



Saving the Infant Class from Hell

BY JOHN GOULD CURTIS

The drunkard's grave yawned for children a few generations ago. Sabbath-breaking or even being naughty had their dire consequences exhibited in horror stories, which decorated Sunday school libraries, comparing favorably with the tabloids of to-day.

“**H**ELEN *was intoxicated!*”
Perhaps that means nothing to you. Maybe you aren't even shocked. Possibly you don't care. But for Helen to be intoxicated in the pages of the Massachusetts Sabbath School Society library a couple of generations ago was every bit as awful as for her to murder her husband with a meat-axe to-day—and fully as tabloid. The principal difference is that her contemporary counterpart would deserve much less sympathy and get a great deal more.

In either case, however, the story of the affair would leave no gruesome detail unrecanted; for the crusading of the Sabbath schools was no less ardent than that of our little newspapers, and if heaps of horrors will point the path to virtue, then the shocking details cannot be piled too high. Both types of publication have relied on the truth that simple minds are more often impressed by awfulness than by beauty.

Thus, “at the age of nineteen, Helen was indeed a beautiful girl—intelligent, industrious, and warm-hearted; no wonder that she was the idol of the family. More than once her flushed cheek and the sparkling brilliancy of her eye had awakened suspicion in her mother's heart; but could she for a moment

cherish such an idea? No, it was an unwelcome thought and, therefore, soon banished. Ere long, however, the truth, humiliating, painful as it was, burst upon the whole family—*Helen was intoxicated!*”

Here we have the first of several climaxes in the life of a young lady of promise, who, unhappily, had the misfortune to be born in the Red Tavern, where ardent spirits were dispensed, and who, in consequence, was exposed to more than ordinary temptation. Hers is one of several hundred terrifying tales told in the fascinating library of the Massachusetts Sabbath School Society—that repository of piety and learning which either baited or bludgeoned the children of an older generation into regular attendance at the Sabbath school (under penalty of fire and brimstone), and exacted from them pledges of life-long abstinence and promises of fidelity at an age when they were definitely too young to have any idea what they were letting themselves in for. The most terrifying and improbable consequences are made to appear inevitable upon certain seemingly innocent missteps, and lest the reader be incredulous, it may be worth while to look into a few of the pitfalls.

Suppose we turn back once more to Helen, who was intoxicated. The "Old Red Tavern" appears, if the woodcut frontispiece is to be believed, to have been located in Marlboro; and its proprietors seem all to have been persons of incalculable callousness and avarice. They simply ruined their customers right and left. "That tall, athletic young man with bloated countenance and trembling limbs [if you can picture the antithesis] was once an industrious, obedient, affectionate boy. How his fond mother's heart yearned over him, and how tenderly she guarded him during the years of infancy and childhood." Edwin left home to obtain work, took lodging, all innocently, at the Red Tavern, saw drinking going on there and, unprotected by any personal pledge to abstain, fell into taking a glass of wine himself occasionally. It was always so gradually, so unsuspectedly, that the nasty habit gained ascendancy; no drunkard of these tracts ever started out on anything stronger than light wine, but they all went rapidly after that, and knew not another sober breath until they tottered into their drunkards' graves. "Oh, that Edwin had never, never, *never* gone where ardent spirit was sold—never associated with those who drank it."

But why bring in Edwin? It was this way: Helen's flushed cheek and sparkling eye having given her away, she had perforce to flee the harsh virtue of her family, and accordingly took refuge in matrimony with Edwin. These birds of a feather flocked to the wedding of one of Helen's friends, drank wine with the other guests, and after that their morals simply went below sea-level. Poverty and squalor came upon them. Helen went in for cider, which, to make matters worse, she begged from the neigh-

bors. Her baby was neglected while she went off into the fields to sleep, her bottle by her side. The climax was reached on the day when she came home in an evil temper (having, it would seem, run out of cider) and found the baby at the door, "crying sadly, which vexed her so much that she caught him up and threw him into the pigsty."

If this doesn't make an ineffaceable impression of what is to be expected from alcohol in any dilution, perhaps another anecdote will carry conviction. A young woman bought a pint of brandy to bathe her lame "angle," the medicinal value of the fire-water apparently being conceded if it were taken externally. She accidentally confused it with another bottle, which she took home in its stead, and which her father spotted as soon as she had entered the house. He asked her what it was, and she told him "brandy to bathe my angle with."

"'I must have some,' said he, 'for I have not had any to-day.' Accordingly he poured some out and drank it. In twenty minutes he was a *corpse*.'"

The horrid intemperance of the victim is cited as the proximate cause of this bit of poetic justice, but the modern reader yearns to inquire whether it would not be fairer to blame the daughter for carrying poison about in an anonymous bottle.

II

All of this dramatic flubdub was designed to get the wee ones to sign the pledge. The trustful children were double-crossed at every turn: first, by the offer of story-books as a reward for Sunday school attendance; and then by the presentation, in that guise, of propaganda which so distorted life that it

must have made hundreds of neurotics, to say nothing of the hypocrites.

Take "The Sabbath-Breaker Punished," from the powerful pen of Mrs. Helen Cross Knight. This is concerned with yet another Helen, who is generously credited with not realizing the sinfulness of her secret wish that there were no Sabbath. With a perverseness and abandon astonishing in one so young, she presumed to suppose that she could keep the Sabbath as well in the barn, on the haymow, as in restless quiet in the parlor. "Helen distinctly determined to do wrong. . . . Her dear mother was not far off, to gladden and comfort the young heart, but that little child *was sinning*." She climbed around the haymow and looked for eggs; then the supper-bell rang, and Helen got what was coming to her. The cross old cow was laying for her (by arrangement with a displeased Deity) in the barnyard. "The cow stood still, while a fierce expression gathered on her face. Helen hoped she might be able to run from the barn to the gate before the cow would think of moving. Helen started—the cow started towards her; the little girl gave one scream of terror, and in a moment she was tossed into the air by the furious animal."

When she regained consciousness and begged her mother's forgiveness, she was referred elsewhere. "Her parent looked very serious, and replied: 'You must ask God to forgive you, my child, you have broken his laws. I will pray for you.' " Thus is capital proof adduced of the versatility of the Lord in getting at children with unworthy instincts.

But the least of these tracts has thirty-two pages, and only twenty-two of them have been used in telling the story of

Helen's fall. So we have two more examples of rewarded sin: the boy who spoke profanely one Sabbath morning, and was promptly and completely drowned when he went swimming in the Missouri River that afternoon (the matter being left uncertain whether the drowning was for the profanity or for postponing Saturday night's bath to Sunday); and the other lad, who untruthfully shouted from the top of a high tree that he had found a squirrel's nest there, and added as a makeweight the wish that the Almighty might strike him dead if it were not so. God knocked him right out of the tree and killed him.

"'I Am Glad of It'; or, Wicked Rejoicing in Others' Calamities," gives a most graphic account of what happens to boys who say "Goody" when their playmate's hat blows into the water. It puts out also an excellent line of argument on the part of a father who persuades his daughter to return the scholarship prize she has won at school, on the ground that the runner-up, Julia Arthur, must have been the victor but for her unfortunate attack of "brain fever."

III

If one shudders at the thought of what must have been the ideal child of that time, as manufactured in the approved mould of the Massachusetts Sabbath School Society, and if one is puzzled by the ferocity with which the Society's God seems to enforce meekness and gentleness in the youngsters, one is nevertheless not left in doubt as to the ideal in the minds of the Society's Committee of Publication. Let me tabulate from "The Bad Family and The Good Family":

BAD FAMILY

Handsome house.

Vicious parents.

Six children, *viz.*:

Fighting Harry, always scrapping.

Greedy George, robs the pantry.

Idle Richard, won't get up in the morning.

Careless Fanny, loses things, steps in puddles in the street.

Lying Lucy, headed for the lake that burns with fire and brimstone.

Selfish Sarah, simply hateful, never does anything for any one.

GOOD FAMILY

Handsome house.

Pious parents.

Six children, *viz.*:

Manly Edward, courageous, avoids all quarrels, shuns rude, vulgar boys.

Studious Arthur, not bright but awfully earnest.

Well-bred Charles, always civil and carefully washed.

Patient Emma, suffers pain, and takes nasty medicine with good temper.

Generous Susan, gives everything to charity.

Merry Agnes, a "sweet plaything" who wants to be like the big girls.

Of course, had these parents been a trifle more fecund, and their offspring more varied as well as more numerous, it is possible that some of the minor good qualities and damnations might have been illustrated also, but probably a half-dozen of each are all that the young seeker can be expected to assimilate between Sabbath and Sabbath. However, those youngsters who yearn for more light on the path can turn in their silver badges for a copy of "The Model Family," in which Jane Ewing begins by questioning her uncle Melville about the careers he would choose for his eight children. Uncle Melville has long whiskers and a stern countenance; such a man as any child would consider an oracle. He piously replies: "I should wish my boys to become preachers of the Gospel, translators of the Bible, and missionaries to the heathen; and my girls to make just such wives and mothers as your aunt Melville."

Uncle Melville has occasion to expound what (in view of the announcement that the volume is "Written for the Massachusetts Sabbath School Society, and approved by the Committee of Publication") we may take to be the officially endorsed method of child-training. A visitor inquired: "Brother Melville, I never saw such gentle, obedient, and respectful children in my life

as yours are; pray how do you contrive to govern them in this manner?" And Brother Melville explained that the Bible was so strong on obedience and subordination that he felt under an obligation to fill his youngsters with the fear of God. "From the time they are nine months till about three or four years we punish frequently; but after that age we find little use for the rod." Brother Melville seems also to have gone to elaborate lengths to persuade the children that it hurt him more than it did them.

How splendidly this system worked out in practice was illustrated a little later when the ten-months-old baby heaved a chicken-bone out of its high chair. (The little ones seem to have matured young in those days, so far as diet was concerned.) Her mother picked up the bone, untroubled by sanitary considerations, and said that naughty baby must be punished if she did it again. "With great spirit the child struck it from her mother's hand," and got lustily slapped in consequence. The struggle goes on for about three pages, the baby showing splendid persistence, but getting the worst of the slapping "until her arm was almost blistered. . . . The family knew that if the contest lasted till sunset no person could leave the table, or speak aloud, or give the babe a look of love or pity." In the face of this

united offensive the babe at length capitulated, changed the tone of its shrieks in a manner taken to indicate contrition, and "Mr. Melville, as his custom was, then returned thanks." A splendid demonstration of the advantages of taking 'em young and treating 'em rough.

This, it seems, is the formula to be followed if you want to raise a "Good Family." The enlightened author is Miss Sarah Tuttle, apparently an embittered spinster; and I am sure it was only want of imagination that prevented her having the child tied up by the thumbs until bedtime.

IV

Apart from free and continuous resort to the "horrible-example" kind of narrative, the little books gave over a good many pages to discourse on piety and the prospect of eventual salvation. Death and the devil were always lurking together just around the corner, and one's chance of eluding them and getting something of a run for heaven depended on persevering meekness, profound devotion, ceaseless furbishing of many minor virtues, and regular attendance at the Sabbath school. Thus an anonymous clergyman (identified as the Reverend Amos A. Phelps) wrote "Letters to Little Children; or, The History of Little Sarah," wherein Letter I, titled "Sarah Not Too Young to Die," discloses the blood-curdling perfidy of a wicked man who, knowing how little Sarah loved to go to the Sabbath school, tried to *hire* her to stay away. He was reputed to have offered her twenty-five, or perhaps fifty, cents if she would only stay away; but virtue triumphed and she would not do it, "and when she came to die, no doubt she was very glad she did not stay away." Besides, she may

have felt that a quarter was no inducement.

Little Sarah's last illness and funeral are related with a degree of dramatic detail too awful for reproduction even in this sophisticated periodical. She was very sick, and the less said about her pain the better. But her love of prayer was amazingly strong to the very last. In fact, Sarah went in for prayer on such a wholesale scale, and so utterly to the exclusion of everything else, that it is hard to believe that she could have been of much help to her mother. For "*Little Sarah was very fond of prayer.*"

"She loved to pray herself; and she loved to hear other people pray, too. She used to pray often, before she was sick.

"Little Sarah also loved to pray, after she was sick, as well as before; and when she was in so much pain, or was so weak as not to be able to pray herself, if some friend was in the room she was very fond of having that friend pray with and for her, and she used to ask them to do so often. And then she used to enjoy the prayers very much." Unnatural child!

"Once during her sickness, when her uncle watched with her, she awoke in the night and conversed as pleasantly and rationally as any well person, for fifteen or twenty minutes, and asked him to pray with her.

"At another time, after she had been in great pain, she said to her mother: 'Do turn me over and talk religious to me.'

"Remember, then, this *one* thing, if nothing more, *LITTLE SARAH Was Always Very Fond of Prayer.*"

And that, my dears, was the sort of child that brought sunshine to the heart of the Reverend Amos Phelps, and persuaded him that life was not all sorrow.

If this very comprehensive system seems inadequate, there is still more to be found in an entire volume devoted to "Infant Piety," which is concerned with the more philosophical aspects of devotion as distinguished from the formulas of prayer. It considers at length, for example, the dilemma of one Mary, who spent a Saturday night with relatives, found in the morning that a heavy rain had made the streets unfit for walking to church, and struggled to decide whether she ought or ought not to send home for her overshoes. "'Aunt,' said she, after hesitating a few moments, evidently struggling between a sense of duty and of propriety, a fear of offending or doing wrong, 'do you think it would be right?' *Is it right?* was with her indeed the first question, and it was the union of delicacy and integrity, of firm principle with sweetness and tenderness, which gave her character a peculiar charm." The peculiarity of the charm, if any, is readily conceded.

V

Just what, then, did these virtuous propagandists hope to achieve through their tabloid appeals to the children? Piety—appalling piety—seems to have been the primary aim. Preservation of the New England Sabbath in an atmosphere of profound and impregnable sanctity (in the style of the modern Lord's Day Alliance) was another. Impression upon the child mind of certain articles of faith, before the infant was capable of questioning, was the accepted device for gaining and keeping control.

We have seen something of what piety required, and of the precautions to be taken even by the very young, against sudden death or other act of

God. I have tried to discover just what little Helen, who had the unhappy affair with the cow, ought to have been doing on the Sabbath. A lengthy tract treats the matter, but confuses rather than enlightens: "See that they [the children] abstain from play as well as from work. Let them not pass the golden hours in idleness, or go out with careless companions, or be seen standing at the corners of the streets; but try and make their home happy and the Sabbath pleasant to them."

This last is a large order, even for an omniscient clergyman, and I wish he had said a little more about *how* the children are to be kept happy while they are forbidden at once, play, work, idleness, or company. Perhaps the implication is that they ought to sit in the parlor and read tracts. For the very young there would be "Plain Words for Those Who Can Read but Little," which plunges right into the problems of the little folks:

"You have a bo-dy and a soul. Your bo-dy will soon die and be laid in the dust. Your soul will live for ev-er. It will live for ev-er with God, or it will live for ev-er with Sa-tan. It will live for ev-er in hea-ven, or it will live for ev-er in hell. It will live for ev-er in peace, and joy, and love; or it will live for ev-er in fire, and pain, and woe." And so on, at considerable length, and with a good deal of urging to prompt and complete repentance.

The older children would probably be permitted "Conversations on the Deaf, Dumb, and Blind; or, History of James Mitchell," which proves with appalling conclusiveness that since a thorough explanation of the Scripture and of the principles of salvation is a prerequisite to entrance on high, the deaf, dumb, and blind must have gone ex-

clusively below until means of imparting this precious knowledge to them were discovered.

By way of more readable and entertaining precepts, the boys might have some such volume as "Boys and Bosses," or Mrs. Sherwood's story of Honest Tom, "The Errand Boy," somewhat in the nature of forerunners of the Alger fiction; while girls could be given a counterpart in "Fanny, the Flower Girl," by Selina Bunbury, author also of "Glory, Glory, Glory; I Am So Happy!" and "The Indian Babes in the Woods." If the big boys got beyond the stage where "Dying Scenes" intrigued them, they might still be induced to attend the Sabbath school with regularity, long enough to earn a copy of "The White Slave," though some of them would doubtless read it with diminished interest on getting it home and finding its alternative title; "A Life of John Newton."

Truly, the instinct of the tabloids was with our tract-writers, and they worked

in the consciousness that they must focus interest with arresting titles, hold it with tales of pious but dramatic horror, and thrust home the conviction that salvation (which was their stock in trade) was indispensable. No doubt they would have contended, if they could be made to see some little inconsistencies and absurdities in their devices, that the glory of the end was a sufficient glorification of the means. But when I think of how God used the cow to put little Helen to bed when her erring feet wandered from the path, I'm glad I wasn't a child in those troublous times—beaten (under the auspices of the Massachusetts Sabbath School Society) for resenting my mother's imbecility in feeding me chicken-bones at the age of ten months, restricted in my literature to the iterated arid platitudes and imprecations of the Sabbath school tracts, doomed to a drunkard's grave if I once tasted wine, and subject always to the risk of some exotic vengeance by a terrible and capricious Deity.



On This Rock

BY BERNICE KENYON

In the summer night it is good to lie
On a shelf of rock, with a warm stone pillow,
Heated through when the sun was high,
Washed by old rains, and weathered mellow,
Hollowed a little but not too deep,
Hard to the bones, but strong for sleep.

Some may seek a softer bed
But I like stone beneath my head,