

Riding Down from Bangor, George Orwell

The reappearance of Helen's Babies, in its day one of the most popular books in the world – within the British Empire alone it was pirated by twenty different publishing firms, the author receiving a total profit of £40 from a sale of some hundreds of thousands or millions of copies – will ring a bell in any literate person over thirty-five. Not that the present edition is an altogether satisfactory one. It is a cheap little book with rather unsuitable illustrations, various American dialect words appear to have been cut out of it, and the sequel, Other People's Children, which was often bound up with it in earlier editions, is missing. Still, it is pleasant to see Helen's Babies in print again. It had become almost a rarity in recent years, and it is one of the best of the little library of American books on which people born at about the turn of the century were brought up.

The books one reads in childhood, and perhaps most of all the bad and good bad books, create in one's mind a sort of false map of the world, a series of fabulous countries into which one can retreat at odd moments throughout the rest of life, and which in some cases can even survive a visit to the real countries which they are supposed to represent. The pampas, the Amazon, the coral islands of the Pacific, Russia, land of birch-tree and samovar, Transylvania with its boyars and vampires, the China of Guy Boothby, the Paris of du Maurier – one could continue the list for a long time. But one other imaginary country that I acquired early in life was called America. If I pause on the word "America", and, deliberately putting aside the existing reality, call up my childhood vision of it, I see two pictures – composite pictures, of course, from which I am omitting a good deal of the detail.

One is of a boy sitting in a whitewashed stone schoolroom. He wears braces and has patches on his shirt, and if it is summer he is barefooted. In the corner of the school room there is a bucket of drinking water with a dipper. The boy lives in a farm-house, also of stone and also whitewashed, which has a mortgage on it. He aspires to be President, and is expected to keep the woodpile full. Somewhere in the background of the picture, but completely dominating it, is a huge black Bible. The other picture is of a tall, angular man, with a shapeless hat pulled down over his eyes, leaning against a wooden paling and whittling at a stick.

His lower jaw moves slowly but ceaselessly. At very long intervals he emits some piece of wisdom such as "A woman is the orneriest critter there is, 'ceptin' a mule", or "When you don't know a thing to do, don't do a thing"; but more often it is a jet of tobacco juice that issues from the gap in his front teeth. Between them those two pictures summed up my earliest impression of America. And of the two, the first – which, I suppose, represented New England, the other representing the South – had the stronger hold upon me.

The books from which these pictures were derived included, of course, books which it is still possible to take seriously, such as Tom Sawyer and Uncle Tom's Cabin, but the most richly American flavour was to be found in minor works which are now almost forgotten. I wonder, for instance, if anyone still reads Rebecca Of Sunnybrook Farm, which remained a popular favourite long enough to be filmed with Mary Pickford in the leading part.

Or how about the "Katy" books by Susan Coolidge (What Katy Did At School, etc), which, although girls' books and therefore "soppy", had the fascination of foreignness? Louisa M. Alcott's Little Women and Good Wives are, I suppose, still flickeringly in print, and certainly they still have their devotees. As a child I loved both of them, though I was less pleased by the third of the trilogy, Little Men. That model school where the worst punishment was to have to whack the schoolmaster, on "this hurts me more than it hurts you" principles, was rather difficult to swallow.

Helen's Babies belonged in much the same world as Little Women, and must have been published round about the same date. Then there were Artemus Ward, Bret Harte, and various songs, hymns and ballads, besides poems dealing with the civil war, such as "Barbara Fritchie" ("Shoot if you must this old grey head, But spare your country's flag, - she said") and "Little Gifford of Tennessee". There were other books so obscure that it hardly seems worth mentioning them, and magazine stories of which I remember nothing except that the old homestead always seemed to have a mortgage on it. There was also Beautiful Joe, the American reply to Black Beauty, of which you might just possibly pick up a copy in a sixpenny box.

All the books I have mentioned were written well before 1900, but something of the special American flavour lingered on into this century in, for instance, the Buster Brown coloured supplements, and even in Booth Tarkington's "Penrod" stories, which will have been written round about 1910. Perhaps there was even a tinge of it in Ernest Thompson Seton's animal books (Wild Animals I Have Known, etc), which have now fallen from favour but which drew tears from the pre-1914 child as surely as Misunderstood had done from the children of a generation earlier.

Somewhat later my picture of nineteenth-century America was given greater precision by a song which is still fairly well known and which can be found (I think) in the Scottish Students' Song Book. As usual in these bookless days I cannot get hold of a copy, and I must quote fragments from memory. It begins:

Riding down from Bangor
On an Eastern train,
Bronzed with weeks of hunting
In the woods of Maine
Quite extensive whiskers,
Beard, moustache as well
Sat a student fellow,
Tall and slim and swell.

Presently an aged couple and a "village maiden", described as "beautiful, petite", get into the carriage. Quantities of cinders are flying about, and before long the student fellow gets one in his eye: the village maiden extracts it for him, to the scandal of the aged couple. Soon after this the train shoots into a long tunnel, "black as Egypt's night". When it emerges into the daylight again the maiden is covered with blushes, and the cause of her confusion is revealed when

There suddenly appeared

A tiny little ear-ring
In that horrid student's beard!

I do not know the date of the song, but the primitiveness of the train (no lights in the carriage, and a cinder in one's eye a normal accident) suggests that it belongs well back in the nineteenth century.

What connects this song with books like Helen's Babies is first of all a sort of sweet innocence – the climax, the thing you are supposed to be slightly shocked at, is an episode with which any modern piece of naughty-naughty would start – and, secondly, a faint vulgarity of language mixed up with a certain cultural pretentiousness. Helen's Babies is intended as a humorous, even a farcical book, but it is haunted all the way through by words like "tasteful" and "ladylike", and it is funny chiefly because its tiny disasters happen against a background of conscious gentility. "Handsome, intelligent, composed, tastefully dressed, without a suspicion of the flirt or the languid woman of fashion about her, she awakened to the utmost my every admiring sentiment" – thus is the heroine described, figuring elsewhere as "erect, fresh, neat, composed, bright-eyed, fairfaced, smiling and observant".

One gets beautiful glimpses of a now-vanished world in such remarks as: "I believe you arranged the floral decorations at St Zephaniah's Fair last winter, Mr Burton? 'Twas the most tasteful display of the season." But in spite of the occasional use of "'twas" and other archaisms – "parlour" for sitting-room, "chamber" for bedroom, "real" as an adverb, and so forth – the book does not "date" very markedly, and many of its admirers imagine it to have been written round about 1900. Actually it was written in 1875, a fact which one might infer from internal evidence, since the hero, aged twenty-eight, is a veteran of the civil war.

The book is very short and the story is a simple one. A young bachelor is prevailed on by his sister to look after her house and her two sons, aged five and three, while she and her husband go on a fortnight's holiday. The children drive him almost mad by an endless succession of such acts as falling into ponds, swallowing poison, throwing keys down wells, cutting themselves with razors, and the like, but also facilitate his engagement to "a charming girl, whom, for about a year, I had been adoring from afar". These events take place in an outer suburb of New York, in a society which now seems astonishingly sedate, formal, domesticated and, according to current conceptions, un-American. Every action is governed by etiquette. To pass a carriage full of ladies when your hat is crooked is an ordeal; to recognise an acquaintance in church is ill-bred; to become engaged after a ten days' courtship is a severe social lapse.

We are accustomed to thinking of American society as more crude, adventurous and, in a cultural sense, democratic than our own, and from writers like Mark Twain, Whitman and Bret Harte, not to mention the cowboy and Red Indian stories of the weekly papers, one draws a picture of a wild anarchic world peopled by eccentrics and desperadoes who have no traditions and no attachment to one place. That aspect of nineteenth-century America did of course exist, but in the more populous eastern States a society similar to Jane Austen's seems to have survived longer than it did in England. And it is hard not to feel that it was a better kind of society than that which arose from the sudden industrialisation of the later part of the century.

The people in Helen's Babies or Little Women may be mildly ridiculous, but they are uncorrupted. They have something that is perhaps best described as integrity, or good morale, founded partly on an unthinking piety. It is a matter of course that everyone attends church on Sunday morning and says grace before meals and prayers at bedtime: to amuse the children one tells them Bible stories, and if they ask for a song it is probably "Glory, glory Hallelujah". Perhaps it is also a sign of spiritual health in the light literature of this period that death is mentioned freely. "Baby Phil", the brother of Budge and Toddie, has died shortly before Helen's Babies opens, and there are various tear-jerking references to his "tiny coffin". A modern writer attempting a story of this kind would have kept coffins out of it

English children are still americanised by way of the films, but it would no longer be generally claimed that American books are the best ones for children. Who, without misgivings, would bring up a child on the coloured "comics" in which sinister professors manufacture atomic bombs in underground laboratories while Superman whizzes through the clouds, the machine-gun bullets bouncing off his chest like peas, and platinum blondes are raped, or very nearly, by steel robots and fifty-foot dinosaurs? It is a far cry from Superman to the Bible and the woodpile.

The earlier children's books, or books readable by children, had not only innocence but a sort of native gaiety, a buoyant, carefree feeling, which was the product, presumably, of the unheard-of freedom and security which nineteenth-century America enjoyed. That is the connecting link between books so seemingly far apart as Little Women and Life On The Mississippi. The society described in the one is subdued, bookish and home-loving, while the other tells of a crazy world of bandits, gold mines, duels, drunkenness and gambling hells: but in both one can detect an underlying confidence in the future, a sense of freedom and opportunity.

Nineteenth-century America was a rich, empty country which lay outside the main stream of world events, and in which the twin nightmares that beset nearly every modern man, the nightmare of unemployment and the nightmare of State interference, had hardly come into being. There were social distinctions, more marked than those of today, and there was poverty (in Little Women, it will be remembered, the family is at one time so hard up that one of the girls sells her hair to the barber), but there was not, as there is now, an all-prevailing sense of helplessness.

There was room for everybody, and if you worked hard you could be certain of a living – could even be certain of growing rich: this was generally believed, and for the greater part of the population it was even broadly true. In other words, the civilisation of nineteenth-century America was capitalist civilisation at its best. Soon after the civil war the inevitable deterioration started. But for some decades, at least, life in America was much better fun than life in Europe – there was more happening, more colour, more variety, more opportunity – and the books and songs of that period had a sort of bloom, a childlike quality. Hence, I think, the popularity of Helen's Babies and other "light" literature, which made it normal for the English child of thirty or forty years ago to grow up with a theoretical knowledge of racoons, woodchucks, chipmunks, gophers, hickory trees, water-melons and other unfamiliar fragments of the American scene.

THE END