Bertrand Russell had the choice of his own godparents, he might well have chosen John Stuart Mill, one of the great empirical philosophers, and Mill's stepdaughter, Helen Taylor, one of the earliest suffragists; they were amongst the most advanced rationalist radicals of their time. As it was, his parents chose them for him.

In the Russell Archives there are over 100 letters written by Helen Taylor to Kate Amberley; the other half of the correspondence (not complete, of course - one's luck is never perfect) is in the Mill-Taylor Collection at the London School of Economics. These letters cover the years from 1865 (just after the birth of the Amberleys' first child, Frank) to 1874 (the year of Kate Amberley's death, when Bertie was two). During these years there developed a very close and intimate friendship between Kate Amberley and Helen Taylor; they shared ideas and activities in the many radical movements, especially the Women's Movement, of those years. Their affection became so great that despite the religious views of all concerned, the Amberleys asked Helen Taylor and John Stuart Mill to stand in loco parentis-dei.

The friendship was anchored in mutual need. Although both the Russell and Stanley families had radical tendencies, they did not give unqualified support to the young couple and it was of great importance to both Amberleys to have the approval of the most respected philosopher and radical of their time. In a letter to Kate Amberley dated 22 April 1865, Helen Taylor, whose approval always signified Mill's too, wrote congratulating Lord Amberley on his speeches at Leeds in April 1865, and assuring him that a man is always most misunderstood by his peers (she never punned) when he is criticizing them, and that no man has been great in maturity who has not held advanced ideas in his youth. In other letters, for example, she approved Amberley's bold stand on religious liberty and expressed delight that the Amberleys "go all lengths with us in our revolutionary excesses about Ireland" (letters of 15 July 1865 and 4 March 1868).

Their support of Kate Amberley must have been particularly valuable to a well-to-do, aristocratic, Victorian lady who was expected to remain mentally and physically idle and not to draw public notice upon herself. Although the ladies in her family were not idle (Lady Stanley of Alderley's work in the cause of women's education was well-known), Kate's enthusiasms were considered extreme by nearly all her acquaintances but Helen Taylor. She expressed an interest in Kate Amberley's work with the factory girls (letter of 21 June 1865), encouraged her determination to read and study and her "love of solitude" (22 January 1867), introduced her to women working in the Movement, such as Elizabeth Garret (Anderson) (14 June 1866 and 19 May 1868), and emphatically urged her to continue trying to write (11 September 1869). When Kate Amberley began to speak in public for the women's suffrage campaign she needed all the encouragement that Helen Taylor and John Stuart Mill could and did give her (12 April 1870). Her first speech at Stroud in May 1870, which Helen Taylor had persuaded her to give, outraged her family.2 In her letter of 26 May 1870 to Helen Taylor describing the meeting, Lady Amberley wrote:

Remember me to Mr Mill I hope he will be pleased at my having made the effort and taken my share of ridicule which falls to the lot of women who advocate this cause - I heard I was made great fun of at the Carlton and we had had insulting anonymous letters but one must make up one's mind to some disagreeableness for the sake of one's opinions.

Helen Taylor's three prompt congratulatory and laudatory letters (dated 29 and 30 May, 9 June 1870) helped to counterbalance for the Amberleys the "great fun" at the Carlton Club, the Duchess of Cambridge's public rudeness and a humiliating tea-party at the Gladstones'. But perhaps the greatest bond between Kate Amberley and Helen Taylor was an unusual mesh-
ing of minds and personalities; in each other’s company they were in-
formal and relaxed. Helen Taylor was, in Kate Amberley’s words, a
person of whom they were both genuinely fond and with whom Amberley felt
no “gene” (letter of 29 July 1873):
I cannot tell you what a joy it has been to me to find anyone with whom
I have so much sympathy and from whom I can get such help in many matters.
(1 March 1870)

That Helen Taylor felt as warmly toward the Amberleys, especially
toward Kate Amberley, is somewhat surprising. Helen Taylor was a very
radical, very righteous, very assured (unusually so for a Victorian
spinster in her early thirties) and a very solitary woman. Having been
almost exclusively in the company of older people during her youth, first
dominated by her mother, Harriet Taylor Mill, and then devoted to John
Stuart Mill, she found it difficult to make friends. The difficulty was
increased because her upbringing by her mother had given her a conviction
of superiority and because the young women who knew she were disciples
of Mill through their espousal of radical causes. Therefore she never
could be in her own eyes or in theirs una inter pares but always prima
persona.

What a long habit of solitary life has given me is a great dislike to be
brought close to fellow creatures with whom I cannot feel in harmony;
hence my dislike to various or numerous society. It is painful to me
(eating to the habit of living chiefly with my own family); not to be able
either to love or to respect those with whom I associate; for this reason
I never really enjoy the society of anyone with whom I am not willing to
be intimate. (letter of 24 October 1869)

For whatever reasons - Kate Amberley’s qualities of mind and
character, the shared radical views, and possibly her aristocratic and
influential family - Helen Taylor was warm and affectionate towards Kate
as towards few if any other contemporaries. After the birth of the
Amberleys’ daughter, Rachel, in March 1868, Helen Taylor wrote:
I have not asked you to visit me before because I thought it might be
dull for you; but our little bit of lawn still do to lie on and you can
have a lot moved into sun or shade as the weather demands. The hawthorns
are so sweet and the laburnums so pretty now that I hope you will
come soon - can you come this next Saturday and Sunday? or any day this
week or next? Fix your own time and I will send up the brougham for you.
I can give you a room for nurses and the children and one for yourself,
and should so much enjoy a quiet long talk with you. (letter of 7 May
1868)

In 1869, when there was a prospect - one which was fulfilled - of the
Amberleys and their two children visiting Mill and Helen Taylor at their
small home in Avignon for ten days, she told Kate that she had built onto
the back an addition in order to be able to offer the Amberleys bedroom,
bathroom and sitting-room - all tiny - and a cell for the maid if they
bought one; the letter continued:
and if I can get the “Vibratory” made water-tight, it will just do for
the children in bad weather. You must know I have built the “Vibratory”
expressly for Mr. Mill to “vibrate” in; and to “vibrate” is to benthamite
for to walk up and down. There are other remarkable things in our
cottage, as for example a Semicircularvibratory, but I won’t tell you what
that is till you see it. (letter of 24 October 1869)

Kate Amberley had some doubts about bringing the children, worrying over
the noise they would make. Helen Taylor assured her that she and Mill
would be in no way bothered by that kind of noise and wanted the children
to stay: “children one can always love and the more one sees of them the
more friends one is sure to be with them” (ES5:2).

The children were being brought up under a very permissive system
as befitted the children of advanced radicals. The results, if one is
to judge by the accounts of a somewhat harassed father in the Amberley
Papers, were not above criticism, particularly one would imagine from
Kate’s mother-in-law. It was, therefore, natural that Kate Amberley
would turn to her closest ally for confirmation of her unorthodox views
on child-rearing. The confirmation duly came:
I have got so much to say about the question of discipline with children
that I am afraid to begin lest I should tire you; but on the whole I am
interfering with children as little as possible, and holding very
strictly to the worst observance of such few rules as must be laid down;
and in this I fancy you fully agree. (letter of 23 May 1869)

The rules must have been very few; by 1871 matters seem to have reached
a bit of a crisis in the upbringing of Frank, by then six years old. The
decision had come to the conclusion that the time had arrived for
rationalizing the upbringing of the boys. Helen Taylor was then
prescribed a prohibition of reading and study for two or three years (Kate
to Helen, 30 September 1871). Once again, even after the Avignon visit,
Helen Taylor sent her full approval:
I am glad you have adopted the plan of occasional holidays, and using
them in open-air exploration of new country. I am sure they are the
healthiest sort of change for people who lose their brain much. Your
idea of combining the education of your own children with that of others,
I like very much... I am very glad the doctor has put you at ease respect­
ing any serious danger for Frank and I do not think you need be afraid
of his being backward if he is much with yourselves; for then he will
acquire a love and respect for work and thought. I suppose he may be
allowed to amuse himself by reading stories at his own choice, and as
for restlessness and irritability muscular exercises is a certain cure for
that, and the only one. (letter of 5 October 1871)

It must have been about this time that Kate Amberley realised
that she was pregnant again. In the following March, she wrote to Helen
Taylor about a public meeting at which she had presided, about having
met a sister of Mill’s, and about her coming confinement expected at the
beginning of May.

If I have a girl I want to ask you to be godmother to it or whatever
term in your and my religion of answer to that description; a spiritual
mental and moral friend and adviser, one to look up to especially to whom
one has a sort of right of appealing in perplexity, is my notion of the
relationship. Will you allow this link I should be much pleased, if
you would. (13 March 1872)

Helen Taylor’s reply was warm and loving, although the mentor would out.

[Your letter] gives me pleasure in many ways and I shall like very much to
contract a spiritual affinity to you and to your little one. It is, you say a
beautiful old custom, answering to a real need in human nature.
I often wish there were more spiritual relationships (as I do not doubt
there will be some day) solemnly recognized and consecrated, that of
fraternity and sisterhood among others. It is very hard that we are to be
sisters whether we will or no to people between whom and ourselves
there is either no likeness or likeness only in our defects, and that
we may not be so to others whose society and sympathy brings out all that
is best in us. I am so glad to hear too that you are in good health, as
with a cheerful and happy hope to look forward to. Gardening is a
delightful occupation, only too absorbing, but I do hope you will do no
real work in it for the present – for the present at least. My sister’s little
daughter was young and active and brought on a premature confinement by
gardening, and although she happily got through that one, it left behind it a
predilection to the same danger, which worried her off on her fourth confinement
in four years. Gardening is hard work than one imagines while one is
do it, because it is so interesting, and you ought to be abroad for the next three months. (letter of 22 March 1872)

The gardening proved not to be harder work than was advisable and on 19 May 1872, Lord Amberley wrote to Helen Taylor to announce the birth of a boy "in whose future you have already taken such a friendly interest". The note ended with words which seem with hindsight the epitomy of British understatement: "I hope he will turn out mentally not unworthy of your regard." Helen Taylor was away on a trip with Mill and it was a week before she sent congratulations on the birth of Bertie, in a letter dated 27 May 1872. Kate Amberley was taken unawares by the unaccountable appearance of a male child; she was not sure of the reaction of the leading suffragist household:

Do you mind godmothering my little boy? I had always somehow counted on a girl to be called 'Condelia Helen' but as it has turned out a 'Bertrand William' and a girl may never come will you give him your blessing and guidance? We hesitated to ask such a favour of Mr Mill otherwise as he too of all the male coundidates for is there is no one in whose steps I would rather see a boy of mine following in ever so much a humble way, then in Mr Mill's. (letter of 16 June 1872)

Helen Taylor replied from a town in the Austrian Alps:

Your sweet letter of June 18th has followed me here, having gone first to Avignon and then to Heiligenblut on its way. I should like to be godmother to your little boy and should take as much interest in him as in a little girl, for one of the sweet and attractive things about children is that one finds just as much earnestness and sweetness and purity about the boys as energy and courage about the girls, till, alas! they fall under the influence of the vulgar world, and then one should certainly be interested in all your children; indeed my chief anxiety in accepting the godmothership is that I am afraid I may be equally interested in all! Then is there not a hindrance in my absence? We who have moved from England, according to our plan, shall be in London in a Territorial for one or two and I will come myself and stay with you there. I should like to do to have you in town; if you will it shall be ready for you in a day or so and I will come myself and stay with you there or leave it to you, as you like best; and you would be perfectly quiet. I suppose you leave the children at Ravenscroft, so that there would be room for you; and my mind is waiting for me at her mother's (in town) would be so glad to come and wait on you....

I should be so glad if I could be of any use with the children, could I? Could I hear their lessons and take walks with them while the governess is away? You know I always said I should like to be a governess... [There I can do just as I like. It is not too far from London for one to go and return in a day, so that if you come to Victoria Street I could come and see you and return here the same day. I should like to see you, to be with you, or near you, but I have been thinking, since I have been talking to Mr Mill about what I might be worse than I was, that I should be useful to you in some way, and that I can live at Mill's and I shall live in the same house and in the same room with one of the little people and we will of course be too late if ones presence is necessary. Mr Mill says that if you wish it he does not think that you would mind me coming this way or other for meeting on foreign soil, either Egypt, Avignon or Italy and then to Heiligenblut on its way...]

But when Kate came to London at the end of the month, Helen was unable to make the journey to meet her.

I tried to come to town today, for I should have liked so very much to see you, but my courage gave way.... I have formed no plans yet for the future, for next winter, but (is it not a strange turn in life?) for the first time in my life I wish to live; and shall do all I can to recover health. I feel as though a torch had been left in my hands and I want to keep it alight till I can hand it on to someone younger than myself. (letter of 1 August 1873)]

Gradually Helen Taylor recovered from the blow of her stepfather's death. The first friends whom she visited were the Amberleys in Ravenscroft, where she stayed for at least three weeks in September. The visit was a great success and, as Kate wrote to Helen on 11 October 1873, it was projected as the first of a regular series of relaxed and informal sojourns. There were also plans for Helen Taylor to join the Amberleys on a trip to Egypt, but the plans seem, by twentieth-century standards, to have been very vague and uncertain for such a lengthy trip. There were frequent letters in October all alluding to some plan or other for meeting on foreign soil, either Egypt, Avignon or Italy and including pleas from the children, who were sometimes going with their parents and sometimes not, for their Aunt Helen to replace the present unpopular governess (see Kate's letter of 20 October 1873). Amberley, who had had an epileptic seizure earlier in the year, lives. Kate immediately offered to come to Helen in Avignon (letter of 11 May 1873). She replied, in an undated letter:

Do not think dearest Kate that I have not felt and am not grateful for the kindness of your letters. I have felt it deeply and I did not know till I reviewed [sic] your and a few other letters that anything that concerned myself, that sympathy for me, could touch me so much and be so soothing.

When Helen returned to England from Avignon, she went to stay with her brother Algernon, but Kate was immediately urging that she go to stay with the Amberleys at Ravenscrorove on 15 July 1873. And although she could not bring herself to make the effort right away, it was Kate Amberley whom she most wanted to see outside her immediate family.

Dear Kate,

Can you not come to Victoria Street [where Mill and Helen had moved in 1872] while you are in town; if you will it shall be ready for you in a day or two and I will come myself and stay with you there or leave it to you, as you like best; and you would be perfectly quiet. I suppose you leave the children at Ravenscroft, so that there would be room for you; and my mind is waiting for me at her mother's (in town) would be so glad to come and wait on you....

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was again unwell. Helen Taylor left London precipitately in November in order, it appears, to make her Avignon home ready to receive him. 3 Exactly what happened is not clear from Kate's letter to Helen:

"How kind you were about nursing - I trust we may want no more of that but enjoy in perfect health the rest of our journey - Amberley is much better. (11 January 1874)"

All through the early months of 1874 there were suggestions of getting together in Italy which were frustrated either by inertia or the post office. In March, Helen made an offer, which was refused, to have the children for a visit. Kate, in a letter of 20 March 1874 proposing tentatively to give a school for boys and girls to be supervised by Helen, the Amberleys' tutor-cum-troisieme-en-menage, Spalding, interjected, "How kind of you to be knitting for your little godson" (one might equally exclaim, "How surprising!). Helen Taylor appeared to be on the point of joining the Amberleys in April (letter of 20 April 1874).

On the Amberleys' return journey in May, Frank came down with diphtheria and the family stayed in London while he was nursed. As soon as they arrived back at Ravenscroft in June, Kate invited Helen to stay with the Amberleys for a long time. Helen wrote expressing disappointment that Helen's plans to visit Mrs. Grote and then the Hares would put off her visit to them for such a long time. July was finally settled upon.

But they had delayed too long. On 21 June, Rachel developed diphtheria and four days later Rachel too was dead. On 29 June, Helen received a movingly dry note from Lady Stanley of Alderley saying that she had come to her daughter too late and apologizing for not answering Helen's telegram sooner. Helen expressed her grief in a letter to her friend, Eliza Cairnes:

"I knew I should have your sympathy in this fresh loss, although it is greater to me and to all concerned than perhaps anyone can estimate. For me it has changed the aspect of life; taken out of it that cheerfulness was left to me personally, independent of myself. Yet it has only increased my desire to work while there is yet time awaiting how subtly "the night cometh when no man can work"; and in work and a good conscience, no one knows better than you, there will always be cheerfulness to be found."

Not until September was Amberley well enough to write to Helen:

"The fact that you spoke more of your own and the public loss than mine is exactly what rendered your letter peculiarly valuable and precious to me. Infinitely as I have suffered myself I have not forgotten to feel for you in the loss of a friend who was so truly anxious to do all in her power to make your life a little less unhappy. How often and how strongly she expressed the wish that you might join us in Italy I cannot say, and she hoped as you know that you could spend a long time with us this summer at Ravenscroft. Both of us had felt very deeply for you in the loss of Mr Mill, and she was especially anxious that in our perfectly serene and happy life we might help you if possible to bear that great calamity. All this is over now, and I am afraid that you may find another friend so sympathetic and so warmhearted as she was. I am now with my mother and with Bertrand, whom I must thank you for bringing up. I trust that he was not troublesome to you. The condition of prostration I was in when you came down made it impossible for me to see you. Believe me, yours sincerely, Amberley."

This contact, bringing Bertie from Ravenscroft to London, would seem to be the last that Helen had with her godson, although she had a long life ahead of her.

Amberley never recovered either health or spirits after his wife's death. He gradually became weaker and weaker until on 9 January 1876, after the doctor had lifted Bertrand up to be kissed, he lay back on his pillow and died. After a most unpleasant lawsuit to break the will (Amberley having left the boys to the guardianship of their peculiar tutor and another atheist, Cobden-Sanderson), Frank and Bertrand went to live with their Russell grandparents. Helen Taylor spent much of her latter years as a semi-recluse in Avignon until her niece brought her back in 1905 to live in Torquay, where she died two years later.