

HIS BANNER OVER ME

by

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

STRONG WOMEN OF THE PLOW

MY FATHER had little faith in doctors. He believed that nature was the great healer and that doctors should only be called in emergencies. It might have worked out had we children been born with strong constitutions, but none of us were.

Sometimes pain put his foot into our doorway and tried to enter. Frequently he succeeded, and the family by united efforts pushed him out. We had the usual childhood diseases, but had them harder than did others. The measles wouldn't come out on me until I had taken copious draughts of chamomile tea. Amy and I came down with whooping cough simultaneously but I had it more thoroughly.

Chicken pox left scars on my face for several years because I couldn't resist scratching them.

There was an obnoxious concoction called Garfield Tea. We drank sassafras tea in the spring, and all three of us nearly strangled on sulphur and molasses.

One spring, father decided asafetida was the proper method of warding off infection, so he brought home pills which we were to swallow. Other children wore asafetida in small bags around their necks, but Mother put her foot down and said, "Samuel, I will not have my children reeking of that horrible stuff." So we were to take the pills instead.

Amy docilely took hers and went off to school, but I had never learned to swallow pills and the thing stuck in my throat. Mother and I battled it out all morning. Of course I would not dream of defying her, but if the pill wouldn't go down, it wouldn't go down, would it?

It seemed there was no answer to that one.

My face became swollen with tears. Mother asked me what the washerwoman would think when she heard me. I screamed that I didn't care what she thought. Finally Mother crushed the pill and mixed it with a teaspoon of sugar, telling me to eat it. I can taste it yet.

I overheard Mother remarking to Father that evening, "Samuel, if Martha has to take any more pills, you can give them to her."

I was subject to tonsillitis, and several times I had quinsy. Frequent headaches, dizziness and nausea dogged each other's footsteps to have at me. During several of Mother's severe sick spells we had to call in a hired girl. I recall that one named Lizzie liked to cook things in plenty of grease. Father took up a dish of fried potatoes, tipping it to show the lake of grease, and stepped into Mother's bedroom saying, "Look at that!" She just turned her head into the pillow and moaned, "Oh, why did you have to show me!" Home seemed a forlorn place.

Then a real shadow hovered over our home. Amy, who had always been small, began to look smaller instead of growing. Her face became pinched and wizened, and she was not doing well in her studies.

Finally after much discussion, the doctor was called in. He said it was lateral curvature of the spine and she would have to wear a plaster of Paris cast for more than a year.

Father rigged up a gruesome scaffolding in our dining room and one Sunday morning Cathie and I were sent off to church and Sunday school. We were a subdued pair as we trudged the long blocks, wondering if they had begun yet and if they were really going to hang her up; and if so, wasn't it dangerous?

When we finally reached home three hours later, Amy was in bed asleep, Mother was down with a raging headache; even Father looked sick. The doctor had gone and Father was taking down the scaffold.

They told us later about it, how brave she had been hanging there suspended by two bands, one under each arm and only her toes touching the floor . . . The plaster of Paris came in small rolls inside tin boxes. After Amy had been hung up with nothing on but an undervest, Father had dipped the plaster rolls into hot water; and Mother and the doctor had run around and around the pitiful little figure until it resembled a monstrous cocoon. They said she grew a little flighty toward the last. Of course the more times they ran around her with the rolls, the thicker grew the cast. At last it was about an inch thick. As it cooled, it became a horribly chilly, clammy thing. It covered her entire torso. Every two months for a year, it was sawed off, she was allowed a bath, and the performance was repeated.

Then came the first separation in our closely knit family. An uncle in Omaha who was a physician advised that Amy spend a year there to complete her cure. Life seemed very strange with one of us gone. For the first time in my life I slept alone.

I was none too happy that first semester at high school. Since Amy and I had been attending only half days on account of our health, we had made but few acquaintances. Now I began a full day session but was somewhat overawed by the numbers of students and the great age of the older ones. I took my lunch in a paper sack and after a short time, I found my place in a crowd of delightful girls. We ate our lunches walking the streets on nice days, and crowded into the dark basement if it was raining. It did not take long to become fast friends. Life became a happy prospect which daily opened wider for me.

Meanwhile word came from Omaha that the plaster cast was off for good and in its place Amy was wearing a leather and steel contraption. Also she went twice a week to the YWCA and took private lessons to strengthen the weakened back muscles. Father, who had hoped that his children would be Amazons, was most enthusiastic about this and wanted me to share in a similar project. So he enrolled me in the GAA (Girls Athletic Association). The high school had no gym, so twice a week the GAA went down the steep hill *en masse* to the YWCA, where we had the use of the facilities of the gymnasium.

Our instructor was a youngish man, very good-looking, on whom I had a humble and sincere crush. Our suits were blue serge; very full bloomers to the knee, blouses and yellow ties, black gym shoes and, of course, the black cotton stockings which everyone wore. Silk hosiery was not yet worn, and nylon had not been invented.

Each girl had a locker. We dressed and undressed in a crowded little room. I always tried to hide in a corner for this process, partly on account of my natural modesty and partly because I was ashamed of my lack of curves.

The gym instructor advising me to take a certain set of Indian club exercises for developing the chest, remarked, "That would be well for you." My face burned with painful embarrassment at this reference to my physical architecture. I do not know what the instructor thought of the wisdom of giving gym work to a frail child.

I have never forgotten my dreadful weariness and the long, long hill I had to climb afterwards to get home, often in pouring rain and sometimes in the early darkness of winter. After reaching the top of the hill there was still a mile on the level.

Naturally I never attained a place on the basketball team but was doing apparatus work. The horse and the great rings hanging on ropes from the ceiling nearly jerked my arms out of their sockets. The Indian clubs, and dumbbells grew heavier each day. In spite of my best endeavors I was not rewarded by glowing health; nor did any muscles or other evidence of strength appear. To the contrary, I grew more and more tired, and thin.

Then to my utter and complete joy I was given a part, very minor to be sure, in a play being presented by the senior class, "Tennyson's Princess." My name was actually printed on the program! Yes, I was one of Eight Strong Women of the Plow. We gave an Indian Club Drill.

The audience reading my billing and seeing the wisp of a girl, must have been highly amused.

This exciting, world-shaking event was hardly over till Amy was back home again, straight and even gently plump and with a certain poise she had not possessed when she went away.

Then began an era of athletic prowess. Father wanted her to show us all the exercises she had learned in the gym. He put up a broomstick over the doorway and we "chinned the bar" until it broke.

He bought a Whitley Exerciser. I came to loathe the very sight of it. It was fastened to the wall in our bedroom. Every night we took turns using it so that we might become strong. I gripped the hated handles, pulled on the long elastic arms, but I grew no stronger, only tired and tired, especially on the evenings after my afternoon at the gym.

There is no telling what might have occurred if an accident had not put a stop to it. Father might have had a troupe of female Sandows. The last act of the evening performance was that of jumping into bed, not decorously, but with agility holding to the iron footboard with both hands and swinging one's self over. One night Amy was about to make a lying landing when out popped her knee. She screamed, I screamed and Cathie began to cry. Father looked helpless but Mother as usual was equal to the emergency.

“Hold her, Samuel,” she commanded.

Father gripped Amy's shoulders and braced. Mother gripped her leg and also braced. Mother gave a twist and a pulled and the knee popped back into its place. It was like magic.

The next day, however, the poor knee was badly swollen. Mother put hot packs on it and borrowed crutches, on which our Amy walked for some time. To this day her knee is slightly unpredictable but I think of it gratefully as having saved me from the dreadful fate of becoming a female athlete.

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