

The First School

The scraping of benches and stools and the bang, bang, banging of the door stopped. Hannah peeped her head round the door that connected the parlour and the school room.

‘Yes, they’ve all gone, Hannah, you may come in,’ said weary Mr More, who was sitting behind a high desk at the front of the simple classroom. Hannah grinned and turned her head to call.

‘Come on, Patty! Sally, come on! We can play, they’ve all gone.’ She rushed in, followed by a taller girl holding the hand of a smiling toddler. Hannah had dark eyes which seemed to flash with ideas and dark brown hair pulled back from her face. ‘Patty, sit down and wait nicely,’ said Hannah, as she and Sally began tugging and pushing the heavy benches and the few desks at which the thirty village children had sat. ‘Our school will soon be ready!’ Their father, fearing noise was ahead, quietly slipped from his high seat and went out of the far door towards the peace of his vegetable garden.

‘Now, we’re ready!’ Sally stood on a bench, towering precariously over her two younger sisters who sat below her on the hard floor. ‘The alphabet, if you please!’ Hannah and Patty chanted the alphabet as loudly as they

could before Hannah began to recite a poem. After this, Patty could sit still no longer and began to run in circles over the flag-stoned floor. Hannah and Sally straight away started to chase her and soon became dizzy, collapsing in giggles into each other's arms. 'What a school! Imagine if Father's boys behaved like this!' panted ten-year-old Sally as she started to race round again.

Hannah loved this time of the day, when she and her sisters could escape the confines of their cramped cottage and imagine they were at school like the farmers' sons that came every morning to learn reading and writing from her father. She couldn't understand why they moaned and grumbled about books whilst they ate their packages of bread and cheese. If only she could have lessons all day and not just by the fire in the evening! While the boys were sitting down with their slates she was helping her mother, scrubbing or mending or minding little Patty. Still, Hannah reckoned that she knew more than those clumsy boys and the few girls who were allowed to school too. They just learned enough to get by at market, whereas she had learned about Hector and Achilles, heroes and goddesses, adventures and wars.

'Hannah! Hannah! Carriages!' Two-year-old Patty had grown tired of running and wanted her favourite game.

'Alright dearie,' said Hannah, 'We'll play carriages. Sally, help me pull out this chair.' Over went the chair and Hannah sat on top of it with Patty on her knee. In

her hands were the imaginary reins of a pair of smart black horses and the battered school room chair was a coach rushing towards London. Bounce, bounce, bounce went the giggling toddler and all the while Hannah kept up her commentary. ‘Over the river and round the bend, mind the pothole, hold on! We’re off to see the bookshops and buy ourselves some stories! We’ll find you an Aesop’s Fable, Patty, and I’ll have some Plutarch in Latin, for Father’s said I’d be able to read it – I’m taking to Latin so well. We’ll buy Father all the books he lost and more besides!’

‘What will mother have?’ cried a breathless Sally. ‘Shall we buy her poetry or sermons? And Mary and Betty? Let’s buy them all books too! And let’s visit the theatres and churches. I can see the dresses now, the big gowns and huge wigs! Hannah, can’t you imagine them too?’ The dull, brown school room became the dazzling streets of London as Sally and Hannah played and Patty listened, eyes wide as her sisters, described the gold, jewels and silks of their imaginations.

‘Supper, girls!’ Mother’s kind face appeared from behind the door.

‘Yes, oh quick, come on! Patty, go with Mother will you?’ In a trice, Hannah and Sally became serious and started to work quickly. They pulled up the furniture and placed it ready for the morning’s lessons and for the unwilling schoolchildren who would soon slouch in.

In the parlour, Jacob More was standing in front of the fire. At fifty-two he looked and felt like an old

man; teaching was hard work and not the career he had dreamed of. When he was a boy, he'd been to a fine old grammar school where he had learned not only to write, but to speak in Latin. He'd studied ancient Greek and complicated mathematics. He'd had dreams of being a gentleman and not having to work. But all that had come to nothing. He had little money and a very small house. There was no genteel life for those who hadn't the right family connections.

He had worked for a while as a taxman, travelling around the countryside checking up on shopkeepers and farmers. But that had been a young man's job. His aching limbs weren't up to those long rides on horseback any longer. So he'd settled for this school. Every day twenty poor boys came to the school room to learn from him. They were good lads really; the sons of servants and farm labourers, who would end up as servants or farm workers themselves. They learned to read and write a little and how to add up and take away – just enough maths so they wouldn't be swindled at market. Ten girls came too and, alongside some reading, learned how to sew and spin from his wife, Mary.

'I just can't see how we can go on, Mary,' Jacob sighed. 'Hannah remembers everything and keeps talking about books. Her mathematics is better than the best of my oldest students and she is only eight! The lessons will have to stop!'

'Jacob! I can't believe you're speaking like this! Stop teaching her because she's learning too much?

Give up on her because she enjoys it too much? This is nonsense!’ Mary turned to face her husband. She clattered the bowls down as loudly as she dared. Looking across at Patty who had started to whimper, she continued in a loud whisper. ‘You loved your books and your studies. I never had the chance – all I had was my mother to teach me on the farm. And now you think you can take that opportunity away from our Hannah. The one you think is the brightest of the lot!’

‘But if she carries on this way she’ll never marry. A freak is what she’ll become – a woman knowing more than any man. She’ll be a laughing stock. No man will want her, and what will we do with her? No Mary, she needs to learn how to earn a living, not how to show off her learning.’

Mary More turned back to stir the stew cooking over the fire. No more lessons for Hannah? Round and round went her spoon. No more Latin or Maths, the subjects her own husband loved to teach?

‘But Jacob, you will miss it so; those lessons are what you look forward to each day. Hannah could do so much more; you yourself say you’ve never taught anyone like her ... she could go to London and ...’

‘Mary, you don’t understand. An educated woman is like a dog walking on its hind legs – marvellous, but for the circus. No, I’ve made up my mind. No more boys’ learning for Hannah. She can follow the others.’ Mary More gritted her teeth and continued to stir. She

had married Jacob when she was only seventeen. Only a year later, she'd had her first child. And now she had five girls, all of them busy and bright, but hard work! Of course she loved them to bits, each one of them so different from the others. And she didn't mind the darning and mending to keep clothes decent and the scrubbing and chopping to keep a meal on the table. But it all seemed so precarious. What if they didn't marry, or married a bad man? How could five girls find a way for themselves in this hard world?

Jacob got his way of course, though Mary didn't give up. Eight-year-old Hannah joined in with the sewing, the sweeping and the washing which went on week by week. She played with her sisters, imagining all kinds of new worlds and at night, after the school lessons stopped, Hannah still crept into the school room. In that room she could remember her lessons and pick up scraps of paper left by the boys. These she took care to hide in the broom cupboard where no one else could find them, writing her own stories on them and then squirrelling them away like nuts stored for winter. She didn't forget the Latin she had been taught and still curled up on her father's knee every night to hear about heroes like Odysseus and the monsters he fought. There weren't many girls in his stories though. All they seemed to do was wait, like patient Penelope, and Ariadne who got stranded on a beach. Women in the Bible stories her father read to the whole family seemed to have more interesting jobs. There she

learned about Ruth who harvested, Lydia who was a merchant and clever Abigail who seemed to know just the right thing to do. Then there were the women who followed Jesus – they were pretty busy and important, quite like her mother, Hannah thought!

On a Sunday, the More family walked through the village to church. All the children from school were there, watching the school family arrive and sit still all through the long service. Week by week, Hannah looked at the communion table pushed back against the wall of the church. It seemed so very far away from their pew and the rector's words seemed very quiet as he repeated the words from the prayer book. The Ten Commandments written up in gold lettering on either side of the chancel were nearer and easier to understand; Hannah knew what these instructions meant and she knew that she had to try to obey them. And when she wasn't thinking about those words, her mind wandered to her own words, her stories and her games. Just like her mother, she thought and daydreamed about the day when she would be grown up. What would she do?