



Ten Nights in a Bar-Room, 1854, frontispiece (detail)

Timothy Shay Arthur

Ten Nights in a Bar-Room: And What I Saw There

NOVEL ■ 1854 ■ CH. 7: EXCERPTS

___ NIGHT THE SEVENTH ___ SOWING THE WIND

. . . The case of young Hammond had, from the first, awakened concern, and now a new element was added in the unlooked-for appearance of his mother on the stage,* in a state that seemed one of partial

derangement. The gentleman at whose office I met Mr. Harrison on the day before — the reader will remember Mr. H. as having come to the Sickle and Sheaf† [tavern] in search of his son — was thoroughly conversant with the affairs of the village, and I called upon him early in the day in order to make some inquiries about Mrs. Hammond. My first question, as to whether he knew the lady, was answered by the remark:

“Oh, yes. She is one of my earliest friends.”

The allusion to her did not seem to awaken agreeable states of mind.§ A slight shade obscured his face, and I noticed that he sighed involuntarily.

“Is Willy her only child?”

“Her only living child. She had four; another son, and two daughters; but she lost all but Willy when they were quite young. And,” he added, after a pause, — “it would have been better for her, and for Willy, too, if he had gone to a better land with them.”

“His course of life must be to her a terrible affliction,” said I.

“It is destroying her reason,” he replied, with emphasis. “He was her idol. No mother ever loved a son with more self-devotion than Mrs. Hammond loved her beautiful, fine-spirited, intelligent, affectionate boy. To say that she was proud of him is but a tame expression. Intense love — almost idolatry — was the strong passion of her heart. How tender, how watchful was her love! Except when at school, he was scarcely ever separated from her. In order to keep him by her side, she gave up her thoughts to the suggestion and maturing of plans for keeping his mind active and interested in her society** — and her success was perfect. Up to the age of sixteen or seventeen, I do not think he had a desire for other companionship than that of his mother. But this, you know, could not last. The boy’s maturing thought must go beyond the home and social circle. The great world, that he was soon to enter, was before him; and through loopholes that opened here and there he obtained partial glimpses of what was beyond. To step forth into this world, where he was soon to be a busy actor and worker, and to step forth alone, next

derangement:
insanity, madness

conversant:
familiar, informed

allusion:
reference, mention

obscured:
darkened

affliction:
hardship, source
of suffering

idolatry:
worship,
extreme admiration

* *On the stage:* into the situation.

† In a typographical error in the 1854 edition, the tavern is incorrectly identified in this paragraph as the “Sickle and Sheath.”

§ *Awaken agreeable states of mind:* bring pleasure.

** I.e., she devoted her thoughts to coming up with ways to keep him close to her.

came in the natural order of progress. How his mother trembled with anxiety, as she saw him leave her side! Of the dangers that would surround his path, she knew too well; and these were magnified by her fears — at least so I often said to her. Alas! how far the sad reality has outrun her most fearful anticipations.

anxiety:
worry, dread

anticipations:
expectations

“When Willy was eighteen — he was then reading law — I think I never saw a young man of fairer promise. As I have often heard it remarked of him, he did not appear to have a single fault. But he had a dangerous gift — rare conversational powers, united with great urbanity of manner. Every one who made his acquaintance became charmed with his society; and he soon found himself surrounded by a circle of young men, some of whom were not the best companions he might have chosen. Still, his own pure instincts and honorable principles were his safeguard; and I never have believed that any social allurements would have drawn him away from the right path, if this accursed tavern had not been opened by Slade [owner of the Sickle and Sheaf].”

reading law:
studying to
be a lawyer

urbanity:
charm,
sophistication

society:
friendliness,
acquaintance

“There was a tavern here before the Sickle and Sheaf was opened?” said I.

“Oh, yes. But it was badly kept, and the bar-room visitors were of the lowest class. No respectable young man in Cedarville would have been seen there. It offered no temptations to one moving in Willy’s circle. But the opening of the Sickle and Sheaf formed a new era. Judge Hammond — himself not the purest man in the world, I’m afraid — gave his countenance to the establishment, and talked of Simon Slade as an enterprising man who ought to be encouraged. Judge Lyman and other men of position in Cedarville followed his bad example; and the bar-room of the Sickle and Sheaf was at once voted respectable. At all times of the day and evening you could see the flower of our young men going in and out, sitting in front of the bar-room, or talking hand-and-glove with the landlord, who, from a worthy miller,* regarded as well enough in his place, was suddenly elevated into a man of importance, whom the best in the village were delighted to honor.

countenance:
approval

enterprising:
inventive,
resourceful

“In the beginning, Willy went with the tide, and, in an incredibly short period, was acquiring a fondness for drink that startled and alarmed his friends. In going in through Slade’s open door, he entered the downward way, and has been moving onward with fleet footsteps ever since. The fiery poison inflamed his mind, at the same time that it dimmed his noble perceptions. Fondness for mere pleasure followed, and this led him into various sensual indulgences,† and exciting modes of passing the time. Everyone liked him — he was so free, so companionable, and so generous — and almost every one encouraged, rather than repressed, his dangerous proclivities. Even his father, for a time, treated the matter lightly, as only the first flush of young life. ‘I commenced sowing my wild oats at quite as early an age,’ I have heard him say. ‘He’ll cool off, and do well enough. Never fear.’ But his mother was in a state of painful alarm from the beginning. Her truer instincts, made doubly acute by her yearning love, perceived the imminent danger, and in all possible ways did she seek to lure him from the path in which he was moving at so rapid a pace. Willy was always very much attached to his mother, and her influence over him was strong; but in this case he regarded her fears as chimerical. The way in which he walked was, to him, so pleasant, and the companions of his journey so delightful, that he could not believe in the prophesied evil; and when his mother talked to him in her warning voice, and with a sad countenance, he smiled at her concern, and made light of her fears.

fleet:
quick

perceptions:
judgments

companionable:
friendly

proclivities:
tendencies

imminent:
about to
happen

chimerical:
imaginary

countenance:
look on one’s face

made light of:
joked about

sad declensions:
declining morals

“And so it went on, month after month, and year after year, until the young man’s sad declensions were the town talk. In order to throw his mind into a new channel — to awaken, if possible, a new and better interest in life — his father ventured upon the

* Simon Slade, the owner of the tavern, had once owned a gristmill.

† *sensual indulgences*: physical pleasures, lacking moral, spiritual, or intellectual value.

doubtful experiment we spoke of yesterday; that of placing capital in his hands, and making him an equal partner in the business of distilling and cotton-spinning. The disastrous — I might say disgraceful — result you know. The young man squandered his own capital and heavily embarrassed his father.*

capital:
money
squandered:
wasted

“The effect of all this upon Mrs. Hammond has been painful in the extreme. We can only dimly imagine the terrible suffering through which she has passed. Her present aberration was first visible after a long period of sleeplessness, occasioned by distress of mind. During the whole of two weeks, I am told, she did not close her eyes; the most of that time walking the floor of her chamber, and weeping. Powerful anodynes, frequently repeated, at length brought relief. But, when she awoke from a prolonged period of unconsciousness, the brightness of her reason was gone. Since then, she has never been clearly conscious of what was passing around her, and well for her, I have sometimes thought it was, for even obscurity of intellect is a blessing in her case. Ah, me! I always get the heartache when I think of her.”

aberration:
abnormal condition
anodynes:
medicines

“Did not this event startle the young man from his fatal dream, if I may so call his mad infatuation?” I asked.

mad infatuation:
object of desire or admiration

“No. He loved his mother and was deeply afflicted by the calamity,[†] but it seemed as if he could not stop. Some terrible necessity appeared to be impelling him onward. If he formed good resolutions[‡] — and I doubt not that he did—they were blown away like threads of gossamer, the moment he came within the sphere of old associations. His way to the mill was by the Sickle and Sheaf, and it was not easy for him to pass there without being drawn into the bar, either by his own desire for drink, or through the invitation of some pleasant companion who was lounging in front of the tavern.”

impelling:
driving, forcing

threads of gossamer:
film of cobwebs

associations:
friends and acquaintances

. . .

“Thus it is,” he continued; “and we who see the whole extent, origin, and downward rushing force of a widely sweeping desolation, lift our voices of warning almost in vain. Men who have everything at stake—sons to be corrupted, and daughters to become the wives of young men exposed to corrupting influences—stand aloof, questioning and doubting as to the expediency of protecting the innocent from the wolfish designs of bad men; who, to compass their own selfish ends, would destroy them body and soul. We are called fanatics, ultraists, designing, and all that, because we ask our lawmakers to stay the fiery ruin. Oh, no! we must not touch the traffic. All the dearest and best interests of society may suffer; but the rum-seller must be protected. He must be allowed to get gain if the jails and poorhouses are filled, and the graveyards made fat with the bodies of young men stricken down in the flower of their years, and of wives and mothers who have died of broken hearts. Reform, we are told, must commence at home. We must rear temperate children, and then we shall have temperate men. That when there are none to desire liquor, the rum-seller’s traffic will cease. And all the while society’s true benefactors are engaged in doing this,[§] the weak, the unsuspecting, and the erring must be left an easy prey, even if the work requires for its accomplishment a hundred years. Sir! a human soul destroyed through the rum-seller’s infernal agency, is a sacrifice priceless in value. No considerations of worldly gain can, for an instant, be placed in comparison therewith. And yet souls are destroyed by thousands every year; and they will fall by tens of thousands ere society awakens from its fatal indifference, and lays its strong hand of power on the corrupt men who are scattering disease, ruin, and death, broadcast over the land!

aloof:
aside

expediency:
usefulness

compass: bring about, achieve

ultraists:
extremists

designing:
plotting

stay:
hold back

traffic: sale of alcohol

gain: profit, money

commence:
begin

temperate:
moderate, having self-control

benefactors:
reformers

infernal agency:
evil actions

ere: before

indifference:
lack of concern

* By causing his father to lose a lot of money.

† Hurt by the disaster.

‡ Made commitments to improve.

§ Promoting the idea that temperance begins at home.