

HIS BANNER OVER ME

by

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CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

“THE LAST OF LIFE FOR WHICH THE FIRST WAS MADE”—Browning

1928. Pain. I have been its victim and its conqueror, its master and its servant. It has been my enemy and my teacher. As long as I draw breath it will be my constant companion. It has been a rod in the hand of God, but the rod blossomed.

On a lovely June day in 1928, Howard and I drove to a nearby eucalyptus grove. While I rested in the pungent shade, Howard took our dog Neil for a run. I had business with the Lord.

Tuberculosis had no terror for me, I had had so much of it. But here there had been, since my mother's death, an awful terror of cancer. Of late that ancient fear had risen in my heart, a fear I would not face. There had been symptoms reminiscent of my mother's illness. That day under the eucalyptus tree I faced them at last, and laid the burden on the Lord who had never failed me.

When Howard and Neil returned from their walk, Howard said quietly, as he sat down beside me, “Now tell me what has been troubling you.”

The next day we went to the doctor, who advised prompt surgery. But in the course of the examination he discovered some slight tubercular activity. I laughed when he tried to break it to me gently, and I told him that TB held no terrors for me. However, he said he would not run the risk of the general anesthetic, and asked if I could have it done with a local. I agreed, but then a heart specialist said my heart could not stand so much local anesthetic. I do not know what they gave me. I woke up on the table as the last stitch was taken.

A month later we exchanged our equity in our Long Beach home for one in Wilmington—the 1406 Lagoon address which has become familiar to so many.

This was nearer to Howard's work and gave him more time at home. By this time I was suffering greatly with my spine. Thus began the trouble which eventually left my spine completely ankylosed, and bent and twisted.

My body has “jack knifed” until my ribs dig into my stomach in a most painful manner. The doctors discovered also that I had an ulcerated case of amoeba. I treated long years for this, unsuccessfully. As I grew weaker, sundry other ailments plagued me. I need not go into them.

So began twenty-five years of trial, suffering and grief. Twenty-five years of lessons learned at the knee of God. Twenty-five years of frequent journeys to the very gates of Heaven. During this time He took from my clinging fingers their last treasures till at last I held my empty hands to Him; and so, being empty, they could be filled with His treasures. I look back over these years, the hardest and yet the richest of my life.

1928-1953. I looked back over those twenty-five years. Sorrow and suffering have assailed me with their armies and their chariots. As I stood and watched them advance, I have known that since the battle was the Lord's, the victory was also His. Twenty-five years in which I became more intimately acquainted with Him whom to know is life eternal.

The Christ of the sickroom shows a very tender face to the shut-in.

I would not have had those years different, yet I could not live them over. Since, in order to write of a subject, one must live it, I am writing very briefly of them. The fruits which they bore are in my books of verse.

My present condition, of course, came on gradually. There were trips to the hospital, many treatments, terrific doctor and hospital bills, until I wonder that my dear husband thought I was worth what I cost.

In spite of the depression, we managed in time to get the little home paid for.

With the possession of our first radio, a change came into the home of the Nicholsons', Charles Fuller, Louis Talbot and First Mate Bob. Thank God especially for these three men. Howard took notes of all of Dr. Fuller's sermons on Sundays. I sat enthralled listening to Dr. Talbot daily as he took us through the Pentateuch, Daniel, part of the Psalms, Job, then the Gospels, the Acts, the Epistles, and riches beyond measure, the Revelation. First Mate Bob came to be as dear as he is to all his wide family. Later he was kindness itself to me by telling his vast audience of my books, as each new one came out.

The sacred Word of God! Manna in a golden bowl! Day after day we ate from it, scraping each bit of succulence from the edges, savoring its sweetness, for it was as wafers made with honey.

Long quiet days with my dog Sandy, while my husband was at work. Often I was ill in bed, alone in the house with a sign "Please do not ring" on my door. I knew fewer people in those days. I formed the habit of taking a verse for a day, brooding over it, trying to extract at least a modicum of what it's Author meant.

During a bout with a strep throat one morning I chose "**Beloved, now are we the sons of God.**" Lunch time found me still entranced. I got no further than that first statement all day. Now the sons of God! Its meaning was fathomless. It implied riches boundless. It was not until the next morning that I could pass to the rest of the verse, "**it doth not yet appear, what we shall be but we know that when He shall appear, we shall be like Him . . .**" and I was pulled up short again. Who can presume to understand what it will mean to be "**like Him**"?

As the blessed Word began to enrich my heart, I continued to write more and more, and many of my verses found their way into various Christian magazines and to be quoted later in others. It seemed a wonderful thing to me. I never sent a poem out without a prayer that God would bless it and use it for His glory and the salvation or strengthening or comforting of souls.

I had previously experienced some slight success in writing secular verse, but this was different: this was touching the souls of men! I knew that I was not a real poet, and never would be, but the years have shown me that I do have two little gifts. Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer told me that I can state doctrine clearly in verse, and my experience through the years has convinced me that I have some little ability to touch the heart. I have tried very earnestly to be worthy of this trust, to stir up the gift which is in me and for which, I must give an account some day.

My bureau drawer was full of verse when Dr. Bauman, bless him, urged me to have a volume of them printed. So in 1938 the Brethren Publishing Company got out my first book, *Wings and Sky*. The publishing company mailed the books by freight, from Ohio. Howard drove to the freight office to get them. I shall never forget waiting at the window to see his car turn the corner. As he drove in the driveway his smile was a mile wide, and he held through the car window the little blue and silver volume. That first edition has long been gone, with several others, but there never was a lovelier sight in our eyes.

The reviews were more than kind. The book sold amazingly well. I was astounded at the letters which came to me.

A year or two later, through the kindness of friends, my first tract was printed, and since then the house has been a beehive of activity. With the Second World War, the *Sunday School Times*, which had printed many of my verses, gave considerable publicity to a four-page tract for servicemen and their families. The result was that my mail became so heavy that a group of ladies from the churches in Wilmington came in each day at mail time to answer the requests. My health grew worse. I have forgotten how many trips I made to the hospital—for oxygen, or artificial feedings, for X-ray pictures, for various tests which somehow never led to anything which improved my health.

In spite of all this, I found time and strength to write another book, *Threshold of Heaven*, The first edition was sold in a year. It was followed shortly by another, *In Heaven's Gardens*.

I was becoming very tired. The tract work was growing amazingly. To date nearly two million of my tracts have been sent out. It was, and is, a faith work. God has never failed me.

More and more people came to see me, Christian workers in various fields. I find in my guest book the signatures of some of God's most precious servants.

My mail grew heavier and I grew more tired, the burden of unanswered letters pressing heavy on me.

I started another book, *Ivory Palaces*. But God had still more lessons for me to learn.

Before the book was finished I went to the hospital for a blood transfusion in an effort to overcome my extreme anemia. Something went wrong. The transfusion could not be completed. I became very ill. Several weeks later I was laid low. For nearly a month I ran a daily temperature of 102 and 103, occasionally 104. Four doctors were unable to diagnose the case; in fact, they did not want it, since I was unable to go to the hospital for a series of tests and X-rays.

During the first week of fever, I wrote the last of *Ivory Palaces*—the prose “There Is Glory Here” and “The Curtain Goes Up.” Then followed such utter exhaustion that I have little memory of it. I longed inexpressibly to go Home, but I thought of the loneliness of my loved ones, and fought on.

Gradually the tide swept me nearer the other shore. Then came a day when the doctor told my husband that I could hardly live more than a week. I had no fear, only a solemn joy. Many friends whose loved ones were on the other side brought me messages to deliver. My mails were heavy. I felt surrounded by love. Then one day the doctor said there had been a change—the tide had turned. As inexplicably as it had come, the fever left. It all but took with it what little life remained in my wasted body. I was bewildered and almost disappointed.

My Christian doctor discussed the changed problems with us. I knew, as does every arthritic, that unless I kept moving I would soon stiffen over my entire body and lose what little action I possessed. The doctor told me that my heart, weakened by the fever, would be in grave danger if I tried to get up.

I made my choice. With the help of my husband, and sustained by divine strength, I tried to take a few steps every day. It took all the grit of which I was possessed. I can never forget those feeble tottering steps holding to Howard’s belt. Every day saw a battle fought and won.

Howard’s tenderness and companionship during those months are utterly precious in retrospect. It took me months to really get on my feet again. But there was still another lesson for me to learn before I could really comfort the heartbroken. The dear Lord wanted me to know that He was my strength and my comfort.

My Howard, who had always been strong as a tree, was suddenly laid low by a coronary occlusion. That heart which had always beat for me, was irreparably damaged. For fourteen months he lay in bed—he who belonged to the great outdoors. The doctors were amazed at the number of attacks he endured.

My tiny 7 x 11 room opened off his with French doors. During those long months, when he was able to talk, and not too exhausted, God gave us the most blessed companionship.

For intervals we were unable to find competent help. Things were very hard. A faithful neighbor, our Marie, slept on the davenport night after night if we were without anyone else. I was able to walk, with my crutches, but was pitifully weak, besides being tortuously bent over. God in His mercy helped me to conceal from my husband my terror and despair over his condition.

There were long hours when I tried to do for him who had so long—so many years—devoted himself to me. This was almost unbearable to him, when he knew about it.

A new low in helplessness was the day when, alone with him, I tried to bend over his bed to minister to him; and my crutch slipped. This caused those agonizing muscular spasms to which the arthritic is subject. I went down to the floor, and could not at once get up. I thought that Howard, who was under morphine following a bad attack, did not know what had happened. But after a moment he put out his arm—that dear arm which had carried and sustained me so often in my weakness—and he said feebly, “Pull on me.”

In August of 1947 came Lois of the willing hand and faithful heart, to live with us. She was with me that day in April, 1948, when my darling went Home. “Martie, I am dizzy.” And instantly he was in that lovely land which is far off, in the presence of Him whom he had loved and served for so long. . .

I cannot write of those days. The desolation of the widow was mine. But also, so was the comfort of God.

To the average person there is a relief for sorrow in physical work, in active service. I was denied this. The waves of grief broke over and over me as I lay on my bed day after day.

Finally in desperation I took to my pen again. I felt as though I were writing to my beloved. I found a solace in pouring out my heart to him, but I never expected to show those verses to anyone.

Time passed. When people learned what had come to me, my mail was flooded with letters from other widowed hearts, asking for comfort, for something about that land where their dear ones and mine were living. So, *The Glory Forever* was published, bringing some surcease of sorrow to me, and, I hope, some comfort to others. I included in it a dozen or more poems which my husband had written.

And so the years go by and the Lord has renewed His mercies every day. Lois and I have made a home together. Many friends find their way here. We have a dear fellowship.

The following year brought another book, *Heart Held High*, in which I tried to share some of the lessons God had taught me. And the next year another, my last of verse, called *The Family of God*, written for both children and adults. It comforted me, in this lonely house, to write of family circles gathered about the lamp light, and of children’s voices and laughter.

One of these latter books was dedicated to the precious little namesake, the baby girl who has been a solace during the years which followed the Homegoing of my Howard. I could almost fancy that as his spirit winged skyward, it met hers coming down to earth.

Even after heart and brain and soul seemed to be squeezed dry, God made a well in my valley of Baca. And so these three books were blest, because they spoke of Him.

Thus were my seven books of verse written—little indeed for the fruit of a lifetime. I lay them before me, my gift to Him who died for me, and rose again. Then in shame I see myself as the unprofitable servant I am. Truly we are recipients of His marvelous grace.

Still He pours His gifts upon me, beyond my fondest dreams of childhood. There has been some praise of men, but I shrink from it. I would rather have a “**Well done**” from my Lord. Horizons have widened, so that mail comes to me from all over the world. There have been the choicest servants of God ringing my door bell. My verses are quoted on dozens of radio programs. After the pruning, the fruitful years.

But the two most precious things which have come to me are eternal: I can take them with me into Heaven. The first is the knowledge that—handicapped as I am, and slow to learn—God has allowed me to serve Him. The other seems an equal miracle: letter after letter, hundreds, even thousands of them, tell me that the writers actually love me. I cannot express what this means to me. I am richer than Croesus. Every letter is carefully read, even though I cannot reply. I pray for those who ask prayer.

I have had no tuberculosis for years, but four incurable diseases have laid their clutches on me. Of the other characters in this little book, kindly Mr. and Mrs. Hughes have gone, so also my parents and grandparents. Emily lives with her husband in their pretty home in La Jolla. Amy is surrounded by her children and grandchildren. I have not seen her for eighteen years. Cathie and her husband adopted a handicapped boy. She has devoted her life to caring for him.

Widowhood has come to all three of us. It seems strange that the three stalwart men who married the frail Snell sisters should all have gone.

And now my story is nearly told. God will write the last chapters in His own time, His own way. We know it will have a happy ending. The life story of any Christian ends as does the fairy story of our youth, “And they all lived happily ever afterward.”

Looking back, how clearly I can see from this vantage point, the road which once seemed so shrouded with clouds and darkness.

In spite of grief and illness I can truly say I am a happy woman. When I was an inarticulate child, if anyone had asked me why I was happy, I would have replied, “Because it is all true about Jesus.” And now, with the silver in my hair and with my body bent and twisted, I can still think of no other way to express the reason for my joy than to say, “Because it is all true about the Lord Jesus Christ.” All true that there is a fountain filled with blood drawn from Immanuel’s veins and that sinners plunged beneath that flood lose all their guilty stains . . .

My happiness is not based upon my own faith, which wavers; nor on my own good works, which as a basis of salvation are in His eyes as filthy rags. Not on my “experience,” which is but a fitful human thing. But on the eternal fact that it is true about the lovely Son of God who sought me, found me, bought me, taught me; who lifted me out of the miry clay and set me upon a rock, accepted in the Beloved.

I found that the cleft of that rock was the secret place of the Most High, and the Shadow of the Almighty.

All true that my body is the temple of the Holy Spirit; that nothing can separate me from the love of Christ. All true that NOW I am one of the sons of God and that it doth not yet appear what I shall be, but that when He shall appear, I shall be like Him.

All true that any day, any moment, He may come for His own. All true that at last I shall be rid of this suffering humiliating flesh; I shall meet again my dear ones; and more than all else, I shall behold with my own eyes that precious Lover of my soul. And so shall we ever be with the Lord. It is all true that throughout my entire life His banner over me has been love, even though I knew it not.

All true that I shall spend time and eternity in His banqueting house with Him whom my soul loveth.

Oh, what does it matter if I suffer a little more here? Of what importance the manner of my going to Him?

O the keen rapture!
O dear delight,
When to my longing eyes faith becomes sight,
And my heart whispers, "My Lord, it is Thee!"

O the sweet safety!
O the bright glory,
Every word true of that wonderful story;
O the fair morning Dawning for me!

~ end of book ~

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