? No, they lived off the land!”

As the loads were shouldered I giggled. “We look like *Pilgrim’s Progress*.”

This time we struck inland at once instead of going along the beach, for we had neglected to look up the tide table and didn’t want to be caught as we had been the last year.

Father was in high spirits and looked happy and free— Father, who so loved the outdoors but spent ten hours a day in a little pen behind the General Delivery window of the Tacoma post office. He even clowned a bit as he walked, and once he dropped his pack and showed us how to do a double shuffle. Finally we reached what he thought was the boundary line.

“Here we are, children. Here we could carve a home out of the wilderness as our ancestors did.”

A short distance from the road we found an open space in the woods and pushed in eagerly. Father announced triumphantly, “There, children! There is our home for a few days. There are the beds, the tables, the chairs, the cupboards.”

We girls and mother looked around blankly. Then Father pointed out his discovery: two fallen giants of the forest lying side by side, actually touching so there was a little trough in between. The years had covered them with soft moss. Father unloaded the bundles, using one end of the logs as a cupboard. Then he said, “I brought a hatchet but I think I’ll just run down to Old Man Jones and borrow his axe, and get some milk. I might want to cut down a tree.”

“Now, Samuel,” said Mother, “You had better be careful. After all you don’t know how to fell a tree.”

“Suppose it falls on you,” said Cathie with a shudder. But Father pooh-poohed the idea. “It’s no trick; I’ve watched it done many a time.”

After Father had gone on his errand, the woods seemed suddenly very wide and empty with no place to hide or get under. He was back in a short time with not only the axe and the milk, but a bucket of freshly dug clams which he waved triumphantly saying, “I told you we could live off the land. Now you children pick some wild blackberries and I’ll start a fire going and Mother will cook the clams. Only thing is, go easy on the water for we didn’t bring much and there is no spring on the place.”

Dinner was voted a great success except for the fact that owing to the water shortage the clams were somewhat gritty with sand, but Father remarked happily, “Oh, well, that will clean our teeth/’ and he made gritting noises till Mother laughing, begged him to stop.

“Now, no dish washing on account of the water shortage.”

Amy and I raised a great cheer.

“But,” Father continued, “we must all work. I want a nice place cleared. You children gather broken limbs of trees and we will have a big bonfire as soon as it grows dark. We will have to go to bed early as, of course, we have no lamps—only the moon as our forefathers did.”

Mother had hoped that Father would forget about cutting down the tree but when he appeared determined to do it, she begged him to try a little tree. So he chose a long slender Douglas fir, a regular Christmas tree, only it could never have fitted into our house. He had no saw but he chopped and chopped all around the tree. Mother suggested doubtfully, “I think they just chop on one side, dear.”

But Father said, “No, they do it all the way around and then when it is chopped almost through, they push it whichever way they want it to go.”

After much chopping and panting he ordered, “Now I want all of you to go so far away that this tree can’t touch you if it should fall the wrong way. Though of course it won’t, he added hastily.

“Oh, Papa, I want to stay and help you push. Please let me,” I begged.

“Well, Mama, what do you think?” asked Father. Mother was about to tell him what she thought when suddenly there was an ominous crack. The tree hesitated a moment, then slowly started down.

“Run! Run for your life!” yelled Father. He grabbed me by the sleeve and we raced for the two fallen trees which now seemed a haven of safety. Reaching them, we dropped to our knees. Father calling,” Dig, Martha, dig!” and our hands flew like the paws of groundhogs, but before we got more than our heads under the log, there was a long swoosh, a great thud and then silence settled except for the calls of startled birds. I stayed where I was, but Father cautiously drew his head out to look around. The tips of the tree were not five feet from our place of refuge. I suddenly burst into one of my gales of laughter, “Oh, Papa, your eyes are bugging out.”

Then Amy and Cathie came running. Mother looked shaken, and Cathie was wailing, “Oh, I thought you would both be smashed.”

“Now Mary,” rebuked Father, who had in the meantime regained his breath, “I told you I knew how to do it and you see, we are all safe.”

“Yes,” answered Mother. “But when I think of you trying to dig under that log and all of you sticking out except your head . . . well, I hope we won’t have to cut any more trees!”

“Very well, Mary, since it worries you,” replied Father with some dignity.

Then he brightened, “You are right. It is too bad to cut down a tree. After all, we do not plan to build a house. We will just clear away the underbrush and make a sort of park.”

Delightedly, we girls set to work with a will. Father cut the bushes: salal, Oregon grape, spirea, hazel nut, madrona. We girls gathered it into a great pile to burn, but Cathie found a lovely bush of Oregon grape with ferns growing near it and demanded that it be saved as her garden.

Supper was early but none too appetizing: cold clams, sandwiches and a can of beans which Mother heated on a tiny fire. This time the dishes at Mother’s demand were washed, but very sketchily, for the water shortage was growing more acute and there was not time before dark for Father to make another trip for more.

The bonfire was a tremendous success and we sat around it happily.

“This is something like it!” exulted Father. He told us stories about the early pioneers but when he started on Indian stories, Mother hinted by raised eyebrows and a glance toward Cathie that perhaps he had better talk about something else. We were very careful with the fire. Before going to bed, we stamped it all out carefully—”one of the first duties of a good woodsman,” Father explained. There was much laughter as we climbed into our mossy bed. Amy rejoiced privately that the beds were high enough to keep the occupants off the ground where Things might be crawling.

It was a great joke to go to bed with all one’s clothes on. Since we had only one blanket apiece, Mother said we might get cold before morning if we undressed even partially. We lay in a long row: Cathie’s head at Mother’s feet, then I with my head at Cathie’s feet, Amy next, then Father. To be sure, the moss wasn’t so soft as expected but we didn’t worry about that at first.

“Good night” echoed down the line—and then we waited for sleep to come. After a while Cathie inquired quaveringly, “You are sure there are no bears, Papa?”

“Of course there isn’t a bear on the island. There hasn’t been one for a long time.”

“But once there was?” asked Cathie.

“Well,” Father admitted, “there might have been, but they are all gone now.”

At that my fertile imagination began to work. Suppose a bear had found a cave deep in the woods and every winter it went to sleep in there and so lived on and on and on and on. I was getting sleepy when Mother’s voice said, a bit weakly, “Samuel, what do you smell?”

Father, who had just been dropping off, inquired, “Wazzat, Mary?”

Mother repeated, “I said, what do you smell?” Father sniffed. We all sniffed. Then Father took charge like a real pioneer, I thought admiringly.

“It’s a skunk,” he said. “Now all of you keep cool and don’t get excited and we’ll be all right.”

“Can he bite us?” asked Cathie timorously, not wise in the way of skunks.

“Oh no,” I replied, “he just . . . uh well, he just makes people smell bad.”

“QUIET,” thundered Father, making a big noise himself. “If we all keep still and don’t get him excited, he’ll go away.”

Soon into the clearing emerged a pretty little creature, a wood pussy. Cathie was entranced and wanted to get down and play with him, but was quelled by Father. The Snell family lay in a long row and quaked, all but Cathie. The skunk investigated the camp fire but gave scarcely a glance at his potential victims on the log. After what seemed an age he finally returned to the woods, but we found it hard to settle down.

A restless interval followed and then Mother’s voice, clear and beautiful under the night sky, “Children, look up at the stars. ‘**The heavens declare the glory of God, the firmament showeth His handiwork**.’ Now we will all say the Lord’s Prayer and ask God to watch over us and then go to sleep/’ she finished emphatically.

Long after the others were supposedly asleep, I lay awake under the spell of the moon-drenched world.

Then simultaneously, a crackling in the brush and Cathie’s terrified screech, “It’s a bear, Papa, I know it’s a bear.” The Snell’s all sat bolt upright, and watched a great black shape emerge from the woods and hesitatingly approach us.

Mother said, “Oh, it must be a dog. I see it wagging its tail. Here, good doggie,” a wonderful bit of bravery on the part of my mother, who feared dogs almost as much as she did bears. But I had a way with dogs and I called with delight, “Here, fellow, come here.”

“Martha,” exclaimed Mother sharply, “how many times must I tell you not to pet strange dogs!”

“But he isn’t a strange dog, Mama; he is the big black dog we saw last summer at Mr. Jones’. See, I remember that round white spot on his chest. I wish I knew his name. Come here, fellow.”

The amazed dog, out on a private hunting expedition, was more than pleased to find a fine family of friends so unexpectedly in the heart of the forest. He went from one to the other, putting his paws up onto the beds and sniffing in a friendly way—at least Mother hoped he was friendly when her turn came. He even decided that he might stay awhile with these delightful people so inexplicably in bed in the middle of the forest, so he lay down beside the bed for a little while. We all tried to compose ourselves to sleep again.

“It must be nearly morning now, isn’t it?” inquired Cathie hopefully. Father lighted a match and looked at his watch. “It is only 9:30,” he pronounced solemnly.

“O Mama,” wailed Cathie, “this bed is so hard and my bones are so bony; won’t morning ever come?”

“I certainly hope so,” said Mother, a bit grimly.

I was never to forget that night beneath the stars. I felt enfolded in the soft, sweet darkness. I knew no fear of the many night noises of the forest. The sky bent low above me, and God seemed very near. I slept very little but my rest was peaceful, though uncomfortable. Shortly before morning the clouds were blotted out by a cold wet fog which crept in from the water. I began to feel a familiar sore throat and I heard Cathie sneeze twice and whimper in her sleep like a puppy. Father’s snoring, which had been intermittent at best, ceased entirely. At the first approach of daylight he climbed off his high bed, giving it a look of disfavor. Then he searched around for dry twigs and wood, and soon had a good fire going.

A shivering group of pioneers gathered about the fire, coat collars hunched up. No one had much to say. We just didn’t feel very chatty. After a bit, Father tentatively suggested breakfast, even though it was so early. Mother replied, “We must have something hot. I shall put Mr. Jones’ bucket right on the fire and heat the milk. The smoke will blacken it but you can pay him for it.”

Hot milk and toasted sandwiches cheered us a little, though Amy, who was possessed of a sweet tooth, lamented, “If we were home we’d have cocoa and hot cakes with sorghum.”

Cathie sneezed again. Mother finally asked, “Well, Samuel, have you had enough, and shall I take these children home and doctor their colds?”

Father really didn’t look too chagrined to have the subject brought up. So it was agreed that if we hurried, we could catch the 7:30 boat for home. After the packs were made and the fire stamped on, Mother and daughters started on the half-mile hike to the dock, while Father went to return Mr. Jones’ belongings. He would catch up with the family later. Mother spoke soberly to us girls when we were alone, “Now children, I don’t want much said to your father about this. You know how hard he works and how much this kind of thing means to him; and after all it has been quite an experience.” She omitted any reference to her own splitting headache.

Soon after, Father caught up with us. He looked considerably cheered and showed that he was the incorrigible pioneer, for he began to declaim,

> The breaking waves dashed high
> On a stern and rock-bound coast,
> And the woods against a stormy sky
> Their giant branches tossed;
>
> And the heavy night hung dark
> The hills and waters o'er,
> When a band of exiles moor'd their bark.

With this, the band of pilgrims burst into hearty laughter.

Never did home look so good. After hot baths the family all took naps, and Mother plied us with hot lemonade.

Two days later as Father was rolling the camp mattresses for the flitting to Gig Harbor, he remarked, "I suppose it is silly not to use nice camping equipment like this; we are pretty fortunate to have it, aren't we?"

And we all agreed.

~ end of chapter 19 ~

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