

## A Divine Cure for Drunkenness

‘Abraham, dearest brother, may God be praised that you could come!’ Abigail Blake embraced her brother and stood aside for him to enter. ‘After prayers, I should like you to meet our Minister. He is shortly to depart for the Colonies.’

Twenty-year old Abraham Biggs stepped directly into the parlour, where he observed his brother-in-law, Samuel, talking quietly to two soberly dressed gentlemen, one in clerical garb. Abraham extended his hand to Samuel, who introduced him to the others. The minister’s name was Benjamin Carvosso, who had a strong yet kind presence. His egg-shaped, beardless face gave him a high forehead and cheekbones, his prominent down-turned nose pointed to a smiling, generous mouth. Clearly here was a man of moral authority, with a preacher’s voice, deep and resonant, to match. Although he could not have been more than ten years older than Abraham, his penetrating gaze and warm smile made Abraham feel both humbled and accepted.

Introductions over, they sat in a circle and bowed their heads as Minister Carvosso led them in prayer. This was a new experience for Abraham. He had been brought up as an Anglican; the family said their prayers in St. Owens Church, Bromham, where the priest followed a liturgical sequence. But *ex tempore* prayer such as he was then experiencing made him feel closer to God, as if he himself were conversing with Him, not merely witnessing a more spiritually privileged person, to wit a priest, holding converse with the Maker of all men.

Abigail had been the first of the Bromham Biggses to convert to Wesleyanism, or Methodism as it had become known, and she had earnestly desired that her dear brother Abraham, who had from early days shown an interest in matters spiritual, to convert to Methodism and to experience the peace and joy that she had done.

After they had finished prayers, Benjamin drew Abraham aside. ‘I am most delighted to have made your acquaintance, Abraham. Your sister has spoken of your possible interest in our faith.’

‘And so most certainly am I to have made yours, Sir. Yes, it is true. Although I was reared as an Anglican and have much respect for that faith, I was much moved by our prayers just now. Pray tell me, Sir, how does your faith differ from that of my parents?’

Carvosso smiled in his engaging way. ‘It differs not at all.’ He raised his hand as Abraham drew breath to question that statement. ‘We subscribe to almost all points of doctrine as outlined in the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds. We differ not in belief, but in *action*. But one must always have faith. With faith, God justifies us; we are, you might say, reborn in the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, and then we must shew forth and bear *witness* to that faith. Also in action one must be an example of godly living, to provide moral guidance to those less fortunate, perhaps *weaker* than us. We must *eschew* such pleasures of the flesh as wantonness, gluttony and drunkenness. Especially drunkenness. Drunkenness is the greatest enemy of Britain – but it can be arrested by the Word of God. I in fact propose to write a book on that very subject.<sup>1</sup> What think you, Abraham?’

‘What, of drunkenness?’

‘The same,’ Carvosso watched Abraham closely.

‘I, er, well I have been but once intoxicated and then but partially so, and under very peculiar circumstances ...’ Abraham broke off then hurried on. ‘Sir, I share your views on that subject. Drunkenness is an abomination before the Lord, surely.’

‘Surely, indeed. Well, Abraham, I see a future for you in our joyful communion of brothers and sisters. Not perhaps as a minister, your sister Abigail tells me you are a carpenter and a most skilful one, as was our Lord Jesus Himself. The Lord has blessed each one of us with our peculiar talents. But certainly you would make a most excellent Leader.’ He paused, looking speculatively at Abraham, then concluded. ‘We may not meet again, Abraham, for next week I am voyaging to Van Diemens’ Land as Missionary to the Wesley Chapel in Hobart Town.’

Carvosso laid both his hands on Abraham’s shoulders, his voice a muted trumpet as he enjoined Abraham: ‘Tell it out among the heathen that the Lord is King! Farewell, Abraham, may you and I meet again. Perhaps in the Colonies; perhaps as fellow foot-soldiers in God’s Holy Army?’ He smiled again, and took his leave.

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<sup>1</sup> Which indeed Carvosso did in 1840: *Drunkenness the Enemy of Britain Arrested by the Hand of God*.

Abraham would have been most surprised had he been told that he would indeed voyage to Van Diemen's Land himself and serve in that very same Chapel in Hobart Town. For that is what came to pass, although by that time Benjamin Carvosso himself had returned to England. They did not see each other again, but that meeting in Abigail Blake's little cottage was to change Abraham's life for ever.

Abraham was born in 1799 in Bromham, Bedford, the youngest son of John Biggs, a flour miller, and his wife Susannah.<sup>2</sup> The Biggs family had been flour millers for generations in and around Bedford. Although the family were staunch Anglicans by tradition, they were close. The fact that their daughter Abigail had embraced Methodism had not threatened the loving relationships within the Biggs family.

After his meeting with Carvosso, Abraham too embraced Methodism and for the next three years he preached in the Leighton Buzzard Circuit, near Bedford. Here he met Eliza Coleman, two years his junior, and on Christmas Day, 1822, they married and moved to London, where he met many more influential Methodists, confirming his dedication to that cause. Abraham, Eliza and their infant son, Alfred, returned to Bedford, Abraham working in Bromham village as a carpenter, while his brother William, to whom he later wrote regularly, carried on with the milling business.

Carvosso's words, no doubt fertilized by Abraham's subsequent Methodist contacts, turned Abraham's thoughts to becoming more active still in preaching the faith. The Methodists having become firmly entrenched in the United States, Abraham's first thoughts were for Buffalo, New York, but in the end he decided to settle in Van Diemen's Land. Carvosso's example might well have influenced that decision, so too might have the fact that the home government advanced the fare of £20 per family, repayable within two years, to married mechanics (tradesmen) who were willing to emigrate to the Colonies.

But in other ways, it might be seen as a strange choice.

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<sup>2</sup> Bromham Mill still stands beside the bridge at Bromham, Bedford. It was recently restored and is now a tourist attraction.

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The news of Abraham's fiery eloquence and of his success at New Norfolk reached the ears of Lieutenant-Governor Arthur. He required Abraham to attend a meeting with him. Abraham did so with alacrity.

The formidable Governor Arthur stood to acknowledge his visitor. He used his height to intimidate, but it did not visibly have that effect on the slight, dark haired man before him. Their height was not the only contrast. The Governor had a severe mien, with thin, bloodless lips. He was not given to smiling, his down-turned mouth rarely reversing. When conversing, his wide, grey eyes looked as if he was doubting what he was hearing.

Abraham on the other hand had small humorous eyes, his lips commonly in a gentle smile. Although he was given to ranting about the perils of sin and damnation, his look was at the same time sympathetic, as if he truly felt for those so damned and that he would soon be on his knees interceding for their lost souls.

Arthur extended his hand toward the chair in front of his desk and sat down behind it. 'Mr. Biggs, I should first care to hear your views on the matter of convicts and their rehabilitation. You have visited our prisons?'

'I have, Your Excellency. The moral state of this colony is certainly very far from being good, but we do not generally go to prison to witness an exhibition of the excellence of morality but rather of the deformity of vice.'

'And do you have any suggestions as to how this, ah, *deformity* might be remedied, as if such a thing were possible?'

'It is possible indeed, Your Excellency. That mighty mass of corruption existing in the heat of this prison population is by the restraining grace of God, and by the active exertions of a powerful police, kept within narrower limits than might be expected ...'

The corners of Arthur's thin mouth honoured the speaker with a rare twitch upwards.

'... especially when we consider how much the scattered state of the inhabitants militates against the usefulness of those servants of the Most High in Christ.' Abraham leaned forward earnestly. 'Servants such as I, Your Excellency, who unworthy though I am, bear witness to the infinite Mercy of our Lord Jesus, to whom we must open our hearts and minds if we are to be spared His righteous anger. Only his Word can save the wretched souls of those living in wickedness, depravity and vile drunkenness. That is the remedy I would enjoin upon you, Your Excellency, that I *preach* to those held in captivity, wallowing in their own corruption. With the politics of the land I meddle not.'

Surely I am a man after Governor Arthur's own heart, Abraham had thought, an evangelical Christian who sees convicts as morally depraved but whose condition can be ameliorated by battering their souls with the mighty hammer of God's Word. I, like our Governor himself, detest not only the prevalence of alcohol abuse in the Colony but the use of any alcohol at all; and I keep out of politics – unlike many of the other free colonists who, however much I might *agree* with them, pester him with their bleating about free speech and an end to transportation. Abraham had judged the Governor correctly.

'Then, Sir,' Arthur replied with a slight smile, 'I would be greatly pleased if you would accept the office of schoolmaster and catechist.'

'I should be much honoured, Your Excellency.' Abraham bowed his head in acceptance, but told himself that some bargaining lay ahead. 'I understand there is a position of catechist at Glenorchy. It would be a great convenience to go there, as I have a farm ...'

'Yes, yes, but there is another place I would much rather you go to, namely Grass Tree Hill, where there is a large party of prisoners who would benefit greatly from your words, as there are also at Green Point and at Bridgewater. We could give you a quarter's salary at once. Could you go next Sunday?'

Knowing that His Excellency was thinking of the prisoners on his own farm at Grass Tree Hill, Abraham agreed, 'I could indeed, Your Excellency.'

'Capital, Mr. Biggs. I will order the Port Officer to have a boat in readiness for you on the Sunday following. I and the Chief Police Magistrate, Captain Foster, will attend the service.'

'How would you like the service conducted, Your Excellency?'

'I should like you to read the church prayers which I think are very excellent, then offer an extempore prayer before the sermon and an extempore sermon. Now, for your other duties, and for the matter of emolument.'

Fifteen minutes later, Abraham left Government House elated. He crossed Macquarie Street and walked the five blocks up Elizabeth Street to his home.

'Eliza, my dearest,' he called as he entered the door, 'I have wonderful news. The Lord indeed has been gracious. His Excellency received me with great kindness and affability. I am to be catechist to His Excellency's prisoners at Grass Tree Hill, and to further encampments of prisoners at Bridgewater and Green Point.'

'To be a catechist is a pursuit to which you have long been inclined, dear husband,' Eliza smiled, 'what would you do, exactly?'

'My duties require me to read the Church Service and preach at Green Point to a company of prisoners and at Bridgewater to another company. Soldiers, and the Lieutenant Superintendent and his family, will also be in attendance. ...'

'Such travelling!' Eliza interposed.

'I have in mind to rent a farm somewhere close, near Richmond, possibly. But let me finish telling you of my duties. Following the service and after our midday meal, I am to supervise the best educated and best conducted of the men in teaching those have yet to learn reading, writing and arithmetic. Wednesday and Friday I conduct school until five o'clock. Thus you see I should have five days clear to spend on the farm.'

'But would five days on the farm be sufficient to provide for us?'

Abraham smiled broadly. 'Indeed it would. The Lord entered the heart of His Excellency and inclined him to generosity. The emolument for schoolmaster is £50, for catechist £50, assistance for the house rent £25, and for you my dear Eliza, for teaching Reading and Needlework, you shall receive £25. A grand total of £150! But even yet the Lord guided His Excellency to provide an allowance for horse forage, namely £45.12.6d., that I in my prideful haste omitted to mention myself.'

'Oh, for grace to set my Saviour forth in a proper manner, to seek His praise, not the praise of man.'