• CHAPTER ELEVEN •

Adolescent Clerks

SEDUCTION FICTIONS as well as seduction lawsuits of the early nineteenth century centered on women's struggles to retain virginity against the entreaties of manipulative men. The culture was steeped in the conviction that chaste and respectable women experienced negligible sexual desire and could easily become the unwitting victims of lustful men. Rarely was male sexual interest itself called into question or rendered problematic. Some moralists challenged and condemned exploitative styles of masculine sexuality, but they conducted no campaigns on behalf of diminished male desire. However, acknowledging the existence of male sexual energy did not mean that parents condoned its expression in unmarried youth. Desire was one thing; sexual activity quite another. (Even among the married, sexual restraint was held up as a valued goal.) A new apprehensiveness over prostitution's effect on men accompanied and paralleled the panic over the seduction of respectable women. Just as women of supposedly negligible sexual appetite could be duped by bad men, so virile but innocent young men could easily be led astray by bad women. A middle-class ideal of male virtue and control took shape in precisely the years of the rising tide of prostitution, and a spate of advice books in the 1830s took specific aim at young men living away from home.

There was little need in this culture to resort to deep psychological portraits to explain a male's lapse from virtue. Temptation abounded, and male chastity advocates sought not to deny the power of sex but to portray it as overwhelmingly dangerous. The advice books sound prudish to our ears, but they actually grew out of a realistic assessment of the entice-

ments facing men. Written mainly by ministers, doctors, and health reformers, the books vigorously promoted the maintenance of chastity and warned of "the monstrous tide of depravity and dissipation" awaiting youth in the city.[1] William A. Alcott, physician and schoolteacher, wrote more than a half dozen moral-advice books in the 1830s on right living, including *The Young Man's Guide* (1834), which warned that "the whole race of young men in our cities, of the present generation, will be ruined" because of prostitution, which led to "disease and premature death."[2] Health and diet reformer Sylvester Graham toured major cities between 1832 and 1837 delivering his "Lecture to Young Men on Chastity," which was finally published in 1834, passing through ten more editions throughout the 1830s and 1840s. Graham, Alcott, and others knew that big cities posed sexual dangers precisely because unsupervised youth there confronted a highly visible traffic in illicit sex.

The understanding that male sexual temptation was omnipresent helps explain why the newspapers paid very little attention to Richard P. Robinson in the weeks immediately after the murder. In fact, all the young men whose names surfaced at the trial or in accounts of the Jewett murder were ignored, as if their involvement in the world of illicit sex commanded little interest, posed no problems, and piqued no curiosity in the public. The relative silence about the details of Robinson's life is especially striking. Helen Jewett, the mystery girl, commanded center stage, feeding public fascination with questions about her reputed early innocence, her sexuality, her complicity in sin, and her contested position as a victim worthy of public sympathy. Perhaps the spotlight stayed on Jewett because newspaper writers were men, and their presumed readership was also male. Also, and perhaps more to the point, Jewett did not have a vigilant family or a lawyer on retainer to defend her reputation, erect barriers around her past, and keep her out of the newspapers. The protective circle the lawyerly Westons drew around themselves excluded their former servant. Robinson instantly hired a top-notch New York attorney, Ogden Hoffman, who kept his client's profile as low as he could.

The newspapers were remarkably uninterested in delving into Robinson's past. This was quite in keeping with the prevailing journalistic practice of acquiring facts from official sources rather than by investigative reporting. Yet investigating Jewett seemed warranted by the many puzzling and contradictory stories about her background.

The *Herald* lavished column after column on Jewett, but of her accused killer said only that "Robinson is a native of one of the Eastern States, aged 19, and remarkably handsome, and has been for some time past in the employ of Joseph Hoxie, 101 Maiden-lane."[3] The *Transcript* at first misreported his name as "Francis P. Robinson," son of a man of

the same name from Durham, Connecticut, a confusion probably arising from Robinson's brothel alias, "Frank." Within a day it had the name right, but that paper never specified his employer, his workplace, his job, or his age, instead preferring general assertions about "the high respectability of the family and connexions."[4] The *Sun* was scarcely less reticent. Robinson, it reported, "is a young man of excellent general character, fine, manly appearance, and most respectable connexions, not yet twenty years of age, and was much esteemed by his employer, Mr. Hoxie, and many others whom we yesterday heard say they had known him long and intimately. We understood he was from Maine."[5]

Emphasizing Robinson's respectability accomplished two things. First, as shorthand for his class position, it also conveyed assumptions about his moral character. And second, it highlighted the mystery of the crime (and thus sold papers), because of the presumed incongruity of a person of reputable character committing a murder. The notion that the young man was respectable and had "respectable connexions" was established—or, rather, asserted—by his employer. Joseph Hoxie vouched for him, and to many that was enough.

Outside New York, where Hoxie's name carried no weight, it was easier to challenge the assumption that Robinson's respectable family connections elevated his character. The *Philadelphia Ledger*, for instance, was a newspaper founded by artisan printers disdainful of wealth. A penny paper on the model of the *Sun* and the *Transcript*, the *Ledger* noted in connection with Robinson's arrest that the word "respectable" had become debased in modern usage. Nowadays, the paper editorialized, "respectable" really simply meant "wealthy": in the marriage market, for example, parents who said they desired a respectable man for their daughter really only meant a husband with money. No longer were there moral connotations in the word, because the wealthy were generally no longer moral, the editors wrote; sons of rich or comfortable families were especially prone to immorality, having the idle time, the money, and the lack of ambition to get into serious trouble. "American youth are corrupt, deplorably corrupt," said the *Ledger*, "and we find the causes in a false standard of respectability, want of early moral education, want of proper occupation, and vicious example."[6]

In reality, Hoxie was not at all wealthy, nor was Robinson's Connecticut family; but neither were they poor or struggling. The clerk's family background was similar to that of thousands of other young men of the New England countryside who had come to New York City to make their fortune. The Robinson family had lived in Durham for over 150 years; the American progenitor came to Hartford in 1640 in the first wave of Puritan migration into the Connecticut River Valley, and the second genera-

tion moved on to found Durham. The village remained small all those years, drawing on farming, shoemaking, and tavern keeping for its economic base. In 1830 the U.S. Census counted only 1,116 inhabitants, which was 14 fewer than in the 1810 census. Small and stagnant as it was, it was not an out-of-the-way backwater. Durham sat on the main stage road between Boston and New York, and in the early nineteenth century the immediate stretch of road through town was a privately owned toll road, the New Haven Turnpike. Many stagecoaches and freight wagons passed through daily, and all stopped in Durham because it was a toll collection point; as many as a half dozen stagecoaches might be lined up all at once near the hotel at the town's center, to pay the toll, refresh the passengers, and change horses.[7] Durham's children could plainly see it was an easy place to leave, which is exactly what most of them did when they reached young adulthood.

Robinson's father, also named Richard, was sixty-three in 1836. He owned substantial property in and around the town. The family house stood about a half mile west of the turnpike on the old Quarry Hill Road (now called the Wallingford Road), on the bank of the Coginchaug River at the edge of the Durham Meadows. The elder Robinson was a farmer, but he probably earned more money buying and selling land and negotiating loans than he did from raising crops and livestock; conveyance records for Durham show that over the course of his adult life he engaged in sixty-six sales and ninety-nine purchases of local land parcels.[8] (Some of these apparent purchases were undoubtedly loans Robinson made, secured by property deeded to Robinson for the life of the loan, a common financial practice in New England.) His eight terms in the Connecticut state legislature further demonstrate his substantial standing with his neighbors.[9]

Young Richard was the eighth child and first son in his family; four more children followed him. The elder Robinson had six daughters with his first wife, Tabitha, who died in 1811, and then three daughters and three sons with a wife two decades younger than he. Richard was the second-born in the new family set. His mother, Cynthia Parmelee, came from the adjacent town of Killingworth. One of her brothers had just a few years before married the eldest daughter of the senior Richard Robinson, and yet another Parmelee married the third oldest in 1819.[10] The families were thus closely intertwined, and Cynthia must have been more peer than stepmother to her stepdaughters, two of whom were also her sisters-in-law. All that the New York papers ever reported about Robinson's parents was that they were aged and gravely ill with grief on account of his trouble. His mother never came to New York to visit him during his incarceration, although she sent him letters.[11] Attending the trial appears to have been men's business; his father came, along with an older sister's

husband, most likely the man who was brother to Cynthia Parmelee Robinson.

Little can be learned of Richard's childhood. Perhaps there really was not much of high interest for the New York papers to sleuth out, had they even been so inclined. Durham's nineteenth-century town historian, William Fowler, recalled that wrestling was a popular boys' sport in his youth, and the town champ was "sometimes laid on his back by a young Robinson," of whom there were several—Richard, his younger brothers, and an assortment of cousins. This scrap of information suggests that Robinson family boys had gained a reputation for being physically vigorous and fully part of the "boy culture" of the antebellum Northeast—a stage of middle childhood where boys escaped the domestic hearth and gave vent to aggressive yet still friendly impulses.[12] Six common schools met Durham's needs to educate its youth in basic skills. Each consisted of a one-room building accommodating seventy or eighty male pupils of all ages during the winter session. (Girls attended the summer sessions.) The students sat at plank benches and writing desks and struggled to learn the rudiments of reading, spelling, grammar, and arithmetic with goose-quill pens. At about age twelve, the brightest boys then graduated to the Academy on the town's central green, presided over by teachers Benjamin Coe and Gaylord Newton.[13] Richard P. Robinson likely attended the Academy, since he had learned enough Latin to add flourishes in that ancient language to his letters to Helen Jewett. But he did not stay past age fourteen, when most boys finished schooling and began an apprenticeship.

Still, like Helen Jewett, Robinson had access to books in Durham. Durham's greatest claim to fame was having one of the first public libraries in the entire country. Founded in 1733, just two years after Benjamin Franklin had started Philadelphia's first subscription library, it was a matter of great communal pride.[14] Self-education further prospered with the founding of a local lyceum society in the late 1820s, affording members a chance to hold debates and develop skills in public declamation. The first debate, held in 1829 when Richard Robinson was twelve, took up the burning political topic of Indian removal, an ambitious plan proposed by the newly elected Andrew Jackson to relocate eastern Indians to lands west of the Mississippi River.[15] Durham may have been a tiny village, but its male citizens were very much a part of the larger world of Jacksonian-era politics.

Ministers of New England Congregational churches provided another route to education by providing intellectual and moral training for the youth of a town. Very often the minister kept a Sabbath school and also tutored college-bound boys in Greek and Latin. But Durham had a long

and very unhappy relationship with its minister. It seems highly unlikely that the Reverend David Smith provided any moral or spiritual mentoring to young Richard in his formative years.

Smith was a rigid enforcer of church discipline; he brooked no mercy when it came to Sabbath violations, once excommunicating a farmer for hurriedly harvesting his fall crop when a severe Sunday storm threatened to ruin it entirely. The Robinson family came in for more trouble than most. In 1801 Reverend Smith took complaints against James and Amy Robinson, then in their late sixties and the grandparents of Richard P. Robinson. More unspecified complaints against them surfaced in 1802, and Smith's disciplinary committee "withdrew their watch and care over them as Christian brethren," or, in other words, expelled them from the church. (Over three extremely troubled years, 1804 to 1806, Reverend Smith expelled 18 people from his church. In such a small town—approximately 150 households—18 expulsions indicate a serious fracturing of the covenanted community.) Tabitha Robinson, the first wife of Richard P.'s father, was charged with a "breach of the covenant" in 1805; and when she died in 1811, at age thirty-four, Smith entered the cryptic notation "d—nk—d" next to her name in his register of deaths. The notation appeared against two or three decedents' names each year; in one place the word "drunk" appeared, and in another, "hard drinker."[16] Smith not only kept vital statistics in his register, as did most New England ministers, he also entered the data to construct moral statistics from the permanent church record.

The Reverend Smith "was not afraid of making enemies," according to an unusually blunt local informant who contributed recollections to an 1884 county history; "there were threats, and, it was thought, actual danger, of personal violence."[17] (The informant did not specify whether the threats of violence emanated from or were directed at the Reverend Smith. Even so, to have reported this much about the minister registered an extraordinary departure from the usual bland, filiopietistic stories of early town history that are the hallmark of the late-nineteenth-century county histories.)

For thirty-three years Smith hung on to his pulpit, intimidating some townspeople and probably angering them all. Two small rival religious societies, one Methodist and the other Episcopalian, began meeting in the 1800s to 1810s. Composed of castoffs from Reverend Smith's Congregational church, neither was large enough to afford a minister. For over thirty years, the embittered and mean-spirited Reverend Smith battled his congregation, until in 1832 the members finally got the courage to dismiss him. Smith nursed his grievances, kept his records of moral lapses, and bitterly contested his dismissal. Clearly he was not the sort of minis-

ter to steady a rambunctious youth or prepare the juvenile seedbed of Richard Robinson's soul for a spiritual awakening.

This sorry background of religious strife explains a tantalizing tidbit of information reported in July of 1836 by the *Illuminator,* a moral reform newspaper published in Boston. Soon after the Jewett murder, a passenger who stopped in Durham while traveling on the Boston stage line to New York boldly inquired about the Robinsons' religious standing and reported back to the *Illuminator* that the family was said to be complete infidels back two generations, and that Richard had never been sent to Sabbath school.[18] To a moral reformer, this explained all; it suggested an irresponsibly irreligious family that neglected the fundamental moral training of youth. The Durham source—perhaps toll keeper, liveryman, hotel owner, or barmaid—had found a way to explain to inquisitive passersby the town's infamous bad boy. Perhaps the source was close to the truth. But the gossiper neglected to add that the same might have been said of any number of disaffected Durham families, turned from the path of active Congregationalism by the embittered Reverend Smith.

The press sought out none of these meager details about Robinson's hometown and youth. (The one exception, the *Illuminator*'s brief snippet, was submitted by a reader who learned of it by happenstance and who understood its evangelical newsworthiness.) Even the father's service in the Connecticut state legislature was not noted in New York. The minimal treatment of Robinson in the New York papers perhaps was partly due to deference to Joseph Hoxie, rising local politician, or shrewd news management by the lawyer Ogden Hoffman, but mainly it arose from the fact that newspapers did not generally undertake investigative reporting on their own.

The young men boarding at Mrs. Moulton's or employed at Hoxie's store were not named in the paper until they testified at trial, and even then nothing was said about them as individuals. Neither were they interviewed nor their opinions sought. This was true even for George P. Marston (Bill Easy), Robinson's chief rival for Helen Jewett's affections, whose handkerchief was found under her pillow. Not only did the New York papers ignore him, his hometown paper in Newburyport, Massachusetts, ran the full transcript of the trial over a week's time in early June, printing young Marston's testimony verbatim, without ever pointing out that the George P. Marston giving testimony was a local youth clerking in New York. Did the editor of the *Newburyport Daily Herald* simply not realize there was a very considerable local angle? Not a chance: Newburyport was a small-sized town, population seven thousand, with a tight and entrenched local elite which included the Marstons at the center. The paper devoted much space to the trial, day after day well after the trial

ended, both reprinting other papers' commentary and—significantly—engaging in considerable original analysis of its own. Likely the editor shielded the local family out of deference even as he answered a special hunger in town to keep abreast of the story, precisely because a local family was involved. It was simply not newsworthy, or seemly, somehow, for newspapers to enlighten readers about the motivations and behaviors of the respectable young men implicated in this crime.

The family of Judge Stephen Marston, young George's father, lived in a very large three-story Federal-style house at 33 Green Street in Newburyport, a small port city north of Boston. A Vermont native, the judge had graduated from Dartmouth in 1811, read law in Salem under the famous Daniel A. White, married White's daughter, and set up a practice in Newburyport. His oldest son, George Phillips, was born in 1818; three more sons and a daughter quickly followed. Stephen Marston was one of only six lawyers in town, and his local prominence was manifested in his continued reelection to eight annual terms in the Massachusetts General Court, the state's legislative body, during the 1820s. He also served as town selectman for three years and as judge of the Newburyport Police Court, a position he held from 1833 to 1855. During the 1830s Marston engaged in several high-risk business ventures: he was co-owner of at least seven ships, a trustee for a savings institution, president of the Newburyport Bank, and president of the Newburyport Steam Cotton Company, a textile factory built near the town's wharf. None of these businesses fared well in the anxious economy of the mid-1830s, and the bank and the cotton factory went into receivership in the recessionary years after the Panic of 1837.[19]

Money troubles plagued the Marston family enough to keep the two oldest sons from going to college, but not enough to drive them from their splendid house. Adolescent mischief making also plagued them. In August 1834, George, age sixteen, and two other boys were arrested for setting fire to a one-story schoolhouse on Green Street, up the block from the Marston home. After a trial in the Court of Common Pleas, two (including George) were found not guilty by a jury, and the third had charges dropped. In this instance the Newburyport paper did not engage in self-censorship out of deference to the family, probably because everyone in town knew who they were; the trial generated great interest, the paper reported, and "sympathies" from many people "of both sexes." Names of the three boys at trial were printed by first initial and last name; their respectable parents were not named, sparing them out-of-town publicity. The paper editorialized that the boys were let off because of their good characters and families and because the damage was minimal. "Few believe they possessed motives in common with the midnight

incendiary," said the editor; two desks were burned, but the night was wet and rainy and the building far from others, meaning the danger was slight. Even if they had been convicted, he continued, the perception of their act as a "thoughtless freak of youth" would have spared them the maximum punishment. Nevertheless, the editor issued a solemn warning about a local male youth culture needing more supervision:

> The very young men of this town have been in the habit of meeting at clubs, which have not been the best associations for youth of warm tempers, inexperienced minds, and characters not established. To the danger of these and other sources of evil, we hope, however, that their eyes are now opened.[20]

Three weeks earlier, just after the fire, the paper had run another editorial on the "Dangers of Young Men." This article echoed a local sermon expressing adult disapproval of a male youth culture surging out of control—just what the schoolhouse arson exemplified. The Reverend Dr. Beecher warned that "hot blood, unchecked imaginations, inexperience of life transport [a youth] to the midst of dangers"; "thoughtless and cruel" behavior caused parents terrible shame.[21]

At this juncture a cousin visited the Marston family and reported to her sister: "I found them in trouble at Uncle Marston's, in consequence of George's trial which was then pending, for having been engaged in setting fire to an old schoolhouse—which was rather a development of folly on his part, than of vicious propensities. But it bore distressingly on his father and mother, and I do not know when I have been happier than I was after I left, to learn he was acquitted."[22]

If Judge Marston had ever planned to send George to college, he now abruptly set him on another course. In late 1834, he shipped him as a crew member on one of his vessels, a freighter bound for New Orleans, telling the captain to show him "no special consideration."[23] The voyage proved disagreeable to George, as Judge Marston probably intended. Upon his return, George found work as a clerk in New York City and was in residence there by April 1835. At the same time, his brother Stephen, at fifteen a year younger than George, was placed in a dry-goods store in Boston, even though he had been studying Latin and Greek in anticipation of college. The parents now settled their hopes for college and a professional career on their third son, William, 14.[24] They still held up George and Stephen as good examples for William. The older brothers were steady and happy young men, their mother wrote William at boarding school. Her letter brimmed with motherly advice—avoid sugar, brush your teeth, study, be punctual and obedient. She fervently hoped

William's behavior would equal George's, whose New York landlady had reported that "he is one of the best she ever had."[25]

Unfortunately, William did not live up to his parents' expectations. He entered Dartmouth in 1841; college records reveal that he was excused from tuition on account of "poverty," so the family fortunes had sunk low indeed. He absented himself for a term in his second year and was readmitted on probation. In the fall of his third year, according to the college's disciplinary records, he and three other boys were fined five dollars each for vandalizing Franklin Hall. Judge Marston was informed "of his misdemeanors."[26] About this time, the judge wrote to George:

> Oh, George, what will become of him: He is a poor, wretched, wandering cripple and what can he do? God help him. I have done every thing I could and tried in all ways possible to have him go through college and be a man. He had good talents—but I fear he is now ruined for sure!! It may, however, and I can but hope it will lead him to a proper sense of his situation. It will either *save* him or *send him headlong to destruction*.[27]

But worse was to come for William. In 1845 he left Dartmouth for good, he wrote George, because "I got into a confounded scrape for having a *woman* in my room and before the Faculty had time to invite me to a *tete a tete* I mizzled." William felt especially bad for disappointing his father, but he also reflected on the ways that he and his brother were similar: "There seems hitherto to have been much similitude in our fortunes. We have both of us been 'unlucky Devils' and the rascally imps of darkness have delighted to *track* us."[28]

Blaming "imps of darkness" for their scrapes with women was surely a convenient way for the Marston boys to evade responsibility. But George fell into far deeper trouble in New York in 1836. His mother was very ill that summer, and she died July 30, at age fifty-two. A letter from the same cousin who had visited during the schoolhouse fire incident conveyed the Marstons' distress. (The ellipses in the letter reflect editorial decisions made by Marston descendants who compiled a laudatory family history, one that failed to mention the Jewett murder.)

> Springfield, July 13th, 1836. My dear Uncle, I thank you for writing me in this hour of your calamity, for it shows me that you do but estimate my interest in you and your family as it deserves. I have felt that you must be deeply afflicted, even before I knew that Aunt was so very ill, and since I received your letter I have thought of her and yourself continually. . . . It sometimes seems as if trials

> were accumulated upon us to show us at certain seasons of our life that "surely our help is in Jehovah." I pray that both you and she may be enabled to cast all your care upon Him, feeling intimately assured by His own spirit that He "careth for you." That "whom He loveth He chasteneth."[29]

This Springfield relative had been worrying about the family's deep affliction even before learning that the mother was mortally ill. News of Marston's testimony at Robinson's trial had probably reached her before the judge's letter. One of the most alarming editorials appeared in the daily *Boston Advocate*, which wrote right at the end of Robinson's trial, "We deem it more than probable that the 'Bill Easy' who is named in the evidence as the usual Saturday night visitor of Miss Jewett, was the *real* murderer."[30] The consoling cousin mustered her sympathy to remind the Marstons that God chastens those he loves.

George Marston did not sound especially chastened in an oddly upbeat letter he wrote his father from New York in mid-August 1836, just two weeks after his mother's death. George touched on only three topics: the impressive business credentials of the young man carrying the letter for him, the news of a failure of a firm in Buffalo that did business with his firm, and his own health. "I have enjoyed perfect health since my return. I don't know the reason, but I was more unwell when home than I had been before since my first living in New York. How do you get along now? Does Aunt Charlotte stay with you yet? I hope your health is good and all the rest. Give my love to all the children and family. Your respectful and affec. son Geo. P. Marston."[31] Not a word about his mother's death, and certainly not a word about what it might be like to return to work after playing a feature role two months earlier in the biggest murder trial of the year. He confessed to being clueless about why he would be so unwell at home in Newburyport and yet in perfect health in New York. Young Marston seems to have had thick armor against strong emotion and an unusual ability to distance himself from unhappy events. He also had had a year of practice writing letters home that kept his mother in the dark about his adventures with Jewett; maybe the habit of writing false good cheer was simply hard to break.

Even in his relationship with Helen Jewett, George Marston evinced signs of being something of a dolt. He deeply admired Jewett and professed love for her; he exclaimed over her handiwork and exulted over other men denied admission to her inner circle. But he had a hard time reading her moods and catching her signals. Two undated letters illustrate his struggle to negotiate deeper emotional waters than he was accustomed to. The first one also contained the paragraphs on Harry and Mr.

Cook (quoted in chapter 7), so George was veering between dismissing Helen's ill humor toward him and gladly offering her other partners. He seems to have attributed Helen's depression solely to her troubles with Robinson, and he repeats—but does not hear—her warning that she is on the verge of discarding him completely.

> Monday evening
>
> Dearest Helen—You say in your last letter, that you write to beg my pardon for any expressions, which your *ill humor*, as you termed it, arising from disappointment and hopes long defered, might have caused you to utter calculated to wound my feelings.
>
> I was not aware that you had used any expressions of that sort, and was rather surprised at your asking my pardon. I know that I'm a dull and stupid fellow, and that I have a *blockhead*. That accounts I suppose for my not having observed your *ill humor* on Thursday evening.
>
> But though *that* escaped my notice, my thick and stupid head observed with pain that you were unhappy, and it guessed the cause. Helen! if I *could* but restore that man to your affections, if I *could* but remove the cause of your unhappiness; if I *could* but dispel the mist and uncertainty in which you are envolved; in one word if I *could* but make you happy, I should ever experience the liveliest joy, in knowing that my endeavors to render myself of some service to you, had not been wholly fruitless, and that I had been the humble cause of many happy hours. . . .
>
> I knew you was not serious when you told me that Thursday night, might be the last one which I should pass with you, for I won't believe that you could tell me *that*, and not manifest any feeling of regret at all on parting. The deprivation of your society would be a serious loss to me and one that *could not be repaired*.[32]

A second letter must have taken some courage and effort for him to write. His act of writing gains him a little higher standing than that of blockhead; after all, a self-described blockhead at least realizes his deficiencies. While the letter itself shows some degree of self-awareness, the event he describes reveals his total confusion about Jewett and his inability to comprehend her:

> Monday evening.
>
> Dear Nelly—Need I say your conduct to me this evening surprised me much. I little thought when you stood by me so long, and suffered me to keep my arm so long around your waist, that the

very next hour would see you angry with me. What under Heaven was the reason of your most inexplicable and mysterious conduct towards me, when about leaving the theatre? Have I done anything to merit such treatment from you? Has any one been endeavoring to lower me in your estimation or have you seen some one you liked so *much* better than me, that you entirely forgot you had me to bid good night. From the time I left you talking with Mary Morgan, I had been walking fore and aft, free from all unhappy thoughts. I at last saw a friend go down stairs whom I wished to see, and immediately followed him down, walking past you. I came up again in about five minutes, just in time to see you going down the opposite side. Is it possible, thought I, she can be going home without bidding me good night? but I discovered [discarded] the idea, as soon as it occurred to me, and thought you had only stepped down on the stairs a moment to speak to some friend, but after waiting a few moments and seeing nothing of you, I followed you down and met you at the door when you immediately came up, and commenced *reprimanding* me as I thought. Indeed, I know not one word you *did* say, for I was so perfectly astonished in the first place, to see you going home without appearing even to think of me, and then when I met you at the door to find out that you was angry with me, I knew not what to make of it. There were many people looking at us, and I knew it. *That* entry was too public a place for any explanation, therefore I went upstairs, expecting, if you *cared* anything about it one way or the other, that you would shortly follow me up—but I saw nothing of you after.

Please write me and let me know how I have offended, and if you consider me still your friend and welcome to your house. The most prominent bump in my character must be one relative to intruding where I am not wanted, for I would cut off my arm sooner than go more than once where I knew I was not wanted. Ever your sincere friend, W.E.[33]

These are not letters Marston would willingly have shared with parents. He was only seventeen and several months into a relationship with a woman light-years ahead of him in her ability to manage both feelings and people. Insofar as he concealed his activities at brothels and theaters from his parents, his employer, David Felt, his landlady, Mrs. Morrison, and the women at his residence who admired his pincushion, he was leading a double life. But in another sense, this life in the shadows was not really completely different from his respectable world: Marston was the same dimwit in either place. His naïveté prevented him from being fully trans-

formed into a worldly rake or debauched libertine through his association with Jewett. Despite the strident warnings of the William Alcotts and Sylvester Grahams of the 1830s, young men like Marston and Robinson probably saw no reason to suppose that visiting the Thomas Street brothel would bring on the alarmist sequence of depravity, disease, and death predicted by the moral reformers.

One man of Helen Jewett's intimate acquaintance came far closer to fitting the fearful stereotype of degeneracy antiprostitution activists bandied about. But William H. Attree made few claims to moral rectitude in the first place, and the sin that brought on his premature death was too much drink, not illicit sex. When Attree met Jewett in 1834, on the occasion of her police complaint over being kicked at the theater, he had only been in the country for about two years. Born in Brighton, England, he immigrated to New York in about 1832. His 1849 obituary in the *Herald* (probably written by James Gordon Bennett) praised highly his retentive memory and writing skills, but also said "the greatest enemy he had was himself" due to his "morbid craving for stimulants."[34] A scathing 1841 profile of him in the *Sunday Flash*, one of the city's racy papers, called him "Oily Attree" and claimed he fled England on a jailbreak, socialized with blacks in New York, engaged in journalistic blackmail, never bathed, and drank so excessively that his nose permanently turned bright red.[35] Attree did figure in a handful of Police Court cases, often libel suits involving other newspapermen. (In one in 1835, he offered an excuse for his excessive drinking: "The printing business . . . more than any other, exhausts the physical powers of a man, as well as his mental energies," which then leads a printer to seek "artificial stimulus to recruit his powers" at the end of each week.)[36] The knifing he suffered in Hoboken at the hands of the barber John Boyd was the worst of several altercations he got into.

But when it came to Helen Jewett, the rough and coarse Attree turned mannerly and even a bit romantic. He wrote her two letters while traveling in the winter of 1835 to 1836. In the first, written from Louisville, he went on for several sentences about her name: "Ellen," he preferred to write, not "Helen," because of a beautiful and noble character, "above the usual run of common mortals," in Sir Walter Scott's *Lady of the Lake*. (Helen of Troy, from another book he presumed both had read when "young and in our prime," was not a name that befit Helen Jewett, Attree wrote, because the mythic Helen had "cuckolded her husband.") He compared Jewett to a swan

> that is compelled to pass, in the course of its career, through and across some devilish dirty and impure stream (as well as very many

> translucent ones), yet the instant she is freed from immediate contact with them, she simply "shakes her feathers," stretches her noble pinions, and her plumage resumes its pristine purity and beauty.

Helen had taken care of some business for him in his absence, and he thanked her for it: "Accept the pure and fervent thanks of a deep-thinking, intensely feeling heart, for the numerous acts of kindness which your letter tells me that you have conferred upon me; when I read that part of it relating to the commissions which I gave you to do. I felt real mean for troubling you with such trumpery." He next asked about the "movements of Frank and B[ill]," so apparently he was in the habit of hearing gossip about these two young men from her. Attree wished that Helen could have accompanied him to make his journey "completely delightful." "On my soul, Ellen, I never knew but two women whose society I thought worthy of accepting on a journey. Jane Price was the one, and yourself is the second. You must believe me, for I cannot remember to have ever behaved so like a scoundrel or a barber's clerk as to have flattered you."[37]

In his second letter, written in late January from Texas, Attree described meeting a young American girl also named Ellen, traveling alone because her brother had been killed in "the taking of San Antonio." The girl fell ill, and he nursed her with medicines he acquired from his brother in Louisville. He planned to deliver her to New Orleans, and "may the God who made me, curse me if I harm her." "God bless you Ellen," he continued to Helen Jewett, "I long to see and talk to you, for I have seen such sights—but yet I have not yet transgressed with an Indian girl, no, nor with any other kind since I left New York, but this is not virtue, for I wish oh, how I wish I had you with me this very night."[38]

These two had known each other for nearly two years, and it sounds as if they had a lighthearted and firm friendship combined with a sexual relationship that still sparked, at least on his side. She entertained him (and privileged him) with tales of Frank and Bill, and she obliged him by running errands. He valued qualities that would make her a good traveling companion. Given the hardships of antebellum travel, these had to include an easygoing, patient, generally resilient frame of mind. (Attree reported to her he was overturned four times in mail stages on his way to Louisville.) And he still persisted in seeing her as he had back in 1834: beautiful and "pristine," her "soul unpolluted," like the swan, not in the least contaminated by the "dirty" streams she had to cross.

The worldly Attree and the callow Marston both enjoyed romantic friendships with Helen Jewett. They accepted her unconventional sex life

and did not insist on one-and-only love in return from her. She made each feel special enough to make some claim to her heart, and at the same time each welcomed without a hint of jealousy her reports on other men. Marston's snit in the theater stemmed more from his sudden fear that Jewett was inexplicably ignoring him, and not from jealous anger. In their eyes, she was a good woman—generous to friends, skilled with needle and pen, blessed with the temperament for adventurous traveling, and in general fun and interesting to be with. On their end of the game, they found it advantageous to promise exclusive allegiance to her. Marston on several occasions professed his sincere dedication to Helen, and even "Oily" Attree felt it useful to write that he had not slept with anyone on his trip to Texas, not even an Indian. Helen favored devoted admirers.

Nothing about these unconventional romances conformed to the fears of the reformers who blasted seduction and prostitution as the sins of the age. Neither Marston nor Attree was a treacherous man, learning from Jewett the wily arts of seducing decent womanhood; nor were they innocent lads dragged down to destruction and disease. They paid her court—as well as money—and in return they got friendship, love, and sex, all things that they valued and enjoyed. If the culture around them insisted that prostitutes were polluted hags, and sexualized women were unnatural and suspect, they simply made an exception for Helen Jewett.

Richard P. Robinson joined Helen's circle on the same terms as Marston, Attree, and many others. But, it turned out, he was not so able or willing to sustain his assigned role.

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PUBLISHED BY ALFRED A. KNOPF, INC.

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COHEN, PATRICIA CLINE.

THE MURDER OF HELEN JEWETT : THE LIFE AND DEATH OF A PROSTITUTE IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY NEW YORK / PATRICIA CLINE COHEN. — 1ST ED.

P. CM.

ISBN 0-679-41291-3

1. JEWETT, HELEN, D. 1836. 2. PROSTITUTES—NEW YORK (STATE)—NEW YORK—BIOGRAPHY. 3. PROSTITUTION—NEW YORK (STATE)—NEW YORK—HISTORY—19TH CENTURY. 4. MURDER—NEW YORK (STATE)—NEW YORK—HISTORY—19TH CENTURY. 5. UNITED STATES—MORAL CONDITIONS.

I. TITLE.

HQ146.N7C65 1998

306.74'2'09747—DC21 98-14561 CIP

MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

REPRINTED ONCE

THIRD PRINTING, FEBRUARY 1999