

# HIS BANNER OVER ME

by

Martha Snell Nicholson

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

### GIRL GRADUATE

AND SO, in the midst of activity and development, I began my last year at high school. I felt that we as a family would never be the same again; and I welcomed and yet shrank from the possibility of change. Unknown and distant horizons beckoned, yet the old familiar things grew more precious. I earnestly desired to build more stately mansions for my own soul.

I grew discontented with our little neighborhood club, the only purpose of which was to have a good time. My proposition that we change it to a study club was voted down with hoots of laughter. For a while it was their joke to call me "Mrs. Shakespeare."

So, once again, for I was merry-hearted and full of laughter, I threw myself into the affairs of the club and school, concealing the new gravity which had come to me.

I was seventeen years old, half child and half woman, and I was utterly unacquainted with this new person who was I. I did not know nor understand her. Indeed, who but God can understand that puzzle which is the adolescent child? The tragedy of youth is that so many important decisions are made before the maturing mind and judgment attain instinct and experience.

Instead of looking up to God, I developed a profitless habit of introspection, turning my gaze ever inward, and despairing of what I saw there.

Because of my unhappiness I was often unpleasant at home, even to my precious mother. I recall being irritable with my sisters also. This was not caused by my poor health.

I had early learned not to allow my wretchedness of body to affect my actions. I do thank God for this ability, which is priceless to the confirmed invalid.

Though my sylvan summer left me rested, after a very short time my health grew much worse.

I became so anemic that in passing to classes, I always had to maneuver to reach the banister on the edge of the stairs and almost hoist myself up, pausing a moment in the stream of passing students at the top to get my breath and let the blackness pass. I wonder that I did not break down sooner than I did.

My mother was very patient with me. I do not know how much she understood of my inner struggle. Looking back I can see that part of it concerned herself. Something within me felt that I must learn to make my own decisions and not depend so much upon her judgment. This caused terrific inner conflicts and some outward unpleasantness.

On Thanksgiving Day we three families were to have dinner together at my uncle's home. My current boy friend had invited me to go with him to the annual football game with our rivals, the Seattle team. The game was to be held in Tacoma and would be over in plenty of time for him to get me to my uncle's home. I accepted with alacrity, thinking of course there would be no objection.

Then my mother, to my utter astonishment, asked me if I thought that a Christian should attend the game while the churches of Tacoma were holding services.

"But," I objected, "you aren't going to the church service either."

"No," she replied, "but then neither am I attending a public place of amusement. But I leave it entirely up to your own conscience."

I burst out hotly, "No, you aren't. You are making me stay away from the game, and I want to go."

She turned away patiently. I must record that I remained away from the game, but it was not from any inner conviction; only that I knew she expected me to. I was sulky all day.

During my senior year I began taking a greater interest in my studies. My marks all through high school had been only a little above average. I knew very well that I was capable of doing better, but I did not exert myself. Life was too fascinating. Certain of my studies were really difficult; for me: mathematics, physics and chemistry. On the other hand, I could not get my fill of English and history.

Then in the old bookcase at home I discovered a book which my grandmother had used at the "Young Ladies' Seminary." It was called *Moral Science*, and I believe would now be termed some sort of system of Christian Ethics. It fascinated me and opened to me the doors of philosophy and psychology. I had my first glimpse of the maze wherein I was to wander for years. My mind, so long starved, was waking at last, and it demanded to be satisfied.

But all the questions which tormented me—and which certainly could have been answered for me—were in my opinion just "doubts," and therefore wicked. My mind was trying to keep pace with my faith, but the whole thing came near to being a terrible tragedy. I felt utterly condemned on account of these "doubts," and I told no one of them. I could not put them into words, for one thing. For another, there was our family reserve over spiritual matters. I longed to tell my mother but feared that she would grieve if she were to learn of my "wickedness." So I struggled on alone.

A few years later, after my mother was gone, in utter despair I went to a saintly old preacher and unburdened my soul. He listened and then in the kindest way he said, “Now we will kneel and pray that God will forgive you these wicked doubts.” So we did, and I rose from my knees and took my stony heart and my unsatisfied mind home again to renew my struggle.

I do not know why I did not get from my Bible the help I needed. I am only recording what happened, hoping that it may help others.

I do know that many a time I rested my tear-stained cheek on some of the precious promises and that their blessed truth sank deep into my soul. It is hard to describe. All this time I knew it was “all true about Jesus” and that I loved Him dearly, yet my insistent brain clamored for satisfaction.

We had a very early spring vacation that year, and an unseasonably warm week. Emily, Cathie and I, chaperoned by her lively young aunt, took a trip to the old farm. It had been two years since I had seen it. My joy was almost too great to be contained.

Weakness of body and perplexity of spirit were forgotten as I flitted from one lovely beloved spot to another—the barn, the orchard, the pastures, the woods, the creek, and lastly, the dear old hill where the whole farm spread in panorama before our eyes.

One day we took our lunch and explored the great pasture across the lane. As children we seldom visited it; it was too far away from the house.

We had a jolly time under the great oaks. Then the others wished to return to the house but I had not had enough, so asked them to leave me there. After a little good-natured joking they left, and their voices died away in the distance.

Silence fell for a moment, then I was aware of hundreds of small sounds which our laughter and conversation had drowned out. A meadowlark sang his song over and over and over, as though having achieved the ultimate in beauty, he was content to leave it so. The lazy cawing of crows, floating in circles over me, the cheerful singing of little crickets soothed me, as a balm. From the direction of the slough a blackbird called, and I saw the shiny black fellow with his red wings. He sat on the branch of a wild rosebush, beside the yellow snapdragon and pungent skunk cabbage. The very earth beneath me seemed to sing. Or perhaps it was the sky above me.

In the center of the pasture was a considerable rise where gathered a group of large oaks, like a convocation of kings, though elsewhere in the pasture were only the small scrub oaks. One of the giants had fallen but there was dignity even in its fall. Its heart was so sound that it had not rotted through the years. I lay comfortably on a thick bed of moss with this fallen oak for a backrest. I looked about me in utter content, trying to impress on my mind’s eye each bit of beauty; the groups of blue bells and equally blue brodea, the wild cucumber spreading its garlands of white star-like blossoms over the dead tree. Cool green ferns growing out from the bunches of moss, each frond delicate as a lovely flower.

The earth received me as a mother receives her child. I lay on her warm brown bosom and mused: if this earth which He had made was so comforting, what must be the very bosom of God, the author of all this beauty! I was consumed with longing for Him, my Redeemer; but I little dreamed that while I was thus seeking Him, He in His love yearned for me. I longed as never before to know Him in a deeper fuller sense . . .

And so, my Lord met me there for a sweet time of communion, as He always meets those who come to Him. **“I sat down under His shadow with great delight and His fruit was sweet to my taste.”**

I heard not the sound of a footprint  
Around me save God’s and my own,  
And the hush of my heart was as holy  
As coverts where angels have flown.

For more than an hour I lay there unstirring, while the tides of God’s love and glory broke over me. Overhead the clouds drifted lazily; and far, far above, the angels looked over the parapets of Heaven and rejoiced because a young girl prayed to hear God.

He spoke to my heart and showed me that—though I had been worshiping Him, enjoying Him and sometimes praising Him—I had not known the joy of serving Him. I had accepted His bounty, reveling in it, but had given nothing in return. My existence had been aimless. I remember there under the oaks, I begged Him to make me usable. I was fully aware of my handicap of poor health but I still believed it was only temporary and that I would “get strong” some day.

So I asked Him to show me His plan for my life.

Perhaps the child grew up a little that day. But now, looking back, I realize that I had been occupied mainly with only certain phases of God; His wonder and beauty and purity, His love—yes, to a certain extent—but I had never dreamed of the exceeding riches of His grace and mercy to us-ward, or His all-sufficiency in time of trouble.

It was as though I had seen my Saviour’s beautiful face but had not even glimpsed His heart.

Perhaps my cup, being small, was filled with all it could contain that day.

How patient, how understanding He was with my long childhood, remembering my frame, knowing that I was but dust!

The sun was sliding down the western sky when I finally made my way back to the farmhouse, to be greeted with many questions as to what I had been doing. I was not ashamed, and yet how could I tell them that I had been in His banqueting house and had seen His banner of love over me?

Only a few more weeks of school were left. I firmly expected that God would in some miraculous manner reveal to me His plan for my life.

Shortly after our return to town an evangelist held meetings at our church. There was a special consecration meeting for young people. Those who wished “to live a deeper Christian life” were asked to raise their hands. I gladly and earnestly raised mine. Then I waited eagerly for the “experience” about which I was always hearing. But nothing happened, and I felt somewhat let down.

That evening, however, I looked at my patient mother. I thought of the years of her life which she had put into her children, and then I overcame my natural reticence and, though it nearly killed me, I put my arms about her and whispered in her ear that I was going to be a better Christian.

Though she said only, “I am glad, my daughter,” I really glimpsed her joy. There seemed nothing I could do for my Lord at school. The time was full of classes and various activities. I did try to talk to my boy friend but only succeeded in making him uncomfortable, and I realized that truly two cannot walk together except they be agreed.

So there I was, my health growing daily worse yet I was longing to serve my Lord. I puzzled over the situation and wondered how long it would be before He would make my health improve. If I ever had a faint memory of lines I learned in the *Fifth Reader*, “They also serve who only stand and wait,” I shrunk from them.

Then we swung into the excitement of graduation.

More than anything else I wanted to be on the graduation day program. Five students whose marks were highest were to share the program with the five whose essays were the best. I could not even hope to get on for my marks but I thought surely I could make it through my essay. My English teacher, who said frankly that I was the best in the English class, was sure that I would be chosen. Dr. Wegener, the principal, was to read all the essays and decide.

I chose the impossibly long subject “The Influence on the High School Girl of the Poetry She Studies During Her English Course.” I still have the essay, hopelessly trite, yet showing a certain simple earnestness. I worked hard over it, feeling inspired and thinking the result wonderful. Then when I was almost beside myself with hopeful eagerness, my teacher told me that Dr. Wegener had felt it was too long to be given on the program and it was not of general interest to the public. Now I had prayed, I had believed, that God would give me this thing which I so desired. It was a bitter blow, not only to my ambition but to my faith. Of what use was it to pray?

For several days I was in utter despair. Then one afternoon as the other students were gathering in the chemistry classroom, suddenly the door burst open and in rushed my English teacher. She hugged me and said, “Dr. Wegener wants you on the program anyhow; you are to give a poem of Mrs. Browning’s. He says your essay really is the best one turned in.”

How I lived till I could rush home and tell my mother, I do not know. My feet seemed winged. I recall apologizing to God for having doubted Him, little dreaming of the times I was to learn to trust Him when He said “No” instead of “Yes.”

Meanwhile, all during the spring my Mother had been working on my graduation clothes. Remembering my disappointment over my Eighth Grade graduation dress, I take great pleasure in recording that I really had “fine feathers.” It was customary to have two dresses, one for graduation and one for class day. Into these dresses my dear mother had put her most exquisite work.

Then the girls began talking about a wrap for the evening of graduation and the alumni banquet the following night. I had supposed it would be acceptable to wear my warm coat. But there was much discussion of an “opera cape.” I set my heart on having one, and proposed that I should take my tiny bank account—my life savings—and buy the material. Mother talked it over with me but did not urge me one way or the other. I was sure there was nothing on which I could spend the money that would bring more pleasure. So we bought soft wool broadcloth in a light tan shade; and for the lining, O beautiful beyond compare! rose-colored taffeta. The cape was circular with a high collar which turned up around my face as a frame. I was amazed how becoming it was. And my mother kissed me tenderly.

I think I never wore it more than a half dozen times. Then the rosy lining made a perky dress for Amy’s first child. The moths got into the soft wool and ate holes. At last, years later, I cut it into strips for carpet rags. But I still remember how gracefully it hung about me, how the taffeta rustled and how sleek it felt to my bare arms. Yes, I am still glad I spent my money foolishly for it.

The graduation passed as a dream. No girl present had a prettier dress. To be sure, I had to wear my old black shoes, but my skirts were long enough to cover them up. Friends sent flowers, and it took the combined services of the family and boyfriends to carry them up the long hill from the Tacoma Theater, where the services had been held.

Next day was Class Day. Mother and Cathie were the only ones of my family who attended. Though I little guessed it, this was a day of immense importance in my life.

After the exercise, Cathie and I stood talking to the geometry teacher, telling him good-by.

I was feeling a little guilty over the tricks I used to play on him. He had been talking to an old student, now attending the local College of Puget Sound but visiting the high school. He stepped to one side as I talked to Prof. Orr. I did not speak to him, though I knew who he was.

I was not sure we had even been introduced. He was tall and finely built, with blonde hair, fair skin and blue eyes which were unusually keen and deep. How did I know this when I did not look at him? How does any girl know when she is being looked at with that look?

Cathie and I finally walked down the street. Then I heard a manly tread behind us.

Then, as he got into step with us, “Are you coming to the C.P.S. next year, Miss Snell?” My heart fluttered foolishly, but still mindful of the fact that perhaps we had not been properly introduced, I said primly with a voice full of starch, “How do you do, Mr. Nicholson?”

But he was not to be deterred by a little starch. So he continued to walk with us to the corner.

*Meanwhile, transcription of conversation between two guardian angels:*

*His angel to mine, “Well, its nice to see you again, even if only for a moment. Our ways haven’t passed of late.”*

*My angel, to his: “You never can tell what the future will hold. After all, His ways are not our ways, nor His thoughts our thoughts.”*

*His angel, hopefully: “You, you mean? . . . He might have in mind . . .*

*My angel smiling, “I don’t know, of course, but aren’t they suited to each other? And didn’t you see the deep look he gave her in the hall?*

*His angel: “Yes, I did, now that you speak of it!”*

*My angel, interrupting, “She did too, though of course, he did not know it.”*

*In duo: “Maybe I’ll be seeing you. Good-bye until His good time.”*

At the corner our escort bade us good-by, and we separated. Cathie and I toiled up the long steep blocks.

Down over the hill disappeared the one who was destined to become through the long years ahead, Cathie’s devoted brother, my John Halifax—my beloved husband, Howard Wren Nicholson.

**~ end of chapter 25 ~**

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