

work, he ran that risk without a single motive, except it was the privilege of toiling for nothing, or the pleasure of being exposed, when by writing it himself he need have no risk at all.



CHAPTER VII.

JOSEPH SMITH'S EARLY LIFE.

THE supposed bad character of Joseph Smith when a youth has been made the text for many a tirade against the gospel that he, by God's grace, restored to the earth. How is it possible, it is asked, that we can believe that God would choose such an instrument for His work? We answer in the first place, God's ways are not as man's ways, and He has a perfect right to choose whomsoever He will. But further we assert, knowing we speak the truth, that the stories about Joseph Smith's bad character are false, and were never whispered until after God called him, and he had commenced the work that heaven assigned him. Until that time he and his parents with their entire family enjoyed a good reputation among their neighbors.

No sooner had Joseph borne his simple testimony of angelic visitations, than the evil one commenced to vilify his character, to destroy the effect of his testimony. Evil reports spread far and wide, growing as they went, as lies always do, until the days of D. P. Hurlburt, who, when going east to obtain the "Manuscript Found," made it his business to visit the neighborhood of Joseph's early home, and gather for publication all the floating scandal that had been in circulation from the beginning. He also procured an affidavit, or affidavits, which he asserted numbers of the old neighbors of the Smith family signed. Some of the persons whose names were attached to those papers have since repudiated all knowledge thereof, and make statements with regard to Joseph Smith's character entirely at variance with the

tenor of the affidavits. Others signed from hearsay and rumor and not from actual knowledge. Others are said to have been themselves men of such disreputable character that to be traduced by them was a compliment. The names of entire strangers were also added to swell the list. These fraudulent and untruthful affidavits have been reprinted time and again, and others have followed in Hurlburt's footsteps, inventing other statements with regard to Joseph Smith, and attached the names of well-known residents of Palmyra, Manchester, etc., thereto without their knowledge and consent, and putting into their mouths statements entirely at variance with their sentiments and expressions. We regret to have to say that this dirty work has generally been done by professed ministers of the gospel.

The affidavits gathered by Hurlburt make the signers thereto complain that the Smith family, especially Joseph, was indolent, intemperate, untruthful, "entirely destitute of moral character and addicted to vicious habits." These charges are not only false, but they also manifest all the bitter hatred of religious bigotry and all the exaggeration of envy and revenge.

Joseph was undoubtedly not perfect—none of us are—but he was far superior in almost every respect to his neighbors and associates. In his own account of his youth, between the time of his first vision and the visit of the angel Moroni, he in the humility of his repentance fully confesses his youthful follies, and, as is natural with sensitive and conscientious natures, such as his, evidently applies the strongest language to his shortcomings, and exaggerates rather than extenuates his youthful misdeeds.

He writes :

"During the space of time which intervened between the time I had the vision and the year eighteen hundred and twenty-three (having been forbidden to join any of the religious sects of the day, and being of very tender years, and persecuted by those who ought to have been my friends, and to have treated me kindly, and if they supposed me to be deluded to have endeavored, in a proper and affectionate manner, to have reclaimed me), I was left to all kinds of temptations, and mingled with all kinds of society. I frequently fell into many foolish errors, and displayed the weakness of youth, and the corruption of human nature, which, I am sorry to say, led me

into divers temptations, to the gratification of many appetites offensive in the sight of God. In consequence of these things I often felt condemned for my weakness and imperfections; when on the evening of the twenty-first of September, after I had retired to my bed for the night, I betook myself to prayer and supplication to Almighty God, for forgiveness of all my sins and follies, and also for a manifestation to me, that I might know of my state and standing before Him; for I had full confidence in obtaining a divine manifestation, as I had previously done."

The above is a simple, straightforward, artless statement of his condition, in which he seeks to hide nothing, but at the same time shows that the rebuffs he received, the persecutions he suffered from those who should have been his guides and friends had sufficient influence to cause him occasionally to give way to the weakness of youth incidental to association with the rough and unrestrained society he from his lowly position in life was naturally compelled to mingle with.

When comparing the before-mentioned vile charges with the testimony of those who knew the future Prophet's family best, we learn that instead of being indolent, the family were "good workers;" instead of being untruthful and vicious, they were honest, upright, religious and veracious, good neighbors, kind in sickness, but very poor, and with but little of the knowledge of this world. Their poverty, which some uncharitable souls have transformed into "shiftlessness," or lack of management, is one of the heaviest charges brought against them.

The charge of intemperance can be simmered down to the fact that on one or two occasions, in the harvest field, Joseph drank rather more cider than did him good. All the witnesses declare that "everybody drank in those days." It was before the age of temperance societies, and all classes of people considered it perfectly right to take a little strong drink occasionally. Drunkenness was the besetting sin of that era among the English race. Joseph was not a "teetotaler," because there were none. He was also very fond of wrestling, as many of his friends of later years know, and doubtless when stimulated with cider was on hand for a bout, or for any other athletic game or trial of strength that might be suggested. From this exuberance of animal spirits, the enemies of God's

latter-day work have built up the story of Joseph's inebriety and vagabond character.

Again, he is charged with the grave offense of being a "money-digger." In one sense this is true. The whole country round about western New York was in those days affected with a mania to discover hidden treasures in the earth. Most marvelous stories are told of the interposition of unseen beings when some of these treasures were disturbed. The public mind was greatly troubled on this subject, and Joseph Smith was employed by a man at one time to dig for him in the hope of discovering some of these buried riches, or an ancient Spanish mine. Joseph worked for him as he would for any other man, or for the same man if he engaged him to plant potatoes or hoe corn. From this grew the story of Joseph being a money-digger. Even if he dug for treasure on his own responsibility, we do not know that there is anything degrading, dishonest or criminal in such an action.

The following is Joseph's own account of the manner in which he became saddled with the title of "Money-digger:"

"As my father's worldly circumstances were very limited, we were under the necessity of laboring with our hands, hiring by day's work and otherwise as we could get opportunity; sometimes we were at home and sometimes abroad, and by continued labor we were enabled to get a comfortable maintenance.

"In the year 1824, my father's family met with a great affliction, by the death of my eldest brother, Alvin. In the month of October, 1825, I hired with an old gentleman by the name of Josiah Stoal, who lived in Chenango county, State of New York. He had heard something of a silver mine having been opened by the Spaniards, in Harmony, Susquehanna county, state of Pennsylvania, and had, previous to my hiring with him, been digging, in order, if possible, to discover the mine. After I went to live with him he took me among the rest of his hands to dig for the silver mine, at which I continued to work for nearly a month without success in our undertaking, and finally I prevailed with the old gentleman to cease digging after it. Hence arose the very prevalent story of my having been a money-digger."

Somewhere about this time, or possibly rather later, Joseph worked for Mr. Joseph Knight, of Colesville, New York.

Of Joseph, Mr. Knight's son, Newel, writes in his private manuscript journal, as follows:

"The business my father was engaged in, often required him to have hired help, and among the many he, from time to time, employed was a young man by the name of Joseph Smith, Jun., to whom I was particularly attached. His noble deportment, his faithfulness, and his kind address could not fail to win the esteem of those who had the pleasure of his acquaintance. One thing I will mention which seemed to be a peculiar characteristic with him in all his boyish sports and amusements: I never knew anyone to gain advantage over him, and yet he was always kind and kept the good will of his play-mates."

In March, 1881, two gentlemen, named Kelley, residing in Michigan, for their own satisfaction, visited the neighborhood where Joseph spent his youth, and questioned the older residents who were acquainted with the Smith family as to their knowledge of the character of Joseph, his parents and his brothers and sisters. Their interviews with numerous parties who claim to have known Joseph were afterwards published. Among those visited were the families, and sometimes the identical persons whose names had been appended, often without their knowledge, to former scurrilous affidavits regarding the reputation of the Smith family. In several cases these parties stated that they did not so much as know that any statement of theirs had ever been published; that they never uttered the sentiments or made the assertions attributed to them, and in some instances that they had been abused because they would not make the damaging statements regarding Joseph's character that those who visited them required. In many cases where they spoke disparagingly of the Prophet's family to the Messrs. Kelley, these gentlemen found that they spoke *from hearsay*, and *not from actual knowledge*; while those who knew Joseph best spoke of him the most highly. We here append a few extracts from these interviews, at the same time remarking (to put the feeling in the mildest language), that some of these gentlemen were no friends of the Smith family.

"What did you know about the Smiths, Mr. Gilbert?"

"I knew nothing myself; have seen Joseph Smith a few times, but not acquainted with him. Saw Hyrum quite often. I am the party that set the type from the original manuscript for the Book of Mormon. They translated it in a cave. I would know that manuscript to-day if I should see it. The

most of it was in Oliver Cowdery's handwriting. Some in Joseph's wife's; a small part though. Hyrum Smith always brought the manuscript to the office; he would have it under his coat, and all buttoned up as carefully as though it was so much gold. He said at the time that it was translated from plates by the power of God, and they were very particular about it. We had a great deal of trouble with it. It was not punctuated at all. They did not know anything about punctuation, and we had to do that ourselves."

"Well; did you change any part of it when you were setting the type?"

"No, sir; we never changed it at all."

"Why did you not change it and correct it?"

"Because they would not allow us to; they were very particular about that. We never changed it in the least. Oh, well; there might have been one or two words that I changed the spelling of; I believe I did change the spelling of one, and perhaps two, but no more."

"Did you set all the type, or did some one help you?"

"I did the whole of it myself, and helped to read the proof, too; there was no one who worked at that but myself. Did you ever see one of the first copies? I have one here that was never bound. Mr. Grandin, the printer, gave it to me. If you ever saw a Book of Mormon you will see that they changed it afterwards."

"They did! Well, let us see your copy; that is a good point. How is it changed now?"

"I will show you (bringing out his copy). Here on the title page it says (reading), 'Joseph Smith, Jr., author and proprietor.' Afterwards, in getting out other editions they left that out, and only claimed that Joseph Smith translated it."

"Well, did they claim anything else than that he was the translator when they brought the manuscript to you?"

"Oh, no; they claimed that he was translating by means of some instruments he got at the same time he did the plates, and that the Lord helped him."

The Messrs. Kelley also called upon Dr. John Stafford, at Rochester, N. Y. He is now a retired physician, being too aged and infirm to practice. Answering a question as to the character of Joseph Smith, he said:

"He was a real clever, jovial boy. What Tucker said about them" (the Smith family) "was false, absolutely. My father, William Stafford, was never connected with them in any way. The Smiths, with others, were digging for money before Joe got the plates. My father had a stone, which some thought they could look through, and old Mrs. Smith came there for it

one day, but never got it. Saw them digging one time for money; (this was three or four years before the Book of Mormon was found) the Smiths and others. The old man and Hyrum were there, I think, but Joseph was not there. The neighbors used to claim Sally Chase could look at a stone she had, and see money. Willard Chase used to dig when she found where the money was. Don't know as anybody ever found any money."

"What was the character of Smith, as to his drinking?"

"It was common then for everybody to drink, and to have drink in the field; one time Joe, while working for some one after he was married, drank too much boiled cider. He came in with his shirt torn; his wife felt bad about it, and when they went home, she put her shawl on him."

"Had he been fighting and drunk?"

"No; he had been scuffling with some of the boys. Never saw him fight; have known him to scuffle; would do a fair day's work if hired out to a man; but were poor managers," (the Smiths.)

"What about that black sheep your father let them have?"

"I have heard that story, but don't think my father was there at the time they say Smith got the sheep. I don't know anything about it."

"You were living at home at the time, and it seems you ought to know if they got a sheep, or stole one, from your father?"

"They never stole one, I am sure; they may have got one sometime."

"Well, doctor, you know pretty well whether that story is true or not, that Tucker tells. What do you think of it?"

"I don't think it is true. I would have heard more about it, that is true. I lived a mile from Smith's; am seventy-six years old. They were peaceable among themselves. The old woman had a great deal of faith that their children were going to do something great. Joe was quite illiterate. After they began to have school at their house, he improved greatly."

"Did they have school in their own house?"

"Yes, sir; they had school in their house, and studied the Bible."

"Who was their teacher?"

"They did not have any teacher; they taught themselves."

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"If young Smith was illiterate as you say, doctor, how do you account for the Book of Mormon?"

"Well, I can't; except that Sidney Rigdon was connected with them."

"What makes you think he was connected with them?"

"Because I can't account for the Book of Mormon any other way."

"Was Rigdon ever around there before the Book of Mormon was published?"

"No; not as we could ever find out. Sidney Rigdon was never there, that Hurlburt, or Howe, or Tucker could find out."

"Well; you have been looking out for the facts a long time have you not, doctor?"

"Yes; I have been thinking and hearing about it for the last fifty years, and lived right among all their old neighbors there most of the time."

"And no one has ever been able to trace the acquaintance of Rigdon and Smith, until after the Book of Mormon was published, and Rigdon proselyted by Pratt, in Ohio?"

"Not that I know of."

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"Were you acquainted with them" (the Smiths) "Mr. Saunders?"

"Yes, sir, I knew all of the Smith family well; there were six boys: Alvin, Hyrum, Joseph, Harrison, William and Carlos, and there were two girls; the old man was a cooper; they have all worked for me many a day; they were very good people. Young Joe (as we called him then), has worked for me, and he was a good worker; they all were. I did not consider them good managers about business, but they were poor people; the old man had a large family."

"In what respect did they differ from other people, if at all?"

"I never noticed that they were different from other neighbors; they were the best family in the neighborhood in case of sickness; one was at my house nearly all the time when my father died; I always thought them honest; they were owing me some money when they left here; that is, the old man and Hyrum did, and Martin Harris. One of them came back in about a year and paid me."

"How were they as to habits of drinking and getting drunk?"

"Everybody drank a little in those days, and the Smiths with the rest; they never got drunk to my knowledge."

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"How well did you know young Joseph Smith?"

"Oh! just as well as one could very well; he has worked for me many a time, and been about my place a great deal. He stopped with me many a time, when through here, after they went west to Kirtland; he was always a gentleman when about my place."

"What did you know about his finding that book, or the plates in the hill over here?"

"He always claimed that he saw the angel and received the book; but I don't know anything about it. Have seen it, but never read it as I know of; didn't care anything about it."

"Well; you seem to differ a little from a good many of the stories told about these people."

"I have told you just what I know about them, and you will have to go somewhere else for a different story."

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"To our inquiries if he, Mr. Thos. H. Taylor, was acquainted with the Smiths, and the early settlers throughout that part, sometimes called Mormons, he said:"

"Yes; I knew them very well; they were very nice men, too; the only trouble was they were ahead of the people; and the people, as in every such case, turned out to abuse them, because they had the manhood to stand for their own convictions. I have seen such work all through life, and when I was working with John Brown for the freedom of my fellow-man, I often got in tight places; and if it had not been for Gerritt Smith, Wendell Phillips and some others, who gave me their influence and money, I don't know how I would ever have got through."

"What did the Smiths do that the people abused them so?"

"They did not do anything. Why! these rascals at one time took Joseph Smith and ducked him in the pond that you see over there, just because he preached what he believed, and for nothing else. And if Jesus Christ had been there, they would have done the same to Him. Now I don't believe like he did; but every man has a right to his religious opinions, and to advocate his views, too; if people don't like it, let them come out and meet him on the stand, and show his error. Smith was always ready to exchange views with the best men they had."

"Why didn't they like Smith?"

"To tell the truth, there was something about him they could not understand; some way he knew more than they did, and it made them mad."

"But a good many tell terrible stories, about them being low people, rogues and liars, and such things. How is that?"

"Oh! they are a set of d—d liars. I have had a home here, and been here, except when on business, all my life—ever since I came to this country, and I know these fellows, they make these lies on Smith, because they love a lie better than the truth. I can take you to a great many old settlers here who will substantiate what I say, and if you want to go, just come around to my place across the street here, and I'll go with you."

"Well, that is very kind, Mr. Taylor, and fair; and if we have time we will call around and give you the chance; but we

are first going to see these fellows who, so rumor says, know so much against them."

"All right; but you will find they don't know anything against those men when you put them down to it; they could never sustain anything against Smith."

"Do you think Smith ever got any plates out of the hill he claimed to?"

"Yes; I rather think he did. Why not he find something as well as anybody else? Right over here, in Illinois and Ohio, in mounds there, they have discovered copper plates since, with hieroglyphics all over them; and quite a number of the old settlers around here testified that Smith showed the plates to them—they were good, honest men, and what is the sense in saying they lied? Now, I never saw the Book of Mormon—don't know anything about it, nor care; and don't know as it was ever translated from the plates. You have heard about the Spaulding romance; and some claim that it is nothing but the books of the Bible that were rejected by the compilers of the Bible; but all this don't prove that Smith never got any plates."

We close this chapter with an extract from the writings of Elder Oliver Cowdery, published in a very early day of the Church's history:

"But in consequence of certain false and slanderous reports which have been circulated, justice would require me to say something upon the private life of one whose character has been so shamefully traduced. By some he is said to have been a lazy, idle, vicious, profligate fellow. These I am prepared to contradict, and that, too, by the testimony of *many* persons with whom I have been intimately acquainted, and know to be individuals of the strictest veracity and unquestionable integrity. All these strictly and virtually agree in saying, that he was an honest, upright, virtuous and faithfully industrious young man. And those who say to the contrary can be influenced by no other motive than to destroy the reputation of one who never injured any man in either property or person."