

Mrs. Hicks Meets Mr. Douglass

When Rachel told Abraham that a voice had been visiting her in her sleep, beseeching her to become an itinerant minister, Abraham's response provided little comfort.

"Few are blessed this way," Abraham said. "You have been divinely gifted."

Seeing his wife's brow tighten to his reaction, Abraham thought that she rejected the entreaty because of her modest temperament. He understood her concern but disagreed.

"Don't hide your lamp under a bushel, Rachel. It's not a talent given to everyone."

"I have no such talent," she insisted.

"Perhaps not today, Rachel. But the talent will be there when you need it. You won't be asked to do what you cannot."

She couldn't bring herself to tell him that the voice brought not inspiration but torment.

They sat for many minutes before she explained, "If it were the Spirit that I hear, Abraham, I would heed it. But I believe it's my self-will speaking. It's a delusion, an enticement to pride."

The voice continued to insinuate itself into her inner ear, alighting now not only at night as Abraham snored beside her and the bedside candle had guttered to extinction but also in the Meetinghouse.

With each visit during worship, appealing to her week after week, she felt less certain that it was her own voice she heard and allowed that Abraham's understanding may be correct.

"Listen and follow," Abraham advised, as they sat across from one another in the cane chairs fashioned from his own hand, nearly knee-to-knee. Bleating came from the sheep pen, blackbirds cawed in the sycamores. Rachel rested her hands on the folds of her heavy dress while Abraham leaned forward and cupped his hands over hers.

Every now and then, after a Friend had arisen to testify, Rachel let her heart speak to the assembled Friends. This was a release of sorts, but the voice persisted. More was demanded of her than testifying in the Westbury Meeting. She was meant to reinforce the Spirit in others, to bring support where Quakers were scattered.

Abraham urged her to follow the Spirit's call.

"You know me well, Abraham. I'm a shy person. How can I go before strangers and address them with an intelligible voice? I'm not worthy."

“Oh, Rachel. You are as fine a Christian as any. You are worthy of carrying the word. The Spirit won’t mislead you.”

Rachel was comforted by Abraham’s reassuring words, the kindness that he exhibited. Looking into his eyes, never steely with her, she could almost believe his assurances.

That night, she wept as her husband held her.

“I always fail,” she lamented. “I am among the chief of sinners.”

“That’s not so.”

“It is willfulness not give in to my own calling,” she explained.

“You are too stubborn, Rachel. But not willful. You’ve been chosen for the ministry because of your humility. But humility wrongly placed can be a hindrance. The Spirit knows who you are. Let go and the Light lead you.”

“I’m a hypocrite.”

“Oh, woman, you’re too hard on yourself,” Abraham consoled.

Rachel struggled to resist. How could she leave home with a husband and two children to care for? With first her eldest son’s death, followed two years later by her youngest, and then that of Abraham, Rachel’s resistance began to crumble. Although the bereavements seemed more than she could bear, she found consolation that they had passed to a state of never-ending felicity.

During this long period of torment, Rachel became involved in the Meeting’s affairs. However, she rarely

testified or spoke more than a sentence or two, fighting against the Spirit that that wouldn't loosen its grip.

At a Wednesday Meeting, a rough-hewn man, his hat pressed against his stomach as he stood, warned, "There is someone present who if not faithful will be cast into the state of forgetfulness and darkness forever."

As if responding to the Friend's testimony, the voice spoke to her gently: "Who are you to sit in judgment against God?"; then more insistently: "It is His right to rule;" until, finally with the authority she could no longer deny, Rachel admitted that Abraham had been right all along. The Friend had spoken to her and she knew that it was her stubbornness that kept her from heeding the call. After an hour of expectant waiting, she submitted herself to God's will and was pulled to her feet. She knew now that it wasn't pride but an opening to the Spirit that moved her. Words flowed and a long-felt heaviness lifted from her chest.

Freed her from rebellion against her known duty, what had been in Rachel's heart spilled out—she testified against the evils of slavery and in favor of boycotting of goods produced by the heinous system.

"I will not be a thief and a murderer," Rachel said standing in front of the long wooden bench that stretched from the back to the front of the Meetinghouse. The words came easily, and she spoke without shyness, fluently as though she had been long accustomed to speaking in front of a congregation, knowing full well that some who sat in respectful

silence had abandoned the boycott and favored direct action towards abolition.

“I won’t sweeten my tea with the tears of others nor will read a newspaper that prints a slave notice. I will wear rough clothes rather than buy the cotton that is wrung from the bodies and blood of others. The love of our fellow creatures demands we refrain from consuming the goods so evilly gained.”

For an hour, draped in a gray shawl over her black dress, a stiff linen cap covering her thick hair, she relayed her message about her selfishness and shortfalls and how she needed to resist the temptations of the luxuries of the world.



“I will bear another’s burdens no matter how small my part. I forsake my transgressions.”

Some Friends sat impervious to her witnessing while the damp cold numbed their feet in the unheated room. No matter the intensity of her testimony, not one person who had repudiated the boycott was moved to embrace it and no one who favored the immediate freeing of all enslaved people endorsed her. No matter. Truth wasn’t verified by numbers. Rachel had stood to witness, not to persuade, and therefore felt satisfied that she was able to express her conscience.

After her frequent testimonies, the Meeting designated Rachel as a minister and gave her minutes of approbation. As a missionary, she would be carrying on the call of the faithful. At last she took up the cause of traveling and speaking on behalf of the Society of Friends, finally accepting that Abraham had been right, that the Spirit would provide all the strength she needed. She would follow the Light and it would overcome the shadow of mourning.

She traveled on horseback and coach, sometimes retiring at inns, staying mainly with Friends along the way, and returning to her farm months later, which she had left to her neighbor Robert Powell to manage, until she left again to bear witness, preaching, often lonely but always faithful to the voice that emboldened her.

Doubts crumbled before her conviction that the Spirit was true. She found that with the clarity of her convictions, she could even contest her uncle Elias's objection to the construction of the Erie Canal. Her uncle had written, "If the Lord had intended there should be an internal waterway, he would have placed them there, and there would have been a river flowing through central New York."

Sitting on a horse-drawn barge between the Catskills and the Adirondacks, she let a small smile pass her lips as she thought, 'If the Lord intended that there be carriages, he would have placed wheels on the feet of horses.'

Shortly after her fiftieth birthday, despite her iron will, Rachel fell seriously ill, and for the first time in

years, spent more time at home than on the road. In a memoir she began during her convalescence, she spent much time reflecting upon slavery. She noted that her grandfather had once sold his slave when he found the man unpleasant. Then bothered by his conscience, he had concluded that slavery was contrary to Christianity and so repurchased the man and set him free.

And her own husband, she noted with suppressed pride, had raised funds “to remunerate those who had labored for their former owners.” People needed more than money. So he and other Friends established a fund to educate colored children in Westbury. Rachel wrote that Abraham believed if he continued to live his life as a merciful Christian, with these two acts he had done all that justice required of him.

Rachel thought more was demanded of her, but she was uncertain about what that was. She expected that the call would keep her close to home.

One day she received a letter from her cousin, Amy Post, who wrote that a young man, Frederick Douglass, after several years in England and Ireland working with abolitionists there, had recently moved to Syracuse. Could she arrange for her Rochester neighbor to speak in Westbury about the evils of slavery?

Rachel considered the request, but she had misgivings about Amy’s turn towards activism, which Orthodox Quakers embraced while Rachel, a Hicksite, had rejected worldly involvement and held that the women’s vote, as all votes, were irrelevant. A pure life

uncorrupted by the larger world, one that lived by extending mercy and kindness to everyone, was sufficient to bring the evil system to a close. Amy, though, had joined with Protestants and deists in the Anti-Slavery Society, an action that Rachel feared was a compromise that would undo the spiritual life.

“My dear friend,” Rachel responded. She expressed her concern about Amy’s involvement in the cause of women’s rights—women speaking to groups of mixed sexes in public settings was unacceptable. She concluded by stating that despite her doubts about the wisdom of such a course, she would pass on to others Amy’s request.

After much discussion in both Meeting Houses, Douglass received an invitation to meet with Friends, both Hicksite and Orthodox, in Westbury.

On the day of Douglass’s arrival, Rachel rode with Robert Powell in his wagonette to the railroad station to wait for the train from Brooklyn. Although her neighbor was Orthodox and she, a Hicksite, unlike many Friends on opposing sides of the ‘great separation,’ the two remained amicable. Many Quakers had stopped talking to one another and some had been disowned by the other faction. Rachel and her neighbor, whose properties abutted one another, often walked to worship together. Upon reaching the Quaker grounds, Rachel would enter the old Meetinghouse, her neighbor the other. Rachel had been barred from entering the Orthodox Meetinghouse.

The *Hicksville's* steam whistle startled the horses awaiting passengers as the late morning train from Brooklyn chugged to a stop. Smoke billowed from the large funnel on the engine. Douglass stepped down from the second-class carriage. After introductions, Rachel and her guest climbed onto the wagonette to sit facing one another as Powell steered his vehicle towards the gathering.



“Your family is very prosperous, Mrs. Hicks,” Douglas remarked to Rachel who took his comment without a response. “The next village on the rail line and the steam engine that pulled the carriages, I assume, are named for your family.”

The comment irked Rachel, as it pointed to the painful division within the Friends, a difference that would soon be obvious when she, in her homespun kersey clothes, mixed with the Orthodox women with silk taffeta and satin dresses.

“The village and the locomotive were named in honor of Rachel’s cousin,” Powell explained. “He had been president of the railroad.”

“Yes, some have chosen a worldly path,” Rachel added with a hint of disdain, as such vainglory was repugnant to her.

“And you, I see, Mrs. Hicks, have not.”

“I follow God’s way,” she said forcefully, regaining her equanimity.

“Laudable, indeed. If only more did so,” Douglass said with a hint of irony.

“And the same about the women’s cause to vote? I stood with your cousin last year in Seneca Falls, you must know.”

“I did not. But my answer is the same,” she said curtly as she adjusted her cotton cap.

Rachel would later admonish herself for her ungenerous feelings regarding the arrogance of the visitor and the momentary loss of her temper.

The wagonette ambled northward, the Hempstead plains behind them. They passed the smallest of the forty Quaker farms in the area.

“I know from my Rochester friends that some here also have chosen to shelter runaways.”

“Yes, that’s so. Sir, when I was a girl my father hid runaways in the attic of our house. Our homes are still open to wayfarers, yes, that’s right.”

“And you have continued to do so yourself?”

“How could I do otherwise? It is what God commands of me.”

“Although it violates the law,” Douglass asserted.

“It doesn’t violate the only law that matters,” Rachel responded.

They reached the junction at the turnpike where the two Meeting Houses sat on either side of the station road. They crossed the Jericho road and drove into the bosky hills along the lip of the terminal

moraine. Here, set amongst self-sufficient farms tended by many hands, were the large homes of the well-to-do Orthodox Quakers, several of whom were New York businessmen or merchants, more worldly than Rachel and her neighbors.

On this day, dozens from both wings of the Quaker separation gathered to meet the young man from Rochester, the Hicksites in plain homespun dress, the Orthodox in store-bought clothing, everyone in gray and blacks, olive green or muted gold. While several Friends on opposite sides of the Friends' schism avoided talking to one another, their common detestation of slavery now brought them together.

The Friends met in the house of a retired New York merchant. Still, planks had to be laid across living room furniture to make for more seating space. Against one wall stood a melodeon, an ostentation that rankled Rachel, as did the mahogany sideboard with cabriole legs. She wasn't alone in being bothered by the furnishings—the mix of wealth and thrift, show and plainness was a vulgar restraint that disturbed many Hicksites about their Orthodox brethren. She sniffed at the silver trays upon which the servants carried the repasts. Pewter will do.

The smell of freshly mown hay and clover wafted through the windows but soon the room turned sour from the press of bodies. Light glinted off Douglass's high forehead emphasizing his piercing eyes.

“I’m delighted and surprised to find so many welcoming me here,” Douglass said to the expectant crowd.

Douglass continued to engage Rachel while she felt even more strongly that the visitor’s great abilities were misplaced. His efforts would lead to no good.

“You continue to support the boycott, I understand,” Douglass said to her, “though some have given way.”

“They have.”

“I continue the boycott myself,” the visitor said.

“I see,” Rachel said as she looked Douglass’s linen frock coat.

“Although I have come to believe that it is far from enough,” Douglass added.

“I agree with you, Mr. Douglass. More needs to be done. Too few lead exemplary lives,” she said.

“Christian lives of modesty and moderation.”

Redirecting the subject a bit, Douglass said, “You know your cousins have left the Rochester Meeting.”

“Yes.”

“Isaac and Amy have been unable to persuade the Meeting to join the abolitionist cause.”

Douglass leaned over to hear his soft-spoken interlocuter.

“We all oppose slavery,” she said. “This house we are in has aided those fleeing from slavery.”

“This is well and good, Mrs. Hicks. But we also need organizing. Witnessing alone isn’t enough. Petitions. Declarations. Conventions. Slavery is a

moral abomination that can only be resolved through politics.”

Powell nodded in agreement.

Rachel felt no need to defend her positions. Radical action was complete submission to God, not turning worldly.

“If slavery is wrong,” Douglass continued, “shouldn’t you work towards destroying it?”

“I am.”

“So you agree that you must join the anti-slavery organization.”

“No, I do not, Mr. Douglass.”

“Do you object?”

Rachel felt herself being drawn into a conversation that she didn’t want to have. She felt most comfortable testifying, not expressing herself in a dialogue.

“My father and uncle were most clear about this,” she finally said. “They convinced their brethren to free their slaves, sometimes at great personal cost.” Rachel continued evenly, “Friends in our Meeting have purchased land for some.”

“I appreciate that, Mrs. Hicks. But how can material costs be compared to the cost of being in human bondage, as I have known personally?”

“Not at all, I admit.”

“So it must be ended immediately.”

“It has ended here. The good people now have their own farms in the neighborhood, and some have prospered. A Mr. Levi owns a farm far larger than my own, the one by the station.”

“Yes, but they’re a small number and not everyone’s heart is as generous as yours. We can’t rely upon good will, Mrs. Hicks. It is a political matter.”

“It is a spiritual challenge, Mr. Douglass. Each is responsible for his own salvation. We can’t compromise our Christian principles for expediency. Slavery is wrong, it is cruel and unjust.” She kept quiet and felt the Spirit fill her. She then added, “God will put an end to it. God is good, Mr. Douglass.”

“Mrs. Hicks,” Douglass quickly replied, “I prayed for freedom for twenty years but received no answer until I prayed with my legs.”

A stately man in a fashionable suit approached them.

“Sir,” Mr. Seaman interjected, “I want to tell you that I have joined the Anti-Slavery Society, as has my brother in Rochester, Isaac Post.”

The comment pained Rachel.

“Yes. I know your brother well. He’s a loyal friend and supporter of the cause. His spirit, like mine, has been roused to the eternal wakefulness of liberty.”

“No one in this room disputes the evils of slavery. Every good Christian supports its end without equivocation. But I do have reservations,” Seaman continued.

“Yes?”

“Slavery must be gone. We all agree on the righteousness of the anti-slavery cause. But it is the method by which this will be brought about to its just conclusion puzzles many in this room. We are a peaceful people. Violence is abhorrent to the Lord. So,

I must ask you, Mr. Douglass, as there are rumors that I hear but disbelieve: You are opposed to violence, are you not, sir?"

As others gathered closer, Rachel stepped aside, absenting herself from the rising tension in the room. She watched as Douglass's face grew tight.

"Yes, I am," Douglass stated.

"Not meaning any offense, Mr. Douglass," Seaman continued. "Your remarks about Gen. Worth's death that have been reported in the press have raised doubts in the minds of some. We know the press isn't always accurate. Can you tell us, sir, in your own words what your position is?"

'Be still,' Rachel told herself as she sat, closed her eyes and clasped her hands.

Maintaining his even temper Douglass said, "I don't know which newspaper you are referring to, so I will state my position here to you to make it clear." Then, raising his voice to underscore his point, he continued, "The Mexican war was against everything I stand for. It was against freedom, against the Negro, and against the interests of workingmen. Why may not the oppressed say, when an oppressor is dead, that there is one the less of his oppressors left on earth? For my part, I wouldn't care if I should hear of the death of every man who engaged in that bloody war."

From the other side of the cramped room, Rachel asserted, "My dear sir, this isn't a Christian attitude to take towards the living or the dead."

“What about forcible resistance to end slavery? Is this your position?” Powell asked.

“I should welcome news, should it come, that the slaves had risen, and that the sable arms which had been engaged in beautifying and adorning the South were engaged in spreading death and devastation there.”

Douglass left no doubt about his eloquence but a great deal of confusion about his commitment to non-violence.

“Do you mean to say . . . ?”

“What I have to say, sir, I’ll say tomorrow at your Meeting.”

An awkward silence descended, broken by an invitation to partake in the collation. When Douglass finished, feeling as certain as she did when rising in the Meeting House, Rachel took it upon herself to tell him that he wasn’t to address Friends, not in either Meetinghouse.

Taken aback, he said, “What do you mean, Mrs. Hicks? That’s why I’m here.”

“Yes, to address us, to let us hear from you and learn more about the evils of slavery. We support you, Mr. Douglass.”

Douglass waited for the explanation.

“There wasn’t a consensus regarding the nature of that support. For some it’s your payment as a speaker that’s the problem. We’re opposed to hireling ministers. No one is paid to speak in our Meeting House. We speak only when the Spirit moves us, never for a fee. We speak freely and it is freely given.”

Douglass waited for her to continue.

“For others, such as myself, Mr. Douglass, it’s your worldly interventions.”

“All this you knew before my arrival here.”

“Yes. And I apologize, Mr. Douglass,” assuming a pastoral tone. “There has been a misunderstanding. When I wrote to you, I thought you understood the invitation was to meet with Friends in their homes, not in the Meetinghouses. That’s what you have done today.”

Later that day, Rachel and her neighbor drove Douglass to the Westbury Station for the afternoon train to Brooklyn. During the ride from the woods to the plains, she instructed the visitor, who had shown irritation at turn of events, “Nothing is greater than if we live faithfully and strictly by the Inward Anointing. This is the instruction and help we afford one another. I am convinced, Mr. Douglass, that faith alone is sufficient to cause great change.”

Douglass thanked her for her hospitality and said nothing more until they arrived at the station. As he boarded the train, he turned to her from the step and said, “I’m afraid that you are too Godly to favor goodness, Mrs. Hicks.”

“And you, Mr. Douglass,” she quickly responded, “depend too much upon human wisdom.”

“Perhaps,” he added. “The difference between us is that you choose to bow down while I choose to stand up.”

“You misunderstand, sir. Friends stand, too, but with a different posture.”

Leaving a cloud of soot and smoke, the *Hicksville* chugged towards Brooklyn; Rachel returned to her farm in the wagonette beside neighbor Powell. Neither discussed the abolitionist's visit.

When the war arrived, Rachel felt that a great weight of responsibility rested upon the Friends. They were answerable for the calamity—the groans of the dying in the fields, the moans of the bereaved—that the war had wrought since so many had wavered in their principles.

And after the war, they had failed again.

“Had Friends lived in the life and power of vital religion,” she reflected shortly before her death, “we would have remained a united people, wise in the wisdom which the Divine within gives, standing aloof from all parties and party feelings, giving evidence that we love all men of every nation, without distinction. Our country would not have sunk into its present sad condition; its people divided, and in many cases hating each other. My spirit is clothed in mourning.”

When asked on her death bed if she had any messages for her friends, she replied, “None except my desire that they love one another and do right. My love flows to all.”

Rachel Hicks lies in the Friends' Westbury cemetery under a gravestone barely large enough to hold her name, submissive to the end.