

HIS BANNER OVER ME

by

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CHAPTER TWENTY

FINE FEATHERS

WHEN I SEE my mother's hands in Heaven, they may look unfamiliar to me because they will not be needle-pricked.

I often think of her favorite maxim: "Any woman should be able to so manage her work that after the noon dishes are done, she can change her work apron for a white apron and spend the afternoon resting or sewing"—as though the terms were synonymous.

This is how I see her, in her sewing corner, the little table always piled high with work for she could not keep up with the sewing necessary for three growing girls and herself. Behind her a corner sewing stand held threads, buttons, patterns, etc. I frequently sat and gazed at her, thinking how lovely she looked, with the usual flower or bow of ribbon in the crisp dark waves of her hair.

The sewing machine had been a wedding present, a Wheeler & Wilson treadle machine. Her weary feet must have trod many a mile as they stitched the long seams.

The little light sewing rocker with carpet seat faced the table. If Mother could have had new yardage to make up, it would have been easier, but like all frugal families of those days we wore hand-me-downs. Fascinating bundles were received at intervals from aunts. I recall I used to have a vain hope that I would look as elegant as my aunt had looked. But somehow I never did. My mother used to tell us in her positive way, "Fine feathers do not make fine birds."

Mother sewed exquisitely. Her motto for everything she did was: "If it is worth doing at all, it is worth doing well." But she lacked a certain something, perhaps a sense of style. If the material was good, that was the most necessary thing in her estimation.

For years my clothes were these "made overs," and not quite like what the other girls wore. I longed for just one thin dress of wash material to wear to the infrequent parties we attended, but I did not have one for years.

I suffered a good deal from one dress which I wore when I was twelve. It consisted of a blue serge skirt and a "China silk" shirtwaist (my first).

Perhaps from shortage of material, or because she wished to make it more festive, Mother had added a collar of cream wool; and on the lower part of the sleeve, deep puffs of gaily figured French flannel. The tout ensemble must have been bewildering. Mitigating my grief over the waist was the leather belt which came with this costume. As soon as I was out of sight of my mother, I cinched it up tightly to make my waist slimly fashionable. I was so thin that I had little trouble in achieving this result.

Cathie and Amy developed considerable skill with the needle, but though I valiantly tried, I could never master the art of sewing. For some obscure reason, however, I was elected the family milliner. Some strange and bizarre creations were designed by this “modiste.”

One time I found an old straw hat in the attic, sunburned and limp. I painted it with a concoction of my own brewing, a mixture of bluing and glue, and gaily trimmed it with daisies which had also been subjected to the bluing-glue treatment. I proudly wore my masterpiece to a Sunday school picnic but unfortunately it rained and before we could get under cover, my hat was drenched. Slowly and sadly the crisp perkiness wilted until the whole thing flopped in discouraged limpness over my brow.

It was not until after I reached home and tried to remove my hat that I made another humiliating discovery. It was firmly glued to my head, necessitating the application of warm water and an immediate shampoo.

Meanwhile my graduation from the Eighth Grade was approaching. Amy had graduated the year before. Instead of the usual thin white dress, and considering the fact that the exercises took place in February instead of June, my parents had decided on a dress of cream wool. It really looked very well. After she had worn it, it was carefully put aside in moth balls for my own graduation.

But by this time I had set my heart on a thin dress, such as I heard the other girls discussing. I timidly broached the subject to my mother and though she reminded me of my weak throat, I could see that she really did understand my longing to have something new.

She said nothing, but one day she came home from downtown and with an air of mystery she spoke of a surprise for me. She seemed greatly pleased. I found a little snip of white lace near her sewing table and my hopes soared. She sewed on the surprise while I was at school. Graduation came nearer. All the schools in the city combined for the exercises. Two pupils from each city school were to appear on the program at the graduation exercises, to be held in the old Tacoma Theater, an edifice of great elegance, the portals of which I had never entered. To my joy I was one of the girls chosen from the Logan School. I was to give a reading from Hiawatha. I practiced it incessantly, hour after hour:

By the shores of Gitche Gumee,
By the shilling Big-Sea-Water,
Stood the wigwam of Nokomis,
Daughter of the Moon, Nokomis.
Dark behind it rose the forest, etc.

Underneath all my joy was the great mystery of my dress. I thought the time would never come. Then one day, during the last week, as I was singing at the top of my lungs,

Two more days, two more days, two more days to wait,
Two more days, two more days, and then I'll graduate.

My mother beckoned me to come into her room. I rushed in at top speed. There on the bed was spread out the Dress.

Only, instead of the gossamer gown of my dreams, it was Amy's old dress, with decorations—a high stiff collar of blue velvet, wide scalloped Bertha of the same material edged with deep lace, and a belt and turned-back cuffs of blue velvet on the long sleeves. My heart seemed to die right there.

Mother was watching me expectantly. I sent up a swift prayer for help, and the One who had never failed me enabled me to tell her how pretty it was. This is the one youthful memory of which I feel I may properly be proud. I knew very well that I would be the only girl on the platform with the least bit of color, and I shrank from it as only sensitive childhood can. On graduation night some of the girls asked inquisitively, "why do you have blue on your dress?"

And I held my head up proudly and answered, "Because I like it."

I "spoke my piece" with all the grace and talent I could muster.

I like to think that if I did not add materially to the "fine feathers" on the platform, there was at least one fine bird that night on the stage of the old Tacoma Theater.

~ end of chapter 20 ~

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