Bertrand Russell and his godless Parents

Had Bertrand Russell had the choice of his own godparents, he might well have chosen John Stuart Mill, one of the great empirical philosophers, and Mill's stepdaughter, Helen Taylor, one of the earliest suffragists; they were amongst the most advanced rationalist radicals of their time. As it was, his parents chose them for him.

In the Russell Archives there are over 100 letters written by Helen Taylor to Kate Amberley; the other half of the correspondence (not complete, of course - one's luck is never perfect) is in the Mill-Taylor Collection at the London School of Economics. These letters cover the years from 1865 (just after the birth of the Amberleys' first child, Frank) to 1874 (the year of Kate Amberley's death, when Bertie was two). During these years there developed a very close and intimate friendship between Kate Amberley and Helen Taylor; they shared ideas and activities in the many radical movements, especially the Women's Movement, of those years. Their affection became so great that despite the religious views of all concerned, the Amberleys asked Helen Taylor and John Stuart Mill to stand *in loco parentis-dei*.

The friendship was anchored in mutual need. Although both the Russell and Stanley families had radical tendencies, they did not give unqualified support to the young couple and it was of great importance to both Amberleys to have the approval of the most respected philosopher and radical of their time. In a letter to Kate Amberley dated 22 April 1865, Helen Taylor, whose approval always signified Mill's too, wrote congratulating Lord Amberley on his speeches at Leeds in April 1865, and assuring him that a man is always most misunderstood by his peers (she never punned) when he is criticizing them, and that no man has been great in maturity who has not held advanced ideas in his youth. In other letters, for example, she approved Amberley's bold stand on religious liberty and expressed delight that the Amberleys "go all lengths with us in our revolutionary excesses about Ireland" (letters of 15 July 1865 and 4 March 1868).

Their support of Kate Amberley must have been particularly valuable to a well-to-do, aristocratic, Victorian lady who was expected to remain mentally and physically idle and not to draw public notice upon herself. Although the ladies in her family were not idle (Lady Stanley of Alderley's work in the cause of women's education was well-known), Kate's enthusiasms were considered extreme by nearly all her acquaintances but Helen Taylor. She expressed an interest in Kate Amberley's work with the factory girls (letter of 21 June 1865), encouraged her determination to read and study and her "love of solitude" (22 Janurary 1867), introduced her to women working in the Movement, such as Elizabeth Garret (Anderson) (14 June 1866 and 19 May 1868), and emphatically urged her to continue trying to write (11 September 1869). When Kate Amberley began to speak in public for the women's suffrage campaign she needed all the encouragement that Helen Taylor and John Stuart Mill could and did give her (12 April 1870). Her first speech at Stroud in May 1870, which Helen Taylor had persuaded her to give,[1] outraged her family.[2] In her letter of 26 May 1870 to Helen Taylor describing the meeting, Lady Amberley wrote:

Remember me to Mr Mill I hope he will be pleased at my having made the effort and taken my share of ridicule whch falls to the lot of women who advocate this cause - I heard I was made great fun of at the Carlton and we had had insulting anonymous letters but one must make up ones mind to some disagreeableness for the sake of one's opinions.

Helen Taylor's three prompt congratulatory and laudatory letters (dated 29 and 30 May, 9 June 1870) helped to counterbalance for the Amberleys the "great fun" at the Carlton Club, the Duchess of Cambridge's public rudeness and a humiliating tea-party at the Gladstones'. But perhaps the greatest bond between Kate Amberley and Helen Taylor was an unusual mesh-

ing of minds and personalities; in each other's company they were informal and relaxed. Helen Taylor was, in Kate Amberley's words, a person of whom they were both genuinely fond and with whom Amberley felt no "gêne" (letter of 29 July 1873):

I cannot tell you what a joy it has been to me to find anyone with whom I have so much sympathy and from whom I can get such help in many matters. (1 March 1870)

That Helen Taylor felt as warmly toward the Amberleys, especially toward Kate Amberley, is somewhat surprising. Helen Taylor was a very radical, very righteous, very assured (unusually so for a Victorian spinster in her early thirties) and a very solitary woman. Having been almost exclusively in the company of older people during her youth, first dominated by her mother, Harriet Taylor Mill, and then devoted to John Stuart Mill, she found it difficult to make friends. The difficulty was increased because her upbringing by her mother had given her a conviction of superiority and because the young women whom she knew were disciples of Mill through their espousal of radical causes. Therefore she never could be in her own eyes or in theirs *una inter pares* but always *prima inter pares*.

What a long habit of solitary life has given me is a great dislike to be brought close to fellow creatures with whom I cannot feel in harmony; hence my dislike to various or numerous society. It is painful to me (owing to the habit of living chiefly with my own family) not to be able either to love or to respect those with whom I associate; for this reason I never really enjoy the society of anyone with whom I am not willing to be intimate.... (letter of 24 October 1869)

For whatever reasons - Kate Amberley's qualities of mind and character, the shared radical views, and possibly her aristocratic and influential family - Helen Taylor was warm and affectionate towards Kate as towards few if any other contemporaries. After the birth of the Amberleys daughter, Rachel, in March 1868, Helen Taylor wrote:

I have not asked you [to visit me] before because I thought it might be dull for you; but our little bit of lawn will do to lie on and you can have a sofa moved into sun or shade as the weather demands. The hawthorns are so sweet and the laburnums so pretty now that I hope you will come soon - can you come this next Saturday and Sunday? or any day this week or next? Fix your own time and I will send up the brougham for you. I can give you a room for nurse and the children and one for yourself, and should so much enjoy a quiet long talk with you. (letter of 7 May 1868)

In 1869, when there was a prospect - one which was fulfilled - of the Amberleys and their two children visiting Mill and Helen Taylor at their small home in Avignon for ten days, she told Kate that she had built onto the back an addition in order to be able to offer the Amberleys bedroom, bathroom and sitting-room - all tiny - and a cell for the maid if they brought one; the letter continued:

and if I can get the "Vibratory" made water-tight, it will just do for the children in bad weather. You must know I have built the "Vibratory" expressly for Mr Mill to "vibrate" in; and to "vibrate" is benthamite for to walk up and down. There are other remarkable things in our cottage, as for example a Semicircumgyratory, but I won't tell you what that is till you see it. (letter of 24 October 1869)

Kate Amberley had some doubts about bringing the children, worrying over the noise they would make. Helen Taylor assured her that she and Mill would be in no way bothered by that kind of noise and wanted the children to stay: "children one can always love and the more one sees of them the more friends one is sure to be with them" (*ibid.*).

The children were being brought up under a very permissive system as befitted the children of advanced radicals. The results, if one is to judge by the accounts of a somewhat harassed father in the *Amberley Papers*, were not above criticism, particularly one would imagine from Kate's mother-in-law. It was, therefore, natural that Kate Amberley would turn to her closest ally for confirmation of her unorthodox views on child-rearing. The confirmation duly came:

I have got so much to say about the question of discipline with children that I am afraid to begin lest I should tire you; but on the whole I am for interfering with children as little as possible, and holding very strictly to the exact observance of such few rules as must be laid down; and in this I fancy you fully agree. (letter of 23 May 1869)

The rules must have been very few; by 1871 matters seem to have reached a bit of a crisis in the upbringing of Frank, by then six years old. The doctor diagnosed the ailment as the brain outgrowing the body and prescribed a prohibition of reading and study for two or three years (Kate to Helen, 30 September 1871). Once again, even after the Avignon visit, Helen Taylor sent her full approval:

I am glad you have adopted the plan of occasional holidays, and using them in open-air exploration of new country. I am sure they are the healthiest sort of change for people who use their brain much. Your idea of combining the education of your own children with that of others, I like very much ... I am very glad the doctor has put you at ease respecting any serious danger for Frank and I do not think you need be afraid of his being backward if he is much with yourselves, for then he will acquire a love and respect for work and thought. I suppose he may be allowed to amuse himself by reading stories at his own choice, and as for restlessness and irritability muscular exercise is a certain cure for that, and the only one. (letter of 5 October 1871)

It must have been about this time that Kate Amberley realised that she was pregnant again. In the following March, she wrote to Helen Taylor about a public meeting at which she had presided, about having met a sister of Mill's, and about her coming confinement expected at the beginning of May.

If I have a girl I want to ask you to be god mother to it or whatever term in your and my religion wd answer to that description; a spiritual mental and moral friend and adviser, one to look up to specially and to whom one has a sort of right of appealing in perplexity, is my notion of the relationship. Will you allow this link I should be much pleased, if you would. (13 March 1872)

Helen Taylor's reply was warm and loving, although the mentor would out.

[Your letter] gives me pleasure in many ways and I shall like very much to to contract a spiritual affinity to you and to your little one; it is as you say a beautiful old custom, answering to a real need in human nature. I often wish there were more spiritual relationships (as I do not doubt there will be some day) solemnly recognised and consecrated, that of fraternity and sisterhood among others. It is very hard that we are to be sisters whether we will or no to people between whom and ourselves there is either no likeness or likeness only in our defects, and that we may not be so to those whose society and sympathy brings out all that is best in us. I am so glad to hear too that you are in good health, with a cheerful and happy hope to look forward to. Gardening is a delightful occupation, only too absorbing, but I do hope you will do no real work in it for the present. My sister-in-law who was young happy and active brought on a premature confinement by gardening, and although she got happily through that one, it left behind it a predisposition to the same danger, which carried her off on her fourth confinement [in four years]. Gardening is harder work than one imagines while one is

doing it, because it is so interesting, and you ought to be careful for the next three months. (letter of 22 March 1872)

The gardening proved not to be harder work than was advisable and on 19 May 1872, Lord Amberley wrote to Helen Taylor to announce the birth of a boy "in whose future you have already taken such a friendly interest". The note ended with words which seem with hindsight the epitomy of British understatement: "I hope he will turn out mentally not unworthy of your regard."* Helen Taylor was away on a trip with Mill and it was a week before she sent congratulations on the birth of Bertie, in a letter dated 27 May 1872. Kate Amberley was taken unawares by the unaccountable appearance of a male child; she was not sure of the reaction of the leading suffragist household:

Do you mind god mothering my little boy *I had always somehow counted on a girl to be called 'Cordelia Helen' but as it has turned out a 'Bertrand William' and a girl may never come will you give him your blessing and guidance? We hesitated to ask such a favour of Mr Mill otherwise he too c^d^ have been god father - for there is no one in whose steps I would rather see a boy of mine following in ever such a humble way, then in Mr Mill's.* (letter of 16 June 1872)

Helen Taylor replied from a town in the Austrian Alps:

Your sweet letter of June 16th has followed me here, having gone first to Avignon and then to Heiligenblut on its way.... I should like to be godmother to your little boy and should take as much interest in him as in a little girl, for one of the sweet and attractive things about children is that one finds just as much earnestness and sweetness and purity about the boys as energy and courage about the girls, till, alas! they fall under the influence of the vulgar world. And then I should certainly be interested in all your children; indeed my chief scruple in accepting the godmothership is that I am afraid I may be equally interested in all! Then is there not a hindrance in my absence? We shall not be in England, according to our plans, until next year which will of course be too late if ones presence is necessary. Mr Mill says that if you wish it he does not think that it would conflict with his opinions to enter into that relation.

You must not say that you are writing on selfishly when you are writing of your little pets to me; you cannot talk to me too much of them for my pleasure. I never could agree with commonplace criticisms on the egotism of parents in talking about their children; it always seemed to me that the egotism was in those who did not like to hear them talk so. The little ways and doings and sayings of all children are interesting, and so is every trait of character they show. To my mind these things are interesting besides being cheerful and pleasant in themselves, and one feels sympathy as well as interest when they concern a friend. Then too I hold that the best letters must be egotistic. A good letter transports me into somebody else's life, and the more the writer writes about himself the better it does it. (letter of 1 July 1872)

On the 18th of July Kate Amberley wrote to Helen Taylor thanking Mill and herself for their kindness in accepting the relationship to Bertie and hoping that he would imitate them in acting up to their high ideal in life. Correspondence was sparse during the rest of Mill's and Helen's trip, but on 30 December Helen found time in spite of her tiredness to drop a line:

But I will not let it [1872] quite run out without writing to wish a happy new year to you and all yours, and to your little man of the year, in especial.

The new year was not to be a happy one for Helen Taylor. In May 1873, Mill caught a cold while botanizing and 48 hours later he was dead. Overwhelmed with grief, Helen turned to Kate Amberley for support. The Amberleys made every effort to give her a sense of belonging in their

lives. Kate immediately offered to come to Helen in Avignon (letter of 11 May 1873). She replied, in an undated letter:

Do not think dearest Kate that I have not felt and am not grateful for the kindness of your letters. I have felt it deeply and I did not know till I recieved [sic] your and a few other letters that anything that concerned myself, that sympathy for me, could touch me so much and be so soothing.

When Helen returned to England from Avignon, she went to stay with her brother Algernon, but Kate was immediately urging that she go to stay with the Amberleys at Ravenscroft (letter of 15 July 1873). And although she could not bring herself to make the effort right away, it was Kate Amberley whom she most wanted to see outside her immediate family.

Dearest Kate,

Can you not come to Victoria Street [where Mill and Helen had moved in 1872] while you are in town; if you will it shall be ready for you in a day or two and I will come myself and stay with you there or leave it to you, as you like best; and you would be all alone and perfectly quiet. I suppose you leave the children at Ravenscroft, so that there would be room for you; and my maid who is waiting for me at her mother's (in town) would be so glad to come and wait on you....

I should be so glad if I could be of any use with the children, could I? Could I hear their lessons and take walks with them while the governess is away? You know I always said I should like to be a governess .... [H]ere I can do just as I like. It is not too far from London for one to go and return in a day, so that if you came to Victoria Street I could come and see you and return here the same day. I should like to see you, to be with you, or near you, but I have been thinking, since I last wrote that I might be troublesome or depressing, and that if you like it best I might come and stay at Tintern with my little maid. I do *feel solitary - not in mind or even spirits, but in heart, and my heart turns to you; I wish to live for I feel as though I could do some work, but I do not think I can live if I do not love somebody; I dare not let myself feel towards my brother's children as it would be only too easy to do ... for there is a great deal in his way of managing them which is very painful to me....* (letter of 25 July [1873])

But when Kate came to London at the end of the month, Helen was unable to make the journey to meet her.

I tried to come to town today, for I should have liked so very much to see you, but my courage gave way.... I have formed no plans yet for the future, for next winter, but (is it not a strange turn in life?) for the first time in my life I wish to live; and shall do all I can to recover health. I feel as though a torch had been left in my hands and I want to keep it alight till I can hand it on to someone younger than myself. (letter of 1 August [1873])

Gradually Helen Taylor recovered from the blow of her stepfather's death. The first friends whom she visited were the Amberleys at Ravenscroft, where she stayed for at least three weeks in September. The visit was a great success and, as Kate wrote to Helen on 1 October 1873, it was projected as the first of a regular series of relaxed and informal sojourns. There were also plans for Helen Taylor to join the Amberleys on a trip to Egypt, but the plans seem, by twentieth-century standards, to have been very vague and uncertain for such a lengthy trip. There were frequent letters in October all alluding to some plan or other for meeting on foreign soil, either Egypt, Avignon or Italy and including pleas from the children, who were sometimes going with their parents and sometimes not, for their Aunt Helen to replace the present unpopular governess (see Kate's letter of 20 October 1873).

Amberley, who had had an epileptic seizure earlier in the year,

was again unwell. Helen Taylor left London precipitately in November in order, it appears, to make her Avignon home ready to receive him.[3] Exactly what happened is not clear from Kate's letter to Helen:

How kind you were about nursing - I trust we may want no more of that but enjoy in perfect health the rest of our journey - Amberley is much better. (11 January 1874)

All through the early months of 1874 there were suggestions of getting together in Italy which were frustrated either by inertia or the post office. In March, Helen made an offer, which was refused, to have the children for a visit. Kate, in a letter of 20 March 1874 proposing tentatively a school for boys and girls to be supervised by Helen and the Amberleys' tutor-*cum-troisième-en-ménage*, Spalding, interjected, "How kind of you to be knitting for your little godson" (one might equally exclaim, "How surprising"). Helen Taylor appeared to be on the point of joining the Amberleys in April (letter of 20 April 1874).

On the Amberleys' return journey in May, Frank came down with diphtheria and the family stayed in London while he was nursed. As soon as they arrived back at Ravenscroft in June, Kate invited Helen to stay with them. On the 13th she wrote expressing disappointment that Helen's plans to visit Mrs. Grote and then the Hares would put off her visit to them for such a long time. July was finally settled upon.

But they had delayed too long. On 21 June, Rachel developed diphtheria and four days later her mother caught it. Kate died on 28 June and a few days later Rachel too was dead. On 29 June, Helen received a movingly dry note from Lady Stanley of Alderley saying that she had come to her daughter too late and apologizing for not answering Helen's telegram sooner.[4]

Helen expressed her grief in a letter to her friend, Eliza Cairnes:

I knew I should have your sympathy in this fresh loss, although it is greater to me and to all concerned than perhaps anyone can estimate. For me it has changed the aspect of life; taken out of it what cheerfulness was left to me personally, independent of myself. Yet it has only increased my desire to work while there is yet time seeing how swiftly "the night cometh when no man can work"; and in work and a good conscience, no one knows better than you, there will always be cheerfulness to be found.[5]

Not until September was Amberley well enough to write to Helen:

The fact that you spoke more of your own and the public loss than mine is exactly what rendered your letter peculiarly valuable and precious to me. Infinitely as I have suffered myself I have not forgotten to feel for you in the loss of a friend who was so truly anxious to do all in her power to make your life a little less unhappy. How often and how strongly she expressed the wish that you might join us in Italy I cannot say, and she hoped as you know that you could spend a long time with us this summer at Ravenscroft. Both of us had felt very deeply for you in the loss of Mr Mill, and she was especially anxious that in our perfectly serene and happy life we might help you if possible to bear that great calamity. All this is over now, and I am afraid that you may not find another friend so sympathetic and so warmhearted as she was.

I am now with my mother and with Bertrand, whom I must thank you for bringing up. I trust that he was not troublesome to you. The condition of prostration I was in when you came down made it impossible for me to see you. Believe me, yours sincerely

Amberley[6]

This contact, bringing Bertie from Ravenscroft to London, would seem to be the last that Helen had with her godson, although she had a long life ahead of her.

Amberley never recovered either health or spirits after his

wife's death. He gradually became weaker and weaker until on 9 January 1876, after the doctor had lifted Bertrand up to be kissed, he lay back on his pillow and died. After a most unpleasant lawsuit to break the will (Amberley having left the boys to the guardianship of their peculiar tutor and another atheist, Cobden-Sanderson), Frank and Bertrand went to live with their Russell grandparents. Helen Taylor spent much of her latter years as a semi-recluse in Avignon until her niece brought her back in 1905 to live in Torquay, where she died two years later.

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*At this time Kate Amberley wrote to her mother: "The baby weighed 8 3/4 lb is 21 inches long and very fat and ugly very like Frank everyone thinks - blue eyes far apart and not much chin ... He is very vigorous and Mr. Audland says an out of the way strong muscular child wh. is a good thing. He lifts his head up and looks about in a very energetic way ..." (*Amberley Papers*, II, pp.491-2).

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[1] "Kate's Journal", *Amberley Papers*, ed. Bertrand and Patricia Russell (London: Hogarth Press, 1937), II, pp.329-30.

[2] Roger Fulford, *Votes for Women* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957), p.74; and Michael St. John Packe, *The Life of John Stuart Mill* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1954), p.499.

[3] Caroline Lindley to Helen Taylor, 26 November 1873, Mill-Taylor Collection, XXII, 458.

[4] Lady Stanley of Alderley to Helen Taylor, 29 June [1874], Mill-Taylor Collection, XXIII, 621.

[5] Helen Taylor to Eliza Cairnes [draft], 8 July [1874], Mill-Taylor Collection, XIX, 118.

[6] Lord Amberley to Helen Taylor, 7 September 1874, Mill-Taylor Collection, XIX, 6.