

HIS BANNER OVER ME

by

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CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

SYLVAN SUMMER

WHEN SCHOOL WAS OUT in June, it was a very shaken and pallid family which gathered once more about the long dining table. The quarantine was over; Cathie was out of danger, but seemed a mere shadow of her former self. Even her round cheeks were sunken. She had temporarily lost her ability to speak clearly. It was most difficult to understand her and the poor child resented it, thinking that we were not trying.

Mother was utterly worn out from her terrific ordeal. Even Father looked weary and somewhat thinner, as though he had not fared well on his own cooking over a little oil stove in the back yard. I don't know what my grandparents had done about meals. No one ever "ate out"—it was unthinkable. No doubt they too had cooked sketchy meals on an oil stove in their room next door.

As for me, my health was never at such a low ebb. The emotional strain of Cathie's illness, plus my own carelessness about resting, had played havoc with me.

I overheard my grandmother strongly advocating to Mother that I be kept out of school the coming year. This filled me with utter terror. The thought of not graduating with my class was unthinkable. I was willing to do anything if only I might remain in school.

Father proposed that the entire family spend the summer camping at Sylvan on Fox Island, in the hope that Cathie and I would improve in health, and that Mother "would have a good rest." Mother must have been dismayed at the prospect of cooking all summer for six people on a camp stove.

During Father's vacation there would be seven. There were no conveniences, and water would have to be carried in a bucket from the well, a quarter of a mile away. But she agreed for the sake of those she loved. Surely this kind of dissembling is counted on the credit side of the seraphic bookkeeping.

When the subject of camping was first broached, Grandfather was more than dubious. I can understand now how he felt about chilly mornings and their effect on his lame shoulder. Then Mother put him in charge of planning the camp grounds and he responded like the old soldier that he was.

The woods grew down to the edge of the beach and our camp was pitched just off the high tide line. The three tents were placed in a semicircle. Further protection from the wind was provided by a large piece of canvas nailed from tree to tree. In this outdoor sitting room we soon set up an amazing array of driftwood furniture.

The two large tents housed mother and daughters (canvas cots, as usual), and grandparents, who had the real luxury of a thick mattress. (Many a time that summer I slipped in to rest my aching back). Our supplies were kept in the smaller tent, which Grandfather called the Commissary Department.

The woods rang with the music of Grandfather's hammer and saw.

We all became beachcombers, exulting over every board, log or box which the tide brought us. Grandfather's table, seating seven, and his cupboard and bench were voted masterpieces of cabinet work. Since his bench was too plain to suit me, I worked hard constructing an armchair on more ornate lines. It looked beautiful to my eyes and was fairly comfortable if one sat bolt upright. But woe to him who leaned back in it!

He who trusted his bones to it was unceremoniously deposited onto the ground. When this propensity of the chair was discovered, we delighted in offering it to unwary boy friends who found their way to our camp.

The long arm of Puget Sound reaches deep into the land, and is gentle in its touch. Here are no breakers: the tides come in and recede softly with only murmuring lapping waves. Happy the nation which, for a period of time, rests in its heritage; about which there is no recorded history because there is peace, a hiatus between wars . . .

It was a different summer for me. I was so determined to make my health improve that I spent many dreamy hours in the hammock, resting or reading "*Our Mutual Friend*" or Jean Ingelow's poems. I could not make my eager mind rest, and committed to memory many of the choicest poems from the books I had brought along.

There was a strange sense of impending change. Not knowing what it might portend, I shrank from it. Neither did I understand my new self: half child and half woman. Because I did not understand, I was sometimes irritable and even "saucy" to my precious mother. The entire world was more complex than I had supposed, and in my wholesale way I attempted to solve many of its problems, even before I knew what they were. Young as I was, I had seen brief but tantalizing glimpses of the goalless roads of philosophy, down which I was to wander in future bewildered, wasted years.

Then came other times when all this was tossed away impatiently and I was my old eager impetuous self, ready for any adventure: fishing and clam-digging, rowing and bathing. Or for leisurely walks along the beach with my grandfather. I missed our close fellowship of former years because I could not open my heart and show him what I considered my "wicked doubts."

On Sundays my current boy friend usually came over from Tacoma to spend the day with me. Sometimes he rowed over from the mainland, quite a feat. Usually, however, he came on the little Typhoon, waving to me as it rounded the point. He usually arrived just before church time. I have often wondered if he enjoyed going to the services with us. But we never even considered anything else: it was Sunday, wasn't it? And didn't people always go to church on Sunday? Well, then!

What is there about a little white church in the country? No city edifice can possibly achieve the spirit of reverence and joy which fairly exude from these small places of worship.

The whole family walked together from the church and helped in the preparation of dinner. Then we two usually went down to the point, amply chaperoned by the spirit of John Halifax. I was still loyal to my ideal, and resolved that any boys in my life were to be merely friends until my John Halifax came wooing me. How I thank God that He put this protective wall around my heart!

Of course there was magic in the soft breeze and in the lapping waves. Of course we didn't read many of the books we brought along. Of course there were pauses in the conversation freighted with emotion we could not express. I was young and perhaps the air was vibrant with messages which were all the more eloquent for not having been expressed by touch of hand.

So the summer drifted lazily on, and I rested more and more, knowing that Grandmother and Mother were watching to see how I really felt. I made a point of putting my best foot foremost, physically speaking.

When Father arrived he threw himself with his usual capacity for pleasure into every camp activity. Two weeks out of the entire year, and then the rest of the time shut in his little cubbyhole at the post office! Yet he never complained of the monotony. He was grateful for the position which enabled him to support his loved ones, and thankful for each vacation. He relived it often during the year following. If some of his time in Heaven is spent in exploring instead of worshipping, I know that God will understand.

The summer at the beach did wonders for Cathie. She had filled out; her color and strength were good and the slight speech defect was disappearing rapidly. Grandfather was quite rejuvenated and of course Father had had his usual good time. Every morning he had told us what a "fine large day" it was, urging us to take deep breaths and get the "glam." I do not know how my mother felt at the end of the camping season, but I imagine there was considerable relief when it was over.

As for me, I was not much improved in health. At least I was rested, and Mother allowed me to return to school and begin my momentous last year. Referring to my diaries of those days, I find this entry:

I am taking some new medicine. Oh, I hope it will help me. I try to do the things other girls do and it always makes me sick. I wonder when I will get well. Of course I couldn't be like this all my life: I'd never get anything done.

Shortly after our return from camp, my grandparents went back to Omaha. We never saw them again, though they and our parents have long been together in Heaven, waiting for the unbroken family circle for which Father used to pray at family prayers.

~ end of chapter 23 ~

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