

HIS BANNER OVER ME

by

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

HEART TOO VULNERABLE

“WHAT IS THE MATTER with her, Mary? Is she sorry she gave it to me?”

“No, of course not. She is merely troubled with excessive emotion.”

I can still hear my mother’s voice with its faint edge of impatience. I had just given my choicest treasure, an almost microscopic star fish, to my aunt visiting us from Nebraska. Then, overcome with the enormity of the whole transaction together with the fact that she was leaving soon, I had burst into tears. Hence the question and answer.

I think I knew very early in life that there was something the matter with me. I do not refer to my poor health, for I was used to that. But I harbored a conviction that whereas my parents and sisters and acquaintances kept their hearts safely put away inside their little cages of ribs, I wore mine outside on a ribbon around my neck, exposed and entirely vulnerable. Sometimes it split wide open with pain.

The summer was getting off to a bad start. In the first place I grew weak with terror when my mother suggested that I leave my cat Mischief home this time, instead of taking him to the farm.

“He loves me. He couldn’t live all summer without me!” I objected.

Mother explained that cats were more attached to places than to people.

“Not my Mischief; he knows that I saved his life, remember?” Mother shudderingly replied, “I remember.” Two years before when Mischief was a kitten, he had nearly lost his life. The streetcar track ended in front of our house. All the motorman had to do was reverse the trolley and then start the car. The trolley was already in place and the motor-man’s hand on the starter when Mischief had darted straight underneath the car. I was after him like a shot and my guardian angel was forced to move fast. My mother had just stepped to the door in time to see me disappear under the car, and she screamed, “Stop, stop, there’s a child under the car!”

When I emerged with the cat, I am sure all three of them— motorman, guardian angel and my mother—must have longed to spank me.

“You know,” said Mother, continuing the discussion about leaving Mischief at home, “he and Bulger really don’t get on well together, and maybe he’d be happier living quietly here with Father. And it is asking a good deal of Mrs. Hughes to take him.”

“If you mean the custard pies,” I returned hotly, “you didn’t need to throw both of them away; he hardly touched one of them. His little mouth is clean anyhow.”

So Mother called out the reserves: “Remember the baby chipmunks.” That brought me to a halt. I had been unable to teach Mischief how adorable were the tiny chipmunks. The memory of certain episodes still tore my heartstrings. So I reluctantly and with many misgivings, consented to leave him home.

But everything seemed different at the farm that summer. The very earth had been seized with a malady beyond my powers of diagnosis. One tragic thing after another happened.

Shortly after we arrived, two pigs were butchered. I am still overcome with nausea when I remember how they squealed with pain and terror. The sounds penetrated the piles of pillows I had heaped over my head after fleeing up the stairs to get away. Horrified questioning later brought out the fact that the second pig had been forced to watch the butchering of his brother, knowing full well that his own turn was next.

I could not shake off the impression of this event until it was forgotten in a measure, as plans progressed for a neighborhood picnic.

Four families drove to lovely Lake Steilacoom to spend the day. Picnic baskets were bulging and it bade fair to be a gala event. A neighbor child brought her dog, an endearing fox terrier with whom I romped on the beach. Sometime later his anguished cries rent the air. There was a good deal of hush-hush about it, but I learned that a fall down the bank had broken his leg. An ominous silence succeeded. Some of the men had taken him out on the lake and drowned him. My heart was so shocked, my imagination so vivid as I pictured that pitiful last struggle, that I can scarcely even yet indite the event.

I kept after my mother. “Why don’t you do something? Why did you let them do it?”

Her own lips were white but she said, “We have to bear what we can’t help, Daughter.”

“But you can; you are a lady and I am just a little girl! And they won’t listen to me!”

“I am sorry, darling. Try to think how good it is that it’s all over and he is not suffering at all now.”

The heart hanging on the little ribbon about my neck was palpitating and bleeding, but no one saw it save the dear Lord who made me as I am, for some reason known only to Himself.

I well recall my amazement when the lunch was spread and the others ate with relish.

Even fried chicken and my favorite jam tarts filled with wild blackcap could not overcome my sickness of body and soul.

What a weight of suffering must be on the heart of the loving Father who created all these little dumb creatures, and who notes the fall of even one sparrow. Truly it will be a joy to Him when the curse is removed from these innocents.

The depression failed to lift. In fact, it was augmented by a violin's wailing sound which drifted out in the twilight air from a neighboring farm as we drove past on our way home. Emily had told us that the man was in love with a girl who would not marry him, and I suppose that his heart was forever broken . . .

It was the custom for neighbors to visit one another, taking the children and staying all day. I recall one of our visits. The place was bleak and dreary, without a blade of grass or a flower. Great dead oaks lay around the vicinity in grotesque shapes. Mother was in deep conversation with the woman, trying to comfort her. I heard enough to gather that this woman was grieving because of the absence of her husband, whom she believed to be in California.

Later I besought my mother, "Can't we give her some money so she can take the children and go to him in California?"

After considerable hedging on the part of my mother, it became apparent that there was more to it than lack of railroad fare. Looking back, I realize that the husband had probably deserted his wife, but at that time such an action was inconceivable to me. The whole thing became another sad, dark mystery in tune with this whole groaning earth which seemed to be taking somber hues.

The next event was sheer tragedy. I quote a postscript marked in blue pencil "Private," written by my father to Mother:

If it will spoil any of Martha's enjoyment out there, do not tell her of this until she comes home. Her cat is dead, died of a broken heart and not enough to eat. When I came home Sunday night, no cat anywhere. I called her but no answer. (To Father the female pronoun was applied to all cats, regardless of sex).

Monday morning, still no cat around. Called her. Mrs. S. had not seen her. I hunted till the last minute and started down to the post office. As I was going out the gate, I caught sight of the cat in the front yard. Had not time then to stop and feed her.

Monday night—no cat again to meet me as she used to do.

Tues. morning—just as I commenced eating my breakfast I heard a distressed meow under the house. I left my breakfast and crawled in the hole at the side of the house and called her. She would answer me, but would not come to me. I then got some milk from Mrs. S., took some matches to light my way, and crawled along with the milk until I reached the cat. She was too sick or weak to drink or stand up, so I took the cat in one hand, the milk in the other and crawled out. Worked with her pouring milk down her throat until I had to go. I went without my breakfast.

I knew the cat would not live long as she was too weak to swallow, but took her over to Mrs. S. who worked with her, but she soon died.

I miss her in the house when I come home, and I'm sorry for Martha. The cat had not eaten enough any time since you left and her long fast Sunday and Monday was too much for her. If Mrs. H. don't want all of their kittens, you'd better get one for Martha. Or, if you think best, you can get one here in town from somebody. Kiss Cathie and Martha and Amy for Papa.

Well, there it is, the little story. My mother told me gently and tenderly. It was my first bereavement. I fled to the woods and lay all day on the earth's brown breast, receiving her comforting and her healing. Let no one laugh at my sorrow. It was very real. Perhaps the dear Lord began His teaching that day. The measure of grief is the measure of love, and my love for Mischief was deep and real.

My grief weighed heavily upon me for the remainder of the summer. Emily's uncle worked in an insane asylum and one day Mother and the Hughes' went into the building to visit with him. For some reason I have never understood, we four children were left in the asylum yard, where trustees were working all around. I did not understand that they too were patients. I fastened my horrified gaze upon the barred windows from several of which, women with long coarse hair streaming down their backs called to us. I turned to flee, whither I knew not, for the gates were locked. Before I had taken more than a few steps, a woman ran over to me and folded me in her arms, kissing me violently and exclaiming over and over, "My baby, my little girl."

I grew faint with terror and yet even in my fright I felt an overpowering sympathy, though I could not possibly have understood at that tender age the probable cause of her condition.

I cannot recall anything more except than an attendant led the poor soul away, in spite of the pleading arms held out to me.

Child though I was, the burden of the world's suffering was in a measure a crushing weight upon my back.

Even in the little white church under the pines I found no peace.

Only one sentence of the sermon remained in my mind and that was enough: "With every tick of the clock a lost human soul passes into eternity." The clock went tick, took, tick tock—and there was nothing I could do to help.

We arrived at the big homey kitchen and it seemed to me a refuge and a place of peace. Then I heard the buzzing. And there on the table were two pieces of sticky flypaper fairly full of struggling victims. With a toothpick and a drop of water I endeavored to release one fine strong fellow. It seemed to me he understood and tried to cooperate. Then to my utter horror, I inadvertently pulled off his leg!

After this terrible debacle I fled upstairs and in the shadowy bedroom alone, laying my face against the starched pillow sham.

I cried out the accumulated woe of the summer; the slaughter of the helpless hogs, the drowning of the dog, the brokenhearted lover, the deserted wife, the death of my Mischief, the tragic woman at the asylum, the march of lost souls into eternity—all these in some inexplicable way for one terrible moment became personified by the struggling fly.

The suffering of all the world was before me, and I was unable to help. It was more than a small girl could stand or endure. Nor would I tell my mother what was troubling me. How could I, when I did not know—only that the whole wide world was wrong.

When Mother went downstairs, I heard Mrs. Hughes inquire anxiously, “What is the matter?”

Mother sighed, “I suppose I let her get too tired.”

~ end of chapter 16 ~

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