



Stancester Chronicles

Yea or Nay

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Yea or Nay

A Stancester story

Both of them were a little short of breath from the climb, and the strings of Sally's black bonnet had come loose. She paused at the top of the hill to retie them.

Hannah said, 'It was here, I think.' But she was already looking beyond the city, further south and further west.

Sally shaded her eyes with her hand and gazed southwards, down into the valley where the two straight roads crossed each other and the houses nestled in the loop of the river. From here, Stancester looked the same as it always had done. One might think that the last twenty-five years had not touched it. There had been no plague here, no fire; and one would need to go much closer to see to what extent the city had repaired the depredations of the Civil War.

She turned her attention back to Hannah, and moved a few paces to the left. 'I think that you stood on this rock, here. I remember that I could see the city beyond you, and the tower of the cathedral.'

It had been later in the day, that first time: the sun had moved round well to the west, and had thrown a golden light across all the hundreds of people gathered on that hilltop, one light illuminating without discrimination the idealist, the hysterical, the curious, the sceptical. It had thrown a golden light across herself, she supposed. And it had illuminated Hannah's face from the outside, as the divine fervour with which she had spoken her words had illuminated her from within.

Naturally, Sally had been curious; she had been sceptical; she had often since accused herself of being hysterical. She had not gone up the hill to be convinced; she probably ought not have gone there at all. Sitting out in the sun to listen to a ranting Quaker preacher? It was hardly in keeping with what was expected of the Dean's sister. Even now, she could only blame March madness, a restless desire to be out of the city. Taken next to what had come after, it seemed trivial, but in the moment it had been outrageous.

She had thought of it as a holiday, of sorts: an afternoon's escape to mark the end of the spring cleaning. She had not expected to hear a call. She had not thought she would find herself leaving her brother, her home, her duties. She had not dreamt that she would follow a woman who spoke in an unfamiliar Yorkshire accent about the urging of the Spirit, and about the divine image in the face of one's fellow men and women, and about the voice of one's own conscience.

‘My brothers and sisters, we trust in the truth, as that truth is still being revealed to us. We are called by a love beyond our understanding, and all we can do is to follow that call.’

Perhaps if Sally had taken longer to think about it she would not have gone. But there was a real urgency as well as a perceived one: she would not stay long here, this dark-haired, passionate-eyed preacher, and Sally felt that she would die if she did not hear her speak again. Someone said that she and her friends would be on their way to Bristol next day, and Sally knew that if she let her go, she would never find her again. The thought was intolerable. As she walked back down the hill into the city, she was already considering which of her possessions she would need to take away with her, what she would write in her note to her brother.

That note had been hard to write, had (of course) not said a quarter of what she would have wanted him to know. She told him that she was leaving with the Quakers; that she had left of her own will; that she craved his pardon, if not his understanding. How could she tell him that a woman’s preaching had stirred her soul as his had never done; that a woman’s face had struck her heart as no man’s ever had; that a woman’s words echoed still in her mind?

‘My brothers and sisters, we trust in the truth, as that truth is still being revealed to us.’

In little more than a dozen words, her life had been changed.

She had risen early and walked out on the Bristol road. When she had left the city far behind her, she sat down, and waited for the little band of Quakers to pass that way. When they came within earshot, she stood, and approached them.

‘May I come with you?’ she asked.

And her heart was glad when it was the woman with the dark hair and the passionate eyes who said to her, ‘Come with us, and welcome.’

The transition to a life of vagrancy had been difficult for one who had been used to the usual comforts. The loss of respectability smarted more than the merely practical hardships. True, it was not vagrancy for its own sake, but it was more or less inevitable. Some Friends bore it as a badge of martyrdom; for Sally, it was more of a necessary trial. She reminded herself that, though foxes had holes and birds had nests, the Son of Man had had no place to lay his head, and tried to be patient with the times of scarcity.

And in time Sally, becoming bolder in this new creed of love which was the fulfilment and the vivification of the one she had always known, had herself begun preaching and teaching. From time to time, on heath or hilltop, she

stopped and thought of her brother in the pulpit of his cathedral, the broken-faced saints surrounding him, and exulted in the breadth of the sky above her.

In York, she and Hannah had found lodgings together, and discovered over and over that necessity became a joy, sharing board and bed, life and love, deprivation and delight. When Hannah was imprisoned, she had stayed with one of the Friends, a stone's throw and a world away from the ecclesiastical dignitaries at the Minster who might have known her brother. She went every day to the prison and walked up and down in front of it, hoping for a glance of Hannah, repeating over and over to herself, 'My brothers and sisters, we trust in the truth, as that truth is still being revealed to us.' And once again she was standing on the crest of a Somerset hill, her gaze intent on the quick movements and passionate face of the woman she had come to love, finding her mind transformed, renewed.

For many years Sally had puzzled over the question of what had really happened in that moment: had she been converted, or had she fallen in love? Both flew in the face of all sense and all convention.

These days, she was content for it to have been both. Indeed, it seemed necessary for it to have been both. For no less would she have followed Hannah across the length and breadth of England; for no less would she, too, have spoken without fear of a God who was fettered in no prayer book and constrained by no Act of human Parliament; for no less would she, too, have submitted to flawed human justice and endured prison herself.

And now she had returned, drawn partly by necessity, partly by inclination, partly by the incessant nagging of conscience. Her brother had done well enough without her, she knew, had remained secure in his post until this latest business with the old king and the new queen – and that was no business of Sally's. At worst, she supposed, she had kept him from a bishop's throne; but he had never wanted to be a bishop, had liked his cathedral and his close too well to wish to be sent elsewhere, and even now he had not left the city. Sally met God in silence, these days; she thought that her brother was probably still, in spite of everything, seeking Him where she had never found Him.

Sally and Hannah retraced their steps to the high road, and followed it down into the city. Hannah would have replenished their provisions and moved on, but Sally knew that she could not leave the place so lightly.

She wandered the streets that she had known as a girl and as a woman, noting what had changed (they had repainted the sign of the Bunch of Grapes) and what was as she remembered it, perhaps a little more faded. She recognised a few faces – not so many as she had expected – and, had any

recognised her, she would have told the truth, that she had come to see her home town one last time before setting off for America. But none seemed to. The severe simplicity of her dress was as effective a disguise as the twenty-five years' absence. Did none remember that she had gone off with the Quakers? Had it not been generally known? Had there been no gossip? It seemed unlikely, but she would never have known.

Hannah, shadow-like, did not speak. Sally had come to understand that an attachment to any one particular place was not something that Hannah felt. She had lived too much on the move for that.

At last, she said, 'I ought to see my brother, if I can find him.'

Hannah nodded, seeming to expect unhappiness, but not disposed to quarrel. 'Will he see you?'

'I don't know.' She had written, often, over the years, but he had never replied; but then she had never told him an address.

And now his own had changed. The people in the Close were happy enough to direct her to a new house on the Exeter road, but that was small comfort. She left Hannah in the High Street, and walked on alone.

She did not know the woman who answered the door.

'Is... Is this where the Dean lives now?' she asked. It was a gamble. The current Dean lived at the Deanery, of course, but her brother's staff were probably sufficiently loyal to appreciate the pretence that he was still Dean.

Indeed, there was a smile, swiftly suppressed. 'It is, madam.'

Sally hesitated. It might well be that her brother would refuse to see her; if that were the case, then it would be a humiliation for both of them if she used her own name.

'Please tell him that Mrs Knowley of Windygates is here to see him,' she said.

The woman looked doubtful. 'I'll see if he's up to visitors,' she said. 'He's not at all well, you know, madam.'

She had not known. How could she have known? A wave of remorse washed over her.

She had to wait only a minute or so. The woman returned, all deference. 'The Dean will be very pleased to see you, madam,' she said. 'Please come with me.' She glanced inquisitively over her shoulder as she led the way through the unfamiliar house. Sally caught herself thinking what she might have done, had she had charge of it, and checked herself. This was not her home, nor would it ever be hers.

Her brother sat propped up by a heap of pillows in the dark wooden bed that had been their parents'. His face had become gaunt; his hair was sparse; he breathed with a sharp, wheezing, effort. She felt once more a stab of guilt.

'Mrs Knowley! Mrs Knowley of Windygates! What a delightful surprise!' His eyes were twinkling.

'I didn't like to cause comment,' she explained, 'particularly if you had... been unable to see me.'

'I quite understand. Take that seat there. Do you think that Mrs Corner will think me quite mad if I tell her that Knowley of Windygates is a frog who lives under a fallen tree behind the wall of the house where we were children?'

'I should think it very likely,' said Sally. She smiled. 'Should I tell her, instead?'

She had lived in far stranger places than under a fallen tree, and she had not told him about any of them; had written only when she could say in truth that she had eaten a square meal and was sitting next a warm fire. She had not told him about the long, cold nights when a haystack was welcome shelter and a barn was luxury. She had not told him about the prison.

'So,' he said, 'what brings you back here, now?'

She swallowed. 'I've come to say goodbye, Godfrey. I'm going to America.'

'At your time of life?'

In fact, she felt younger now, at fifty-four, than she had at twenty-nine. She said, 'I think I can be of use.' Would he understand that a strange compulsion drew her, that the Spirit blew where it would and that she was driven before it? It seemed unlikely, when his calling had kept him in the same place for thirty years, and when he remained there even now that the Church had laid him aside.

'You're going with your Quakers?'

She nodded. She did not want to beg for forgiveness, or even understanding. 'Penn's settlement.'

An expression of sadness settled on his face, and she felt at once conscience-stricken and irritated. 'For a long time,' he said, 'I expected you to see sense, and come back. You never did.'

'But that was why I left,' she said. 'I'd seen sense – or something better than sense, anyway.' Her hard-won eloquence had deserted her in the face of this old authority.

'Something you'd never seen in twenty-five years of Christian teaching from our father or from me.'

His tone was cynical; she answered it seriously. 'Yes. It was hidden from me those twenty-five years, and revealed only in the words of the poor and the

humble.' It was certain that Godfrey would not consider Hannah humble, if he knew her; one of her sex and station taking it upon herself to become a preacher must make her proud in his eyes. But Sally knew that Hannah was, more than any other she had ever met, possessed of a self-knowledge that drove out arrogance, and a faith that trusted that self-knowledge to be reflected and transcended in a divine Love. She tried to explain: 'I'd seen something that was so true that I could not ignore it. I still cannot ignore it.'

He admitted, 'Well, after all these years I can't call it a passing fancy.'

'No,' she said, and wondered whether she blushed.

'And if I were to rant and rave and turn you from the house it would make small difference to you, for you're off to America whether I will or no.'

'It would,' she said. 'Oh, I'm going to America regardless of your yea or nay, but it would mean a great deal to me to go with your blessing.'

'Is that so?' he asked slowly. 'Is that what you came for? The blessing of a clergyman without a living, who preaches a creed you've turned away from?'

'A brother,' she said, 'and a brother in Christ.'

He shook his head. 'That may do for you, Sally, but it can't for me. I can't lay aside my orders.'

'No matter who sees fit to take their trappings away from you?'

He coughed. 'I see you understand me perfectly.'

She leaned forward. 'Then try to understand *me*! You, having sworn an oath to the former king, could not go back on it. I would walk that mile, Godfrey, and then I walk another. I swear no oath, for I would not go back on any word I've spoken!'

'That must lead you into strange places,' he said drily, and then added, 'Well, indeed, to the ends of the earth!'

'Might not some call this a strange place, after the Deanery? And yet here you are. Your friend the Bishop – don't tell me he didn't try to persuade you that it wasn't such a heavy matter, that one Stuart was much the same as her father.'

His laugh was reluctant. 'Why, it's as if you had been in the room! But I maintain that your path has been the stranger. I suppose I ought to rebuke you, really, or perhaps you ought to rebuke me.' He chuckled, wheezily. 'But I'm too tired, Sally.'

'You must tell me if I tire you.'

'No, indeed, you must stay as long as you like, and not mind me.' He closed his eyes for a little while. When he opened them again, he said, 'You look well. Better than I do, no doubt.'

'Do they know what's wrong?' she asked.

He waved an impatient hand. 'Doctor Smyth says he does, but I don't understand what he tells me. It's something in my lungs. Andrews told me that it's all round the city that I'm dying of a broken heart.' He snorted.

'Why, because you've been deprived of the living?'

'If you like to call it that. I don't. I'm no Granville, you know. But it's not that, Sally; my lungs have been troublous since King Charles' day; and besides, Stancester has been very kind to me in all my trials.'

'I'm glad of that,' she said.

He asked, 'Are you going on your own, by the bye? Or have you married?'

She laughed, warily. 'Neither. I'm going with a good friend; she's been my companion, or I've been hers, since I left here.'

He raised his eyebrows, and nodded. She would have liked to tell him that Hannah was more to her than ever husband was to a wife, that she loved her as Ruth loved Naomi, that it was not from poverty alone that they shared a bed. It would not have been wise; she knew that. Even among Friends, where truth was supreme and old assumptions overturned, it would not have done. How much more so here!

'Well,' he said, and he was smiling, 'I hope she takes good care of you, and I shall pray for the preservation of your body and your soul, on the voyage and when you have landed.'

'And I yours,' she said, a little defensively.

He took her hand, and pressed it between his two thin ones. 'Write to me, Sally; tell me about the place. Well: your journey may be the more perilous, but mine, I think, is the more certain to reach its destination. I'll see you in harbour, Sally, be sure of that.'

She was able to suppress the tears until she had left the house – it would not do for Mrs Knowley of Windygates to be seen weeping for the Dean – and found her spirits lifted somewhat by the sight of Hannah, talking solemnly to a little boy.

When Hannah looked up and saw Sally, she pressed something into the child's hand, nodded at something he said, and sent him smiling down the street.

Sally crossed the road to meet her. Hannah took her hand, and the brightness of the sun in the west caught in her eyes, until everything that she could see was glory.