

# HIS BANNER OVER ME

by

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## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

### WIDENING HORIZONS

ON A SOFT GRAY DAY in February our class assembled as usual at the old Lincoln School. We had just finished the Sixth Grade, the highest in that school.

“Children,” announced the teacher, “we are to march in a body to the Logan School, which you are to attend through the Seventh and Eighth Grades. We bid you good-bye, and trust you will so conduct yourselves as to bring credit upon the Lincoln School. You will now proceed in orderly fashion.”

As we clattered down the gloomy staircase I was in a high state of excitement. Amy had been attending Logan School for some time but I had never been inside of it. I felt as though a new world was about to open to me.

To my delight when we passed our house, my mother was in the yard pruning the rose bushes. My heart gave the little leap of joy which an unexpected sight of her always brought. I waved at her proudly and when she smiled and waved back, I said to the girl beside me, “That is my mother.” And my schoolmate said, “She is a pretty lady.”

Arriving at the Logan School, we were marched to the front of the building. Just then the sun came out and the whole range of the Cascade Mountains, with Mt. Tacoma (Mt. Rainier) carried high on the shoulders of the smaller mountains, spread before us in beautiful unbelievable panorama. We were on the steepest crest of the hill. The city fell away at our feet. Sometimes when all the foothills were shrouded in mist, the peak of the mountain floated in the sky above them. It was only a giant’s step to the mountains which were around about us as the mountains are about Jerusalem. And those mountains were there long before God breathed upon man and he became a living soul!

And so, a new life began for me. Whenever I recall the Lincoln School, I always think of darkness and gloom and rain. But the Logan School had many windows, and in my memories the sun was always shining.

If possible I started to school just a little early each day, especially on clear days so I might stand for a few exalted moments to drink in the wonder of the Mountain. This had a tremendous effect on me. I wish that all children might grow up in sight of such majestic beauty.

My teacher, Mrs. Myers, was another strong influence. I am sure she never dreamed how one of her pupils worshiped her. Being one of the smaller children, I sat near the front and I remember that she occasionally sent a special smile my way, so perhaps she did know. Her smile lighted up her strong mobile face in a way that reminded me of the sun coming out.

From the very day we entered her room she talked with us almost as one adult to another. She called us “People” instead of “Pupils” or “Children,” as other teachers did. This put us almost on an equal footing with the older generation.

She instituted what she called “Memory Gems.” Each day during the first fifteen minutes of school, she taught us little gems of literature; and every so often gave a drill in them to see how many we could quote. This gave me sheer delight. I find these gems still stored in my mind.

Make a little fence of trust about today.  
Fill the space with loving deeds and therein stay.  
Lay not down the sheltering bars about tomorrow,  
God will help thee bear what comes of joy and sorrow.

Another one makes me wonder if she shared my love of animals: “I would not enter on my list of friends . . . the man who needlessly sets foot upon a worm.”

This teacher and my Franklin Fifth Reader marked a definite turning point in my life. Although in the Seventh Grade, we were using the Fifth Reader. Would that the children of today had some such influence during their plastic years! Here are some of the authors quoted: Emerson, Burroughs, Kingsley, Beecher, Hale, Sumner, Dickens, Ruskin, Bunyan, Webster, Addison, Everett.

Imagine a child of eleven pouring over this, by Charles Sumner:

Time is the measure of life on earth. Its enjoyment is life itself. Its divisions, its days, its hours, its minutes, are fractions of this heavenly gift to the irrevocable past, shortening by so much the measure of our days, abridging by so much the measure of usefulness committed to our hands.

The moments lost in listlessnesses or squandered in unprofitable dissipation, gathered into aggregates, are hours, days, weeks, months and years.

I do not know how much of this I understood. I know I poured over it. The other day, looking over the precious reader, I noted that I had underscored (to look up in the dictionary) the words “irrevocable,” “dissipation” and “aggregate.”

Kingsley’s *Art of Observing* fascinated me, as also did *The Dignity of Labor* by McClintock. All my life I had loved the sky—its pageantry of sunset, and most of all, the night sky. Now for the first time I read *The Milky Way* by Proctor and English, astronomers of distinction. The pages are worn from much reading.

Most beautiful of all, a bit of description called *Morning* by Edward Everett, written in 1856. Starting with a description of the brilliant night sky, he proceeds with the wondrous transfiguration:

Hands of angels, hidden from mortal eyes, shifted the scenery of the heavens; the glories of the night dissolved into the glories of the dawn . . . The whole celestial concave was filled with the inflowing tides of the morning light, which came pouring down from above in one great ocean of radiance . . . In a few seconds the gates of morning were thrown open and the Lord of day, arrayed in glories too severe for the gaze of man, began his state . . .

The first time we read this in class I was carried entirely away by its beauty, and forgetful of my surroundings I burst out, "Oh, it makes us feel so small!" The children snickered, but my teacher gave me a special smile, and I like to think that that day perhaps gave her one of the rewards which must sometimes come to teachers.

*The Fifth Reader* was rich in the very best of English poetry. I read it over and over; and before long I found that I had memorized long poems, which still remain in my mind and are a source of great joy to me. A richly furnished mind! Why do we not give this to our children nowadays? Instead, they sit before television, soaking up, soaking up until they become sponges, making very little mental effort.

Deep into my heart sank not only the words but the meaning of Whittier's *Snow-Bound*.

Alas for him who never sees  
The stars shine through his cypress trees,  
Who, hopeless, lays his dead away,  
Nor looks to see the breaking day  
Across the mournful marbles play;  
Who hath not learned, in hours of faith,  
That truth to flesh and sense unknown,  
That life is ever Lord of death  
And love can never lose its own.

Milton's *Sonnet* on his blindness sank into my heart before I was aware of it. Once the teacher asked us which line was most quoted. I thought a moment and then said, feeling the power and the glory of God, "His state is kingly; thousands at His bidding speed."

A cold chill passed over me when she said no, it was the last line:

"They also serve who only stand and wait." I shrank from it. I did not want any of that kind of serving.

*Lead Kindly Light* became another of my heart's treasures.

And Tennyson, the poet's poet: "The long light shakes across the lakes, and the cataract leaps in glory." O lovely, lovely words! Suppose God had not made words! I began to think of them as tools and to long for the time when I might use them to make something lovely and good.

And then, in spite of all this exalted life I thought I was leading—I stole again! This time it was pansies. Amy and I both loved them. We frequently passed a beautiful bed of pansies in every imaginable color, their little faces looking up to us like children. We decided there were so many a few would not be missed. And it was good for plants to have the flowers picked.

Amy said, "You pick and I'll watch. If anyone comes, I'll say Jiggers."

So I stooped to my guilty task, while she watched. It was hard to choose among such beauties; and besides my hands were shaking. I had picked only a half dozen when Amy hissed, "Jiggers. A man!"

Had he been a wild lion, he could not have seemed more terrible.

I was in a panic, but Amy as usual kept her head. She said, "We will cut through the yard and maybe he'll think we live here."

But my more vivid imagination outstripped hers. "Maybe he lives here; maybe he'll call a policeman."

But we were already halfway through the unfenced yard. One by one I dropped pansies. Our guilty hearts thudded as the man's footsteps came nearer, still nearer. Were they pausing? I know all about the feelings of a fugitive from justice.

No, he went on with scarcely a glance at us, never dreaming that he was looking not at two ordinary little girls, but at two black-hearted thieves who had just broken the Eighth Commandment and who could not replace on the plants those lovely blossoms left withering in the grass, any more than they could, with their own future good deeds, wipe out this sin of theft.

After a year our class passed into the Eighth Grade. We were under a new teacher, a fine Christian woman, though lacking the charm and personality of the Seventh Grade teacher. I was disappointed in her at first, until my mother came to visit the school, as she usually did with each new teacher. She afterwards pointed out to me what a splendid woman my teacher was.

This Mrs. Smith spoke to Mother about an odd little trait of mine which had puzzled her; if there was any mischief afoot and the class was being scolded about it, she said that I sat there, a picture of abject guilt, although she knew that I could not have been involved. I recall very well that I even felt guilty.

In this class we suffered through a terrible half hour at 2:30 P.M. each day—Mental Arithmetic. By that time we were tired and the room was stuffy, and we found it difficult to concentrate.

I froze in my seat each day in utter terror, knowing that I could not solve in my mind those awful problems concerning the frog who was forever trying to get out of the well and forever falling back in. To this day I often have to count on my fingers.

We were through with readers. I took my beloved Fifth Reader home and often read it. We began the study of *Evangeline*, and were called on to do some writing. My first effort was a description of the burning of Grand-Pré. I was quite carried away by my own fervor. Writing of the burning of the peoples' homes, I put, "Husbands clasped their wives to their bosoms." Then a deep sense of shame overtook me. I had betrayed my New England reserve. I changed the line to "Husbands and wives watched together as their homes burned."

After this sad effort I wrote a story for our Christmas program. My teacher was so delighted that she told my mother perhaps I would become another Miss Alcott.

Excited beyond all measure by this praise, I planned a brilliant career as a writer. This ambition was furthered by my discovery that my initials, M.S.S. were the abbreviation for "manuscripts." Life looked very rosy. I had no least glimpse of the drudgery, and the toil, the happiness and pain, the bondage and the exceeding great reward, which are the lot of the writer.

The *Fifth Reader*, in a long preface, gave all the simple rules of poetic diction and I really studied them, having decided—as one who had only to choose—that I would rather be a poet than a novelist.

I share with you my first effort. It has no title.

The storm was raging wildly  
On the dark and dreary sea,  
And the moon looked down in pity  
To see such misery.

A woman and a little child  
Afloat in an open boat,  
And the water cold it o'er them dashed.  
Not long could the old craft float.

But when the storm had abated,  
And the wind was lulling down,  
Through the early mist of the morning  
They could see the nearby town.

Then my inspiration failed me and I never succeeded in rescuing this unfortunate pair. Perhaps the water cold it o'er them dashes to this very day . . .

May blessings be upon the head of Cadmus, the Phoenicians, or whoever it was that  
invented books.  
—Carlyle

I used to brood over these words engraved on the cover of a book in our library.

There is still living in a nearby town an old friend who knew my mother before I was born. In those days people believed in prenatal culture. This friend tells me that during the long waiting months, my mother read all the good books she could obtain in the hope that this would make me a book lover. In this case it succeeded, for next to God and people and nature, I love books.

After my grandfather had advised my mother to turn me loose in our little library, I browsed happily during the soft gray days of Puget Sound winters when I could not get out to play. As my frail body rested, my mind and soul reached out for ever widening horizons.

Our books, though few, were unusually well chosen. There were several histories, one brief history of art, some volumes of poetry, travels, Talmage's *From Manger to Throne; Pilgrim's Progress* and quite a number of classical fiction. Among the treasures there were more than a dozen great volumes of bound magazines called "The Ladies' Repository, a Monthly Periodical Devoted to Literature, Art and Religion." These must have come from my grandfather's library as the date of the magazines is 1874. Dreary engravings, each protected by yellowed tissue paper, depicted languid ladies in bustles and waterfall hairdos. I poured for hours over these magazines. I smile as I read some of the quaint titles.

People often offered to lend me their books. The *Elsie Dinsmore* books were quite a fad in those days. The heroine was an excessively pious child who upon all occasions shed copious tears. Some neighbor child brought us the whole set to read, feeling sure that Mama would approve, for the books were "so religious"—and so were we!

Mother looked them through and returned them with thanks, saying that they were poorly written and she did not want my literary taste spoiled. This was a neighborhood mystery for quite a while, and my mother was under suspicion by my playmates. I defended her body, of course, although I could not understand it either. It may be that this incident is the one which impressed upon me the importance of what one takes into the mind. To this day when I read a book, I think of the indelible imprint it will make on my mind and character.

The mind of a child is a fertile field. There is in my heart a deep regret when I compare the literature of those days with the sensational, suggestive stories and articles of the present day. Why is America so careless of the seeds she plants in comic books, trashy literature, movies, radio and television? What a crop she reaps today in child delinquency! Is not the America of today and of the future the result of what we feed into the minds of our children?

~ end of chapter 15 ~

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