Yours from the Tower

SALLY NICHOLLS



ANDERSEN PRESS

First published in 2023 by
Andersen Press Limited
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road, London SW1V 2SA, UK
Vijverlaan 48, 3062 HL Rotterdam, Nederland
www.andersenpress.co.uk

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data available.

ISBN 978 1 83913 319 0

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

Bannon House
Abyford
Perthshire
20th November 1896

Dear Polly and Sophia,

Girls, please write to me at once and tell me how you are. I am so lonely I could die. I have been at my grandmother's house for FOUR MONTHS now and absolutely NOTHING has happened. Grandmother sees nobody, visits nobody, goes nowhere. I am expected to wait upon her hand and foot – fetch her her smelling salts, take her letters to the post, read aloud to her, take dictation. I am absolutely wretched.

I know she does not intend for me to marry. She said to me, 'Nice to have a granddaughter to keep house. It has been so lonely since your aunt Lucy passed on.' I do not keep house, though. Her housekeeper, Sarah, does everything and always has done. I tried ordering food when I first came here – I got the big book of recipes down from the kitchen shelf and looked through it, trying to find interesting things to eat. But Sarah and Grandmother soon put me in my place. 'We have chop on Monday,' said Sarah. 'And mutton on Tuesday. And on Wednesdays, your grandmother is partial to Irish stew.' She went on like this through all the days of the

week. And that was that! I am not a housekeeper. I am basically a chattel.

I cannot quite believe I am saying this, but I would give anything to be back at school with you all. Even needlework class and gymnastics would be better than a small Scottish village in the middle of nowhere! Oh, to be walking down to the grocer's with Polly on one arm and Sophia on the other. Oh, to lie in our bedroom giggling together after Lights Out. Oh, to have someone to talk to who is not Grandmother or the servants! Sixteen years, my aunt Lucy lived here! I think I shall die of boredom.

Sophia, write and tell me *everything* about the Season. Have you met any handsome men yet? Are you in love? How I wish *I* had an aunt who was an aristocrat! Please, marry a baronet for my sake and tell him you cannot be parted from your beloved Tirzah. You could employ me as your hermit. I would be perfectly happy to sit in a grotto in the grounds of your castle, spouting riddles for the visiting gentry. I would see more life there than I do here. Polly, tell me about all your brothers and sisters. How is working life? Do you go to many dances in Liverpool?

My arm is tired with all this writing. I've been thinking – all this time, I've written you a letter apiece, and I've mostly written the same thing in each of them. But now you've gone to London, Sophia, I suppose you

won't have much time for letter writing. Why don't we just write each other one letter apiece? I am going to put this one in an envelope addressed to Sophia, and then Sophia, when you write back, write a letter to both of us and post it to Polly in an envelope with my letter inside. Do you see? That way we need only write one letter each. I cannot separate the two of you in my head anyway. I think of us always as a trio, all cuddled up together in our little dorm at school. Oh, I miss you both so much! Please, say you'll fall in with my scheme. It will make me feel like you're not so far away.

Your sister in misery and exile,

Tirzah

12 Wimpole Street
Mayfair
London
24th November 1896

Dear Polly and Tirzah,

Firstly – my aunt Eliza is not an aristocrat. She just married my uncle Simon, who is the younger son of a baron and therefore an Honourable – which means his father was an aristocrat, I suppose. My aunt Eliza is decidedly middle class, and she's horribly aware of it. She is always talking about 'darling Grandpapa's house', and poor Uncle Simon looks frightfully sick whenever she does so. He doesn't like to tell her that it's not the done thing to call your in-laws 'Grandpapa' or boast about your country houses. She is not very pleased about me being here in my homemade ballgowns, looking so obviously the poor relation. She keeps talking about her darling sister who made a rather *unfortunate* match to a drawing master. I do call it unkind. I would rather marry a pauper than Uncle Simon. And Daddy isn't a drawing master anyway. He's a painter. It's not his fault his paintings aren't the sort that sell.

I suppose I should be grateful to Aunt Eliza for paying my school fees and letting me come and stay with her for the Season (though my cousins Mariah and Isabelle

rather sneer at me for having gone to school – *they* had governesses, of course). And it *is* fun – all the balls and tea parties and so forth. The other girls are rather jolly, even if they *are* fearful snobs. Isabelle and Mariah certainly are. I think it's being brought up by Aunt Eliza that does it. They all treat me rather as a hired monkey – 'Sophia, fetch me my slippers, would you?' 'Sophia, tell Langton to get the coach ready for seven.' I think your grandmother and my aunt would get along, Tirzah!

Mariah and Isabelle are just jealous because the men like me more than them. I danced every dance at Lady Frances's ball on Saturday, and weren't they green? They cannot understand it – a plain little thing like me. But men like a girl who makes them laugh.

No, I have *not* fallen in love yet – though I certainly intend to be married before the end of the Season. I shall not get more than one Season, so I shall make the most of it.

Tell me, Polly – how are you coping in that orphanage of yours? Do you still like being a schoolmarm?

Your dear friend,

The not-yet-titled Sophia

45 Park Lane
Liverpool
27th November 1896

Dear Sophia and Tirzah,

It feels very strange to be writing to you both at once like this – it's so queer to be copying all my questions to Sophia onto your letter, Tirzah. But I do rather like it. I miss you both enormously, although I like being at home too. I love my home. It isn't as grand as Sophia's aunt's house in Mayfair. The carpet is flapping off the top of the stairs, and there are greasy fingerprints all along the walls, and it's draughty and shabby, and the windowpanes rattle in a high wind. But I love being here with Mother and Father and the little ones. Even Michael sometimes, when he comes home for the weekend. It's very funny to think of my big brother as a university student. 'We're growing up, little sister,' he says to me, although I don't feel grown-up in the slightest. Do you? I hardly recognise myself in the looking glass, with my hair up and my skirts down. I still feel like a little girl inside.

Working life is good. The orphanage is a wonderful institution. We take little children who would otherwise be sent to the workhouse or end up starving on the streets. It really is so sad – there are so many more children than we can ever help. We get so many women

in trouble coming to the doors, begging for our help. And most of them we have to send away. Sometimes it is women who are not married and have no way of supporting their children. And sometimes they simply cannot feed or house another child. Miss Jessop says very often the babies we cannot take are abandoned in the street or given to baby farmers to raise, and many of them die. It is so desperately sad.

The youngest children go out to foster families in the local area. They come back to us at five, which is when they start in my school. I am teaching the smallest children, and the little ones are so sweet. They are always wanting to climb onto my lap and put their arms around me. I wish I could take them all home! They leave us at fourteen, the girls mostly to domestic service, the boys to the navy.

Your industrious friend,

Polly

P.S. Do you think your grandmother would let you come and visit us, Tirzah? Could you come for Christmas again? You know we would love to have you. Mother still talks about that Christmas when you dressed up as Judith for the charades and chopped off Michael's head into the basket.

45 Park Lane
Liverpool
27th November 1896

Dear Sophia,

I know Tirzah said to write one letter to you both at once, and I have (I sent it to Tirzah, who I suppose will pass it on to you), but I felt I must add a few short lines just to you, Sophia. Do you think her grandmother really is as awful as she says, or is it just Tirzah being Tirzah? I showed Mother her letter, and she said that some women do very well as housekeepers for their relations, but Tirzah is a girl who needs a bit of life of her own. I think she's right. I can't imagine what her parents are thinking letting her stay with that awful woman. Couldn't she go out to India with them?

I hope your aunt and cousins aren't too hideous, and the men are perfectly charming,

Polly

Bannon House
Abyford
Perthshire
30th November 1896

Dear Polly and Sophia,

Oh, Lord! What wouldn't I give to be in your house again, Polly? Would your mother like a nursery governess for the little ones? I could feed them bread and milk and tell them stories and teach them to write. She wouldn't even have to pay me – just let me wear your cast-off dresses and go to dances with you. *Do* you go to dances? You didn't say. You cannot work every hour in an orphanage.

I asked my grandmother about coming to stay with you. I planned it all very carefully. I reminded her of those Christmases I spent with you – how respectable your father is (she likes doctors; our local doctor is practically the only person who ever visits – she is a fearful hypochondriac). I asked him if he thought she was seriously ill (I know it is very wicked of me, but I cannot help thinking that I shall only escape this prison when she dies). He laughed – hateful man! – and said, 'Don't worry, Miss Lewis, your grandmother is in excellent health. She might well live to be eighty!' Eighty! I shall be an old lady myself by then.

Anyway, I was so careful. I talked about your job in the orphanage and how virtuous you are. But to no avail. She pursed her lips at me and said, 'Great heavens, girl! Do you forget your duties? You have had your fun at school; now you must settle down and work for your living.'

She had a paid companion before me, after Aunt Lucy died, a hateful woman called Miss Hamilton. I don't know what's happened to her now I'm here. I suppose Grandmother dismissed her. I wonder where she went? Do you think she's in the workhouse?

I would rather live in a workhouse than here. At least there would be people to talk to in a workhouse. Grandmother does not so much make conversation as *lecture*. 'Sit up, Tirzah!' 'Stop making that ghastly face, Tirzah!' 'Stop *sulking*!'

She wants the sort of granddaughter who just sits there and does as she's told. Well, that's not me. I don't just want to sit. I want to do things.

'Can I take the omnibus into town? I need a new trim for my hat.'

'Can I call on the vicar?' It is not the vicar I am interested in calling on, of course, but his curate, who is twenty-two. He looks deathly dull – pale, with straggly sideburns and a horrible Adam's apple, which bobs about when he swallows. But he is at least young. I would rather marry a curate than live with Grandmother for the rest of her life.

'Is there *no one* under forty in this village, Grandmother?' There isn't, I don't think, apart from the curate. Not anyone Grandmother would let me talk to. There are some younger girls in the cottages, but they just stare as I walk past, and giggle. I wonder if I could pretend to be doing philanthropy – taking them soup or whatever. Do people actually do that outside of novels? But would anyone want to talk to an awful prig who brought them soup?

There are young men in the cottages too. I can see them drinking outside the Durham Ox on Saturday afternoons. They are not at all the sort of men Grandmother would approve of – they are working men, labourers – but goodness, they are so . . . so alive and *male*. NOT like the curate. Perhaps I shall run away with a blacksmith. It would be better than spending the next twenty years of my life fetching handkerchiefs for Grandmother.

Do you really like working in an orphanage, Polly? You sound as if you do. I wish there was something I loved like that. Do you remember how I was going to be a singer at school? It all seemed so easy back then. But I wouldn't have the first idea how one even goes about becoming a singer. I suppose you can't really walk up to the Royal Opera House with your music and ask to speak to the director, like you can in *Girl's Own* stories.

I remember when I talked to Mr Wallasey about it at school. He was very gentle and sweet, and said that while

people do earn a living singing at concerts, they are generally professionally trained, in conservatoires and things. And you need a lot more than half an hour of singing lessons a week from the man who arranges the music for the church choir. I expect he was really telling me I would never be good enough, in the nicest possible way. Do they have singers at any of your balls, Sophia? Have you met any aristocracy? Is anyone in love with you yet? How many balls do you go to, and what do you wear, and what do you eat, and is there champagne, and how late is it that you come home?

I have never been so bored in all my life. Write back quickly before I expire.

Your friend,

Tirzah

12 Wimpole Street
London
2nd December 1896

Dear Polly and Tirzah,

What a lot of questions, Tirzah! My life is very busy. We go to balls three or four times a week. They start at ten and finish at four or five in the morning, sometimes later. We usually stay until the end, although my aunt is nodding in her chair by one. We come home by carriage and tumble into bed. We often do not wake until nearly noon. It is very decadent, and I wonder if Mummy and Daddy know what we are doing. I do not tell them, of course.

There's usually a buffet, and supper, and honestly the food is rather wonderful. Lobster, and little cakes, and ices and all sorts. Yes, there is champagne, and wine, though Aunt Eliza does not permit us girls to drink much. She said we must keep our wits about us if we are to catch husbands. We drink a little, though, just to show we are not prigs. It is all very careful. (I don't know if the real aristocracy behave like this or if it is just Aunt Eliza. She is so anxious that I will say or do something wrong. She insists on telling everyone that I am her poor niece from the country, who has not been much in society. I don't know what society we girls are supposed to have

been in – we are all just out of the schoolroom or finishing school. My cousins went to finishing school in Paris, of course. Lucky beasts. Imagine, Paris!)

There are singers sometimes, and bands. I don't know how one would get a job as a singer, though, and it doesn't look a bit respectable. Some of them sing in nightclubs too! Uncle Simon told me. Your grandmother would be horrified if you tried singing with men in nightclubs, in the sort of dresses those women wear. And honestly, Tirzah, I'm not sure you would be very safe. I know I'm sounding awfully middle-aged, but I think you might be better off at home.

It is unfair, isn't it? If we were men, there wouldn't be any of this bother about marrying well. We could go off to university and become lawyers or clergymen or go into business. You could run away and join the army – you'd like that. But what are my options if I do not find a husband? Staying at home with Mummy and Daddy. Teaching. Being a governess or a companion. Or a nurse. That's about it, honestly. And there' s nothing wrong with any of those things – I'm so glad you like teaching, Polly. But somehow at school we seemed to have more options. We were always learning about Florence Nightingale, or the Brontë sisters, or Queen Victoria. It seemed quite likely that we would all grow up to be great women, probably without having to try very hard.

Real life, it turns out, isn't like that at all.

Remember how I wanted to be a journalist when I was at school? A girl reporter like Nellie Bly. It seemed so easy then. I did actually ask one of Daddy's friends about it, just in case the Season didn't work. He sucked his teeth and said maybe the knitting page or the problem page, unless I wanted to write for a women's publication. He sounded so sneery when he said it, I didn't want to pursue it somehow.

Anyway. Enough of school. Yes, of course I've met aristocrats. So many, it's getting rather boring. No, I am not in love, and I do not think I shall be.

There is one man who I think is interested in me, though. His name is Lord St John, and he is very old – about thirty-five, I think! He is not handsome, but he has a kind face. I think kindness is very important.

He's the youngest son, and he has three older brothers. But he's currently running the estate – two of his older brothers are in the army and the church, and the eldest lives in London and isn't interested in the country at all. But St John likes looking after the land. He keeps talking to me about horses and cows and prize pigs. I confess, I am not very interested in prize pigs! He is rather dull company. And he treads on my toes. But Aunt Eliza says he has come to London to find a wife, and he is more interested in me than in any other lady. So.

If I could get married to a man with money, my sisters could do the Season with me next year, and they would

not have the shame of being the poor relation. And if I do not marry, I shall be exiled back home to live with Mummy and Daddy. This is my one chance to make a good match, and I shan't throw it away.

I miss you all so much. Take care of yourselves. Tirzah, please don't do anything stupid.

Your socialite friend,

Sophia

P.S. Dear Polly, I know Tirzah likes to exaggerate, but it can't be very jolly for her, locked up in a dull house with an old woman and no fun. I think your mother is right. I wish I could invite her here – her grandmother might agree to Mayfair if not Liverpool – but since I'm only here on sufferance myself, I can't invite guests of my own. Maybe her grandmother will tire of having her around. She can't be much earthly good as a companion. I know I joke about my aunt and cousins, but it is hard work being everybody's runaround, and you need much good humour and self-assurance. I'm sure Tirzah spends her days sighing and complaining. Perhaps her grandmother will see sense eventually and . . . Well, I don't know what. Let her come to one of us for the holidays, at least. And then perhaps she could find herself a husband. If you are young and lively and not so picky about who you settle down with, it's very easy to end up with *somebody*. There are plenty of old men who aren't so choosy. They seem to think a poor relation is easy pickings.

P.P.S. Her parents aren't in India. They died of cholera when she was a baby. She told me so in confidence ages ago.

Best love – Sophia