

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

Excerpt from *Northwood*

SARAH JOSEPHA BUELL HALE

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This excerpt, taken from the 1852 edition of her popular 1827 novel, Northwood, is the first of three selections from the writings of Sarah Josepha Buell Hale (1788–1879), the influential American editor, author (she wrote “Mary Had a Little Lamb”), and champion of education for women. Widowed in 1822 with five children to support, Hale took up a literary career, publishing a book of poems in 1823 and assuming the editorship of Ladies’ Magazine in 1828. She would go on to edit Godey’s Lady’s Book in 1837, which would become the most widely circulated women’s magazine in the country, and would assume a leading role in the establishment of Vassar College. These selections trace the (finally successful) campaign that Hale waged over many years to establish Thanksgiving as a national American holiday.

In this literary selection, a New Hampshire farmer, Squire Romilly, explains to a skeptical Englishman, Mr. Frankford, the meaning of the New England Thanksgiving holiday. Describe the scene and mood in the house. What does it indicate about the special place of Thanksgiving in this home? What, according to the Squire, is the reason for a day of public Thanksgiving in New England? Why does he believe that it should be celebrated nationally, like the Fourth of July, and observed by all of the people? Is Thanksgiving, according to Squire Romilly, a religious, moral, or political holiday? How might a national celebration of Thanksgiving “be a grand spectacle of moral power and human happiness, such as the world has never yet witnessed”?

The supper was now in active preparation. The large table was set forth, and covered with a cloth as white as snow. Lucy placed all in order, while Sophia assisted her mother to bring in the various dishes. No domestics appeared, and none seemed necessary. Love, warm hearted love, supplied the place of cold duty; and the labor of preparing the entertainment was, to Mrs. Romilly, a pleasure which she would not have relinquished to have been made an empress, so proud was she to show Sidney [*her son, returned home after a long absence*] her cookery; and she tried to recollect the savory dishes he used to like, and had prepared them now in the same manner. At length all was pronounced ready, and after Squire Romilly had fervently besought a blessing, they took their seats.

The supper consisted of every luxury the season afforded. First came fried chicken floating in gravy; then broiled ham, wheat bread, as white as snow, and butter so yellow

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and sweet, that it drew encomiums from the Englishman, till Mrs. Romilly colored with pleasure while she told him she made it herself. Two or three kinds of pies, all excellent, as many kinds of cake, with pickles and preserves, and cranberry sauce—the last particularly for Sidney—furnished forth the feast. The best of young hyson,¹ with cream and loaf sugar, was dispensed around by the fair hand of Sophia, who presided the department of the tea pot; her mother being fully employed in helping her guests to the viands, and urging them to eat and make out a supper, if they could.

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Sidney's feelings were too much occupied to allow any great appetite for mere corporeal food. He wanted every moment to gaze on the loved faces smiling around him, or listen to voices whose soft tones, when calling him *son* or *brother* made every fibre of his heart thrill with rapture.

But Frankford was as hungry as fasting and fever could make him. He was just in that stage of convalescence when the appetite demands its arrearages with such imperious calls, that the whole mind is absorbed in the desire of satisfying its cravings. He did honor to every dish on the table; till Sidney, fearing he would injure himself by eating to excess, was obliged to beg he would defer finishing his meal till the next morning; “for you know, Mr. Frankford,” added he, laughing, “the physician forbade your making a full meal till you could walk a mile before taking it.”

“If that be the case,” said Squire Romilly, “I hope you will exert yourself to-morrow. It is our Thanksgiving, and I should be loath to have the dinner of any one at my table abridged. It will, indeed, be a day of joy to us, and Sidney could not have come home at a more welcome season.”

While he spoke, he directed a glance towards Silas, whose cheeks, fresh as they were, showed a heightened color, and his black eyes were involuntarily cast down. Sidney observed it, and asked his father if there was to be any peculiarity in the approaching festival.

“Do you,” said he, “still have your plum pudding and pumpkin pies as in former times?”

¹ A Chinese tea. Young hyson is considered high quality.

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“O yes,” replied his father, “our dinner will be the same; but our evening’s entertainment will be different.”

A wink from Mrs. Romilly, who evidently pitied the embarrassment of Silas, prevented further inquiries or explanations, and they soon obeyed her example of rising from the table. Page | 3

Mr. Frankford, who they feared would exert himself too much, was now installed on the wide sofa, (or *settle*) drawn up to the fire, and all the pillows to be found in the house as bethought were gathered for him to nestle in. When he was fairly arranged like a Turk on his divan, half sitting, half reclining, he addressed Squire Romilly, and inquired the cause of the Thanksgiving he had heard mentioned.

“Is it a festival of your church?” said he.

“No; it is a festival of the people, and appointed by the Governor of the State.”

“But there is some reason for the custom—is there not?” inquired the Englishman.

“Certainly; our Yankees seldom do what they cannot justify by reasons of some sort,” replied the Squire. “This custom of a public Thanksgiving is, however, said to have originated in a providential manner.”

Mr. Frankford smiled rather incredulously.

The Squire saw the smile, but took no heed, while he went on.

“Soon after the settlement of Boston, the colony was reduced to a state of destitution, and nearly without food. In this strait the pious leaders of the pilgrim band appointed a solemn and general fast.”

“If they had no food they must have fasted without that formality,” said Frankford.

“True; but to convert the necessity into a voluntary and religious act of homage to the Supreme Ruler they worshiped and trusted, shows their sagacity as well as piety. The faith that could thus turn to God in the extremity of physical want, must have been of the most glowing kind, and such enthusiasm actually sustains nature. It is the hidden manna.”

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“I hope it strengthened them: pray, how long did the fast continue?”

“It never began.”

“Indeed! Why not?”

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“On the very morning of the appointed day, a vessel from London arrived laden with provisions, and so the fast was changed into a Thanksgiving.”

“Well, that was wise; and so the festival has been continued to the present day?”

“Not with any purpose of celebrating that event,” replied the Squire. “It is considered as an appropriate tribute of gratitude to God to set apart one day of Thanksgiving in each year; and autumn is the time when the overflowing garnerers of America call for this expression of joyful gratitude.”

“Is Thanksgiving Day universally observed in America?” inquired Mr. Frankford.

“Not yet; but I trust it will become so. We have too few holidays. Thanksgiving, like the Fourth of July, should be considered a national festival, and observed by all our people.”

“I see no particular reason for such an observance,” remarked Frankford.

“I do,” returned the Squire. “We want it as the exponent of our Republican institutions, which are based on the acknowledgment that God is our Lord, and that, as a nation, we derive our privileges and blessings from Him. You will hear this doctrine set forth in the sermon to-morrow.”

“I thought you had no national religion.”

“No established religion you mean. Our people do not need compulsion to support the gospel. But to return to our Thanksgiving festival. When it shall be observed, on the same day, throughout all the states and territories, it will be a grand spectacle of moral power and human happiness, such as the world has never yet witnessed.”