The End of a Religion

Penny Morrison*

*Iowa State University

Copyright ©1968 by the authors. Sketch is produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress). http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/sketch
WHILE Hannah Charles was sitting on the bench under the rotting weeping willow, the cold November wind blew stronger. Her dull eyes seemed to be staring at the yellowed, straggly vines that wound around the crumbling brown bricks of Memorial Manor, or, perhaps at nothing. A deep, hollow gong sounded and she slowly, painfully, pulled herself up and trailed listlessly into the dark building. She grimaced as the stuffy smell of the overheated room hit her in the face. Another day was almost over. After the meal she would be able to leave the chatter of the cracking voices and escape to her room, to silence—and more nothingness.

She looked around and saw the same thirty tired faces that were always there. She didn't really know any of these people, for she had never cared to know any of them in the last ten years.

If she shut her eyes, she could still see this room plainly—the faded, flowered drapes, the ragged, frayed rugs, and the stained straight chairs and end tables.

She sank into a chair. The others were singing Grace.

"Fools," she mumbled to herself. "What stupid fools!"

Following the scattered "Amens," a train whistle com-
peted with the howling wind. Ah, that whistle. Every night for ten years Hannah had sat there, alone, and remembered.

The screaming whistle woke her every morning. The fogginess of sleep would lift little by little, until she was aware of Brian's arm under her neck. When she stirred, the arm would tighten. Then — ecstasy. Their love had lasted seven wonderful years — then they drifted apart, as casually and painlessly as they had come together.

There had been others before Brian, and she had never felt the need for the confines of marriage with any of them. Love never lasted that long. When it ended there were no barriers. They all realized the worth of freedom. But her family could not. She had lived in their nice, secure world until she met John. Then he showed her a whole new world of free expression and thought and taught her to think for the first time in her life. The day she received her Ph. D., she moved in with him and severed all her old ties. She learned to appreciate what this new society termed "the beauty of sex and the communion of souls."

"Hannah, come and eat." Ella Kelly, a small, squatty woman with a round, sweet face, waited, beaming, with two plates of food in her fat, diamond-covered hands. Hannah walked across the room, took one of the plates, and sat down without a word.

"You missed Grace again. Oh, speaking of Grace, wouldn't you like to go to chapel with me tomorrow?" Her large liquid eyes pleaded.

"No!"

The two women finished the meal in silence. Hannah was only faintly aware of the rattling false teeth and the hacking coughs of those around her. When the signal came that all were finished, Hannah laid down her napkin and escaped to her room.

She had thrown open the window and was just closing the door when someone tapped twice and bustled in. It was Ella.

"You're in the wrong room."

"I realize that. I'm coming to visit, since I noticed how lonely you are."
Ella had arrived only three weeks before, evidently dumped there by "well-meaning" relatives who, actually, wished to get rid of her. She seemed afraid and was too anxious to make friends, two things that Hannah abhorred in her.

"I've thought of some entertainment for us to relieve the boredom of these evenings. We can read each other our favorite passages from the Bible. Who knows? Maybe soon all the others will leave their worthless card games and television shows and join us. I'm sure this will be much more profitable. . . ."

"I don't have a Bible and I don't need one. Good night."

Hannah struggled to keep the annoyance from her voice.

"God be with you," Ella whispered as she left the cold room.

"And with your spirit," spat Hannah as she shut the door.

Safe in her warm, pink room, Ella breathed a sad sigh, as her eyes scanned the walls, plastered with pictures of the Lamb. "I must help that woman," she spoke to herself. "Everyone must be happy." She walked over to her bureau and scrubbed off an imaginary piece of dust with her white lace hanky.

She was again appalled as she remembered the information she had gotten out of the old, near-sighted nurse last week. Ella had come into her room and had found the nurse going through the top drawer of her bureau. Ignoring this, Ella had struck up a conversation with her and had mentioned Hannah. The nurse seemed delighted with this topic and immediately told Ella all about Hannah's past, clearly enjoying the shocked looks that appeared on Ella's face. Apparently, she had gone through Hannah's belongings thoroughly. She didn't forget one detail.

It was hard for Ella to imagine that Hannah, a woman living under this same roof with her, had lived such a sinful life. But she had already dreamed up a miracle that she just knew would restore Hannah to a normal, "good" life like hers. She had written to Brian. (The old nurse had somewhere learned Brian's address, as well as his telephone number and the name of his present girl friend.) She ex-
pected him to come tomorrow for the Open House and Visitors' Day. To think that she did this all by herself! She added another verse to her prayers, making sure she phrased it correctly, so God would know exactly what she wanted.

The day came, cold, rainy, and foggy. Hannah opened her eyes as the near-sighted nurse scurried in and opened her blinds, all the while trying to see into Hannah's letter holder. The weeping willow was bent under the weight of the water even more than it had been from the wind of the previous day. Hannah informed the nurse that she was ill to avoid the trifling conversation of guests and to avoid having to act interested in her surroundings for another day, just to satisfy the nurses.

As the morning passed, the nurse aroused her three more times—for breakfast, mid-morning tea, and lunch, all of which Hannah refused coldly. This old nurse with her snoopy ways was one of the things Hannah hated most about the Manor. She had requested a new nurse three times, but no one had seemed to listen.

Visiting hours began at two-thirty. At two-twenty Ella came bouncing into the dreary room in her best pink party dress, which had seen better days and now gave her the appearance of a link sausage. She stopped abruptly at the sight of Hannah, gasping audibly.

"Aren't you even getting up today? What if you have a visitor?"

"I won't. No one cares to come and I don't care to have anyone come. Go visit with yours."

"Well." Ella cleared her throat nervously. "I don't have anyone coming." She brightened. "But I just have a feeling that you will. I'll wait with you to see!"

Hannah grunted and turned her back. "Suit yourself."

"God hasn't forgotten you, Hannah. You'll see. Oh, you should have gone to chapel with me this morning. The minister said . . . wait, I'll get my Bible and read you that passage."

Hannah sighed and pulled the covers higher. Ella scurried across the hall for her Bible. Upon returning, she began to read, disregarding the stubborn back turned toward her.
As the afternoon waned, Ella read more slowly and more slowly, and her words jumbled together, as her voice carried less and less conviction. Finally, she stopped. Fifteen more minutes of silence and the bell signaling closing hours gonged.

Hannah turned back over and was surprised at the stricken look that met her gaze.

“Well?” Hannah could not hide her contempt for the tears of the weak woman shrinking before her.

Ella opened her quivering lips as if to make a final appeal to Hannah, but the inspiration seemed to die before any words escaped. She rose slowly and backed out of the room, never taking her brimming, defeated eyes from Hannah's piercing ones. Her shoulders slumped and her cheeks were covered with red splotches. As she groped for the door knob, her hands shook. Hannah could hear her feet dragging slowly across the hall; the bed creaked, then a huge, uncontrolled sob, a long sigh, and silence.

Triumphantly, Hannah got out of bed, picked up the Bible from under the chair and pitched it into the waste-basket.

---

**Epitaph**

_by Donald Simmons_

*Fisheries and Wildlife Biology, Jr.*

Toil and strain  
and we shall attain  
a headstone and casket  
as a shield from the rain.