• CHAPTER TWO •

Sensational News

NEWSPAPERS IN NEW YORK did not publish on Sundays. Nonetheless news of the crime spread quickly by word of mouth, drawing large crowds not only to the brothel but also to Bridewell, outside the window of Robinson's cell. Over the next week, city newspapers covering the story saw their circulation leap upward by many thousands of copies, imparting such an urgency to this local event that newspapers up and down the East Coast picked up the story and gave it great play in their columns too, in a departure from the usual journalistic practice of ignoring unseemly crime. From its initial moments, the Jewett murder struck a chord of some kind, one that resonated even for readers unfamiliar with New York City and the world of prostitution. A variety of factors drove public interest in Jewett's murder to unprecedented heights, making it one of the most highly sensationalized crimes of its era.

One simple reason for the attention was the rarity of such an event. Deliberate murder was surprisingly infrequent in the 1830s. New York City, with its 270,000 inhabitants, had only seven official homicides in all of 1835, and in 1836 only two capital murder cases reached trial.[1] Such a low murder rate did not make New York City a safe place to live, however. Nonlethal but brutal violence was endemic, and the Police Office files bulged with dozens of assault-and-battery complaints brought daily by citizens against other citizens; the number in the mid-1830s had rapidly risen to an annual figure of over ten thousand warrants.[2] Dead bodies of questionable origins regularly turned up every couple of days: Coroner Schureman ran a busy office rounding up citizen juries to hold perfunctory cause-of-death inquests on bodies fished out of the East and North

Rivers, on newborn infants found dead in alleys, or on corpses of starved or frozen indigents.[3] Routine deaths attracted little notice. But premeditated murder delivered by hatchet blows to the head was far from routine. A gruesome murder held the power to shock, startle, and alarm; it disrupted daily life even in a fast-growing and increasingly impersonal city.

That Jewett was a well-known courtesan further enhanced public interest. Many men, perhaps several hundreds, young and old, knew her personally or knew of her. The Thomas Street brothel drew in a middle- and upper-class clientele of lawyers, merchants, and their understudies, the clerks. The victim, then, was in a sense a prominent New Yorker, certainly more prominent than most women could ever expect—or fear—to be, known by reputation to a slice of the masculine mercantile world of the city. Jewett's personal relationships with a few key men in the newspaper business ensured that her death would not suffer neglect in the newspapers. The mayor of New York, Cornelius W. Lawrence, dignified the crime scene with his presence Sunday afternoon, demonstrating that high city officials cared about Jewett's death.[4] Lawrence, forty-five, was merchant, banker, and mayor from 1834 to 1837, and his visit to the brothel came literally on the eve of the annual election that returned him to office; polling took place April 11, 12, and 13. A decade later the mayor was revealed to be a brothel habitué himself, so perhaps his official interest in inspecting the crime scene was amplified by a private interest as well.[5] "Ellen Jewett was well known to every pedestrian in Broadway," the editor of the *Herald* claimed, in its April 12 edition. "Last summer she was famous for parading Wall Street in an elegant green dress, and generally with a letter in her hand. She used to look at the brokers with great boldness of demeanour, [and] had a peculiar walk, something in the style of an Englishwoman."[6] If in life she was remarkable and remarked upon, for being bold, eccentric, beautiful, and connected to the mercantile elite of the city, in death she became an instant celebrity.

Even people who had never seen nor heard of Jewett were fascinated by her murder, for it afforded an opportunity to contemplate the forbidden, the taboo life behind the velvet curtain of her brothel. Sexuality infused this crime, inspiring both attraction and repulsion. Just in the preceding six years, prostitution had become a matter of grave concern to a variety of local moral reform activist groups whose insistent message was that sexual licentiousness was surging out of control. While the existence of widespread prostitution was no secret to urbanites, until the Jewett murder polite society largely ignored the moral reformers' entreaties and sometimes condemned them for raising indelicate topics. Jewett's murder suddenly put a human face on prostitution. Large questions about the spread of prostitution (or contagion, the moral reformers said) could now be

The Real Helen Jewett, *a postmortem lithograph by Alfred M. Hoffy, printed in late May 1836. The artist represents a confident Jewett, equipped with letter, parasol, and handkerchief, echoing the* Herald's *description of her daily outings to the post office. Her fancy dress and hat and her tiny hands and feet were taken to be desirable signs of feminine beauty.*

framed around specific life stories. What circumstances brought a young woman to 41 Thomas? Were such women victims of men, or their victimizers? The murder provided an opportunity to talk and write about power relations between men and women. The subject was sex, an intimate topic normally beyond the frontiers of polite and public discussion. Under the guise of "news," literary and artistic depictions of the corpse itself—beautiful, naked, dead—presented material for erotic contemplation.

The unlikely person of the accused transfixed yet more public attention on the Jewett murder. Richard P. Robinson seemed a disquieting suspect, so young and apparently so respectable, coming as he did from a family of local consequence in Connecticut. His sixty-three-year-old father farmed land in Durham, Connecticut, northeast of New Haven along the Boston–to–New York stage road. He represented Durham for eight one-year terms in the Connecticut state legislature in the 1820s and 1830s (including one term in 1837, which suggests that the notoriety of his son seems not to have tarnished his standing with the voters in Durham).[7] To be sure, Durham was a small village, containing 1,116 inhabitants in 1830; with only about 150 householders (roughly equivalent to the number of voters), it was not really a major distinction to get elected. The elder Robinson was a big fish in a very small pond. Young Richard was the eighth child and first son in a family that eventually

numbered twelve children born over a thirty-five-year span of time, a feat that required two successive wives.

On the surface, young Richard P. Robinson appeared indistinguishable from thousands of other similarly situated young clerks. Were they all secretly leading disreputable lives? Could he—could they all—be capable of committing a horrendous murder? Circumstantial evidence seemed to powerfully implicate Robinson, but newspapers and the public were baffled in their effort to understand how such a quiet, mild-mannered youth could commit this crime. The most typical murderer in the collective experience of New Yorkers was the violent blackguard with a history of committing aggressive beatings and drubbings. The rare premeditated murders could only be committed by "fiends" and "monsters," words that put a killer outside human society. Robinson's life before April 9 did not match those labels; indeed, friends and employers called him an "exemplary" young clerk. The only jarring element in his presentation of self for the public was that he appeared to be strangely unruffled by his serious plight.

One of the newspapers, the *Transcript*, summarized all these ingredients of the public "excitement" in its edition of Tuesday, April 12:

> It is not to be wondered at that such an excitement does exist as was manifested in every part of the city yesterday, in relation to this dreadful and almost unparalleled atrocity. The high respectability of the family and connexions of the unfortunate young man who is charged with the aggravated crime; his heretofore exemplary and excellent character and conduct; his youth; the superior accomplishments, beauty, and attractions of the poor murdered girl, compared with those ordinarily possessed by the common herd of unfortunates; the deliberate, premeditated, ferocious character of the assassination; and the desperate means which were resorted to, to prevent exposure and detection; all combine to invest the catastrophe with an interest and a horror that have rarely, if ever, been connected with the occurrence of any homicide, however heart-rending and awful, in any country.[8]

Another paper, the *Sun*, echoed that assessment on Wednesday. Robinson, the paper editorialized,

> still appears perfectly calm and unmoved, and wholy maintains his innocence of the horrible crime with which he stands accused. The excitement throughout the city in relation to this melancholy business continues unabated. The cold-blooded, deliberate and savage manner in which the unfortunate girl was massacred—her well-

known reputation for beauty, intelligence, accomplishments, and gentility of appearance—the youth of her supposed murderer, and the high reputation in which he was held by all his friends and acquaintances—his general mildness of disposition and correct deportment—all these circumstances tend to increase rather than diminish the agitation of the public mind.[9]

Newspapers like the *Sun* and the *Transcript* transformed the Jewett murder from a local affair to a nationwide sensation. The *Sun*, founded in September 1833, pioneered the concept of a penny paper reporting on lively human interest stories. By April of 1836, there were three additional penny papers competing in this new market, fine-tuning a formula based on humor, sensation, and crime reporting to attract a wide readership. The papers were small four-page affairs, on the order of twelve by eighteen inches or smaller, and were sold by individual copy in the streets by newsboys or by weekly subscription. The *Transcript* (started in April 1834), the *Herald* (launched in May 1835), and the *Ladies Morning Star* (first issued twelve days after the murder), together with the *Sun*, were all poised to grab the Jewett murder case and milk it for all its revenue-generating possibilities. As unusual and disturbing as the crime was, with its enthralling, bloodied victim and its improbable perpetrator, still without the competition of the press, interest in the case would probably have sputtered out in a short time. Instead, the upstart penny press whipped up public interest, sustained a high level of enthusiasm over many months, and spread a sense of urgency about this particular crime to daily and weekly papers all around the country.[10]

New York City already had more than a half-dozen daily newspapers of the six-cent variety that attended to political and economic news—the *Evening Post*, the *Commercial Advertiser*, the *Morning Courier and New York Enquirer*, the *Evening Star*, the *New York Times*, the *Journal of Commerce*, the *Mercantile Advertiser*, the *New York Gazette*, and the *Daily Advertiser*. Crime reportage did not fall into their definition of news. Instead, these large-format dailies printed ship arrivals and departures, speeches of favored politicians, exhaustive coverage of debates on bank and railroad charters in Albany, congressional news from Washington, and columns of business and legal notices. They were sometimes called blanket sheets because of their size (as much as two by three feet per page) and potential function (four by three feet when opened out, enough to take a snooze under—the 100 percent cotton rag paper could even withstand a rainstorm without disintegrating). Their presumptive readers were men of the business classes and of public affairs who could spread the large papers over their store counters or big desks and soak up

news of commercial and political significance. In contrast, the smaller penny papers could be held in the hands and read on the street, or in a crowded tenement, a saloon, or even a privy. Subscribers to the big papers paid weekly or monthly rates for a paper delivered to their business establishment; there was no way to buy individual copies on the streets. These papers rarely covered local news at all, on the assumption that what happened locally was already known to readers.

Several of these six-cent newspapers ran regular court columns summarizing the activities of the Police Court and the Court of General Sessions, but this news was reported in the spirit of legal notice rather than in the distinctive whimsical and facetious style of the penny papers. About the most sensational accounts these papers generally carried were reports of transportation disasters, of which there were an increasing and distressing number as the race to move ever faster heated up in the 1830s. Stagecoach upsets, derailed trains, and steamboat explosions qualified as classic "news"—information coming from far away and carrying significant economic implications—while at the same time they supplied a touch of the macabre, chilling, and thrilling. Once the Jewett murder story gained momentum in the penny papers, the more traditional papers found themselves struggling to square their sense of journalistic ethics and conventions about what constituted legitimate "news" against a story that had become the talk of the town. To varying degrees, each started to attend to the story, some apologizing to readers for the sordidness of it all. The *Evening Post* of June 8, for example, called it "disgusting" and "disagreeable," covering it only to satisfy a "public excitement."

Although the penny papers all differed from the bigger papers in size, price, and style of coverage, they were far from identical. Each bore the stamp of its editor; each consequently took a distinctive position, different from its competitors, on the Jewett murder. The papers have often been lumped together as vehicles for an emerging working-class consciousness, or at least an anti-elite, irreverent view of current affairs, but the actual allegiances and reader responses were far more complicated than such a simple generalization allows. Each clamoring for attention to its own version of the Jewett case, the papers of the penny press framed much of the meaning of the story for readers not only in New York but around the country. The three newspapermen who figured most prominently in the Jewett story—and differed dramatically in their views—were Benjamin H. Day of the *Sun*, James Gordon Bennett of the *Herald*, and William H. Attree, who worked for the *Transcript*, the *Courier and Enquirer*, and the *Herald* in succession.

In stepping into the Jewett murder so decisively, the penny papers of New York were breaking new ground for daily journalism and pulling the

reluctant traditional papers after them. Yet there was a different model for the penny papers; crime found its way into print elsewhere. Since the eighteenth century, some American printers had been producing small pamphlets containing ministers' execution sermons for capital crimes, often with some brief account of the crimes or confession speeches from the criminals appended. Initially, such pamphlets garnered respectable interest, presumably because of their moral and religious utility and not because of any morbid fascination with criminals' dying moments. Murder presented an opportunity for ministers to define transgressive evil and to urge their congregations to contemplate the fate of sinful persons; the focus was on the criminal's soul rather than the foul deed or the victim. Starting in the 1770s, crime pamphlets became more elaborate, sometimes reporting on the murder story as it had unfolded at trial, or indeed creating an independent narration that artfully rearranged a strictly chronological rendering and fastened on the horrible or the shocking aspects of murder. As printing presses multiplied in the early nineteenth century, a popular literature of crime emerged in the form of sixteen- and twenty-four-page octavo pamphlets, no longer shaped by ministers but by journalists, printers, and lawyers. Trial reports and accounts of crimes increasingly directed attention to the victims, to the dramatic moment of murder, to the shocking discovery of the mangled body, or to the supposedly twisted motives of the monstrous killer. Morbid fascination with murder found frank acknowledgment. Bloody imagery was deployed and played up to titillate, excite, and awe readers. Overtly erotic themes were not often added to the mix until the 1830s, when several landmark cases transfixed the reading population with stories of female victims in sexual relationships with their murderers.[11] Jewett's murder was a leading example of the popular genre: a prostitute, murdered with a hatchet in her brothel bed, deepened the connections between titillating eroticism and titillating horror.

That her murder in 1836 came precisely at a moment of supreme rivalry among a group of editors of penny newspapers in New York only strengthened the association between sex and murder. Already accustomed to covering minor crimes in regular Police Office columns, the penny papers leaped on the Jewett case, framing their storytelling in the conventions borrowed from the popular pamphlet literature on fatal crimes. But the daily publication schedule of newspapers significantly altered the genre. The editors could not tell completed stories, as did the crime pamphlet writers who knew from the outset the identity of their villains. The Jewett murder had to be shaped into a story for readers within hours after the killing, before anything could be conjectured about Robinson's motive. That alone forced a fine-grained focus on Helen Jewett and

her life as a prostitute right from the start. An aesthetic of erotic murder was in the making, one that centered the story on the victim, and the Jewett case played a major role in shaping its central conventions.

A second important departure from the crime pamphlet literature quickly became apparent. In covering the story as it broke, the penny papers inserted themselves between the crime and the audience, mediating between the principals in the case and a public that, ultimately, would stand in judgment over the accused—either as jury in the court proceedings or in the court of public opinion, after the trial. Unprecedented, extensive pretrial publicity forced newspaper editors for the first time to consider the possibility that what they printed might have an effect on impending judicial proceedings. Canons of objectivity in news reporting were not fully established for the press in general, much less for the humorous, entertainment-oriented penny press. Should the press have access to evidence uncovered by the police? Could editors develop their own leads, uncover their own evidence? How could authentic evidence be distinguished from fabrication in the press? What was to prevent editors from simply making up material to entertain or to win a competitive edge over other papers? Should editors declare their opinions on the guilt or innocence of the accused? After the trial, could they second-guess judges and juries and criticize the outcome? In a battle between circulation figures and the integrity of the justice system, which would win?

In the first week after the murder, the newspapers clashed sharply over the question of Robinson's guilt. To many, the slightly built and seemingly personable nineteen-year-old appeared incapable of such a crime, and Robinson encouraged that view by dropping notes out his jail window at Bridewell to the crowds below, saying "Not guilty!" and calling out, "I am innocent, and I shall prove it tomorrow" and "it will all turn out right; see if it don't, now."[12] The *Sun* at first emphasized that Robinson "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."[13]

The endorsement of Joseph Hoxie carried a lot of weight. Hoxie, forty, was a New York merchant well known for his benevolent, educational, and political work. After a Rhode Island childhood, he came to New York City as a youth in 1812 and in the 1820s directed a private school for boys in the Fourth Ward, gaining experience caring for the intellectual and moral souls of adolescents. In the 1830s Hoxie opened a cloth-merchandising store on Maiden Lane and started joining business clubs like the General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen and the New England Society, a social club composed of transplanted Yankee merchants. He also joined

the New York City Temperance Society and became active in local and statewide Whig politics. In 1834 he stood for election to the city's Board of Aldermen for the Seventh Ward, losing by a small margin of only 23 votes. He ran again in 1836, and the three-day-long poll was in progress on the very days that Jewett's murder was monopolizing headlines. Amazingly, though Hoxie's name appeared in print as Robinson's employer, he was never identified in the murder covereage as a current candidate. Hoxie lost, but by only 34 votes out of 2,500 cast in his ward, which suggests that the arrest of his clerk for murder had little negative impact on Hoxie's bid for office. In 1837, Hoxie ran again and won by more than 500 votes.[14]

Hoxie, educator of boys, supporter of the General Society's lecturer program for youth, and advocate of reform and temperance, was precisely the sort of employer who championed moral uplift for apprentices and clerks. His fervent support of Richard Robinson (carried to the point of sitting next to him at the trial in June) was taken as a strong character endorsement of the young man. Although the papers did not say so, Hoxie was in fact related to Robinson's family. James Robinson, first cousin to Richard but a man of Hoxie's age, had been Hoxie's business partner in the early years of the Maiden Lane store and had married Hoxie's sister Hannah. It was probably through this cousin that Richard P. Robinson landed his clerking job initially. A web of family relations characterized many New York businesses in the 1830s, a common hiring practice in an economy that did not yet credential its young with licenses and degrees to certify skill or knowledge. Knowing someone's family served as a proxy for knowing his job qualifications. Hoxie employed as bookkeeper a twenty-year-old son of James, along with another nephew, an eighteen-year-old clerk named Joseph Hoxie. A third clerk, Newton Gilbert, and a store porter, James Wells, rounded out the Hoxie establishment. Family loyalty between Hoxie and Robinson would be put to the test in the months to come.

The editors of both the *Sun* and the *Transcript* marveled that one so young and unblemished as Robinson could be a killer, but their bafflement was vanquished by the weight of circumstantial evidence—his visit to the brothel, the cloak, and the hatchet. "Everything which has as yet transpired in relation to this strange and unnatural case, goes so strong against the unfortunate young man, that it seems impossible a loop can be found whereon to hang a doubt that the life of Miss Jewett was taken by any other hand than his."[15] By the end of the first week of news coverage, the *Sun* editor even published brief excerpts from a journal alleged to belong to Robinson that cast grave doubts on his moral character. The journal, it said, had "done him most essential injury in the minds of his

best friends and the police authorities"—and, it need hardly have added, now in the minds of the readers of the *Sun*. Equally damaging was the *Sun*'s reassessment of Robinson's physical appearance. "The striking emaciation of his frame, and unnatural glaring of his eyes . . . give evidence . . . of the fearful war that agitates his bosom."[16]

In contrast, James Gordon Bennett of the *Herald* reminded readers of the need to presume innocence until guilt was proven in court. Were there other potential suspects? Bennett had hinted at several in his columns describing his tour of the brothel: perhaps a girl in the house jealous of Jewett's beauty, success, and expensive jewels, which he alleged were now missing. Or Rosina Townsend, who possibly was deeply in debt to Jewett. On April 15, the day the *Sun* went public with extracts from a diary said to be Robinson's, Bennett printed an anonymous letter purporting to be from the real killer, not a prostitute but a man and rival for Helen's affections who described how he hid under the bed and wielded the ax while both Helen and Robinson slept, the plan being to frame the young clerk for the foul deed. (The letter neglected to explain how Robinson supposedly managed to sleep through the crime and not see the perpetrator.) But now remorse had set in, and the tormented self-confessed murderer was writing to clear Robinson's name even as he obscured his own and fled the city.[17] The *Sun* and the *Transcript* scorned Bennett's printed letter as a preposterous fake, charging Bennett had paid someone fifty dollars to write it. Bennett never mentioned the letter again, a tacit admission that it was bogus. After the first week of intensive coverage, Bennett no longer championed the innocence of Robinson, which suggests that his early move was simply calculated to differentiate the *Herald* from the other penny papers in the interest of boosting circulation. If so, it worked. Within a week Bennett's paper was selling out print runs of between 10,000 to 15,000 copies.[18] The *Sun*'s circulation rose as well, and on April 21 its editor noted that it had secured 1,300 new subscriptions for home delivery of the *Sun* just in the past two weeks. The more staid New York dailies that limited their coverage to the official news of the case found that their sales remained stable, at the premurder low level of 1,000 to 2,000 copies per day.

A more pointed and lively disagreement in the press involved the question of Helen Jewett's identity. Who exactly was this young woman? How had she come to be a prostitute? Where was her family? Was she really the accomplished and talented person she was reported to be? The police authorities evinced no interest in delving into her background or locating her family. She was dead, and their task, narrowly construed, was to bring her murderer to the bar of justice. Having arrested Robinson, they felt no need to learn anything more about the victim. But the

enterprising editors of the penny press leaped on the unknown and conflicting stories of her origins to construct a profile of Jewett the prostitute and Jewett the murder victim. In part, their goal was to make Helen Jewett into a sympathetic and worthy victim, so that the public would care about bringing her murderer to justice. That different versions of her story lay ready to be discovered only deepened the inherent mystery of her life and death. The penny papers made the most of these differences, each claiming its version was the only authentic and uniquely accurate report.

Citing a "respectable source," the *Sun* asserted in its paper of Tuesday, April 12, that the dead girl was really Ellen Spaulding, the legitimate daughter of a Major General Spaulding of Maine. The detail of the father's military rank signaled a substantial family standing. Ellen, said the *Sun*'s informant, attended a boarding school (another mark of privilege) where she gained proficiency in music and learned to speak French and Italian fluently. A bank cashier seduced her at school, however, dooming the accomplished girl to a quick descent into prostitution. The villain was thus the cashier: "She abandoned herself to her late degraded course of life in consequence of his [the seducer's] heartless perfidy."[19]

In contrast, the *Transcript*'s more compelling and detailed account of Helen's youth rang with authenticity because it came practically verbatim from the girl herself. The *Transcript* editors rummaged back through old editions of the paper to a column printed in June 1834, when Helen Jewett had appeared in the New York Police Court to press assault charges against a young man. The *Transcript* reprinted its 1834 story virtually complete on Tuesday, April 12. Jewett went to court to complain about a son of a Pearl Street merchant who, she claimed, indecorously kicked her while she was bending over in the stairway of the Park Theatre to pick up a ten-dollar bill she had dropped. He then ran off laughing. The *Transcript*'s court reporter, William H. Attree, eagerly sought out Jewett's life story and printed it as proof "of the misery resulting from the villainous artifices of those whose sole aim in life, seems to be the seduction of a young and innocent girl."

Helen Jewett told Attree that she had been born in Massachusetts and orphaned at an early age. A guardian charged with her care sent her to a boarding school outside Boston, where the son of a "respectable merchant" met her, "engaged her affections," seduced her, and spirited her off to Boston to live in sin. Her guardian rescued her and instituted legal proceedings against the young rake, who was so dishonorable that he fled the city. Helen stayed with the guardian for a while, but felt such shame at her ruin that she finally left the respectable guardian's home for New York City. Reported Attree,

> His unfortunate victim, although kindly treated by her guardian, was but too soon aware, that to regain her former standing in society, was impossible; and in order to escape from scenes, that only served to remind her, with a soul-harrowing power, of what she was, and what she had been, she came to New York, alone and unprotected.

As in the *Sun*'s shorter Ellen Spaulding version, the *Transcript*'s report seemed to endorse the idea that losing female virginity inevitably spelled a woman's doom. Helen herself, the source of the story, apparently offered no challenge or reproach to this unforgiving social practice. The *Transcript* concluded its account with notice of Jewett's two previous appearances before the Police Court, once to lodge a complaint against a British naval officer who ripped up several of her dresses in an angry brothel dispute, and the other when she was arrested in a sweep of a house of prostitution on Duane Street. "Her quiet and genteel deportment procured her dismissal" in the latter incident. Thundered Attree, the court reporter, in his sermon on Helen's behalf, "Could her betrayer now see the once fascinating and innocent inmate of the boarding school from which he seduced her, reduced to the condition we have described, he would, if human, need no further punishment than the remorse which would then gnaw his inmost soul." The seducer was the wretch, and she was the innocent victim; but nonetheless, a severe stigma attached to the woman who had fallen from virtue. Respectability was beyond retrieval for such a woman; at least, such was the story concocted for public consumption in the *Transcript* in 1834 by Helen Jewett, aided by William Attree.[20]

A third and rather different account of Jewett's identity was published in the *Herald* on April 12, the same day that the *Sun* and *Transcript* printed their background stories. The victim, Bennett announced, was really named Dorcas Dorrance, a poor orphan from Augusta, Maine. She was taken into the family of Judge Western of that town, who made her a playmate of his daughters and gave her a fine education at the Cony Female Academy. In the summer of 1829, she was sixteen and lovely, but also fascinating, passionate, even wild. She lost her "honor and ornament" to a cashier from an Augusta bank named "H—— Sp——y." (The letters punctuated by dashes suggested specificity and yet mystery too; more important, the contrivance protected against lawsuit.) After quarreling with the judge, Bennett wrote, she left the Western family, moved to Portland, and commenced the life of prostitution under the name Maria B. Benson. Next came Boston, where she lived under the name of Helen Mar, and then New York, where as "Helen Jewett" she lived and worked in the most fashionable brothels.

Bennett indicated no sources for his story, but his reportage of the previous day had made clear that he ranged well beyond his office, beyond the Police Court and the rest of officialdom, to capture information for his stories. The *Transcript* got its background story from its own files; the *Sun* likely picked up its Spaulding story from someone at the Police Office, since that is where it got all its other news of the crime. James Gordon Bennett, however, was the one newspaperman who broke with custom and visited the scene of the crime himself, and not once but twice.[21] No other paper dispatched reporters to the scene. Under the traditional routines of journalism, even among the penny papers, editors for the most part were content to let news come to them; they passively received and printed official documents, politicians' written speeches, or courtroom testimony they heard as spectators. They might publish about events they observed, if they were newsworthy events, but there was as yet no practice of investigative reporting. Bennett changed that, by innovatively tracking news, interviewing witnesses, peeking into drawers in Helen Jewett's bedroom, and launching inquiries into her life story. Bennett was the reporter as gumshoe, shadowing the police to search the crime scene for unnoticed clues.[22] Somewhere in this process, someone—a housemate at the brothel or maybe a client of Jewett's—told him the Dorcas Dorrance story.

All three versions of the Jewett background quickly entered circulation, first appearing as bits and pieces in the city's six-cent papers—the *Courier and Enquirer*, the *Evening Post*, the *Evening Star*, and even the weekly sporting newspaper, the *Spirit of the Times*. From there they spread quickly to points north (Boston and Portland), to points south (Baltimore and Washington), and to points as far west as Columbus, Ohio, and Natchez, Mississippi, where papers reprinted the confusing multiple accounts verbatim. Rapid improvements in roads, stagecoach lines, and post office conveyance of mail in the 1830s had facilitated a fairly dependable system of newspaper exchanges, so that even tiny weekly papers like the *Oxford Democrat* of Paris, Maine, could count on receiving and selectively republishing news items from New York City newspapers within a fortnight of the event. Out-of-town newspapers often protested a moral squeamishness even as they dedicated space to the murder. The *Natchez Daily Courier* pronounced the story "revolting" but then reprinted conflicting articles from the penny papers. The *Columbus Ohio State Journal* at first refused to reprint the New York news on Jewett, claiming that such reports only "gratify the vitiated and depraved taste of the community" and "excite and inflame those passions, which but too frequently prove an overmatch for human reason." But by mid-May the Ohio paper had capitulated to public interest, covering the news

yet all the while producing a running commentary on how terrible it was to lift up a dead prostitute and glamorize her life: "The press is endeavoring to give her an apotheosis!"[23]

The conflicting versions of Jewett's life created puzzlement and confusion. The *Philadelphia Gazette* finally dismissed all the stories as fabrications. "It has become really amusing to read the attractive fictions in which the life and character of the wretched ELLEN JEWETT have been dressed by the penny prints." Here was a beautiful girl who could play the guitar, harp, and piano, and speak Italian, French, and Spanish; "next we will probably hear she knew the Augustan classics." Her "physical charms" have been compared to "Italian marbles" and her ancestry attributed to eminent generals or majors or merchants. In fact, the *Philadelphia Gazette* declared with satisfaction, her true story has now emerged, courtesy of the *Boston Post*.[24]

The *Boston Post* of April 16 wrote:

> THE MURDER OF MISS JEWETT. The New York papers are full of fictions about this girl. One describes her as surpassingly beautiful—another as remarkably refined, fascinating, and accomplished. The *Star* makes her the daughter of a Major-General Spaulding in Maine, while, by the way, there is no such man in that State, and says that her heartless seducer was a cashier of a bank, who perpetrated his high offence while the unsuspecting Miss Spaulding was at a boarding school &c. Now the true history of this unfortunate wretch is simply this: She was the child of poor and destitute parents, who resided in, or near Augusta, Me., by the name of Dawen—her name was Dorcas—at the age of four or five years she was taken as servant into the family of Judge Weston of Augusta, where she remained until she was eighteen years old. While in this family, she was treated with great kindness, received a common school education, and every effort was made to instill into her mind those high moral principles which could alone secure her happiness and respectability. At an early period she betrayed rather uncommon mental capacity, but an obtuseness of moral perception which excited the apprehensions of those in whose charge she was. Such however, was the strict discipline she was subjected to when with the Judge's family, that her conduct, as far as their knowledge extended, was unexceptionable, although she often declared that nothing should restrain her from following an abandoned mode of life the moment she should be eighteen, for then she would be her own mistress, and freed from restraint; and she fulfilled her determination. Upon reaching that age, she left the family that had so

> long protected her, and was soon degraded—not by a cashier, as the *Star* says, but by a young man of her acquaintance and own standing. About three months after this, she went to Portland, and entered a house of ill fame, under the name of Maria Stanley; after remaining there a short time she proceeded to Boston, and found similar lodgings here, which she occupied, five or six months calling herself Helen Mar; from this city she proceeded to New York, where she called herself Ellen Jewett, and there ended her miserable career, after a residence of about four years, in the shocking manner which has before been described. She possessed a naturally depraved and reckless disposition—was a great thief from her youth up, as we are informed by one who knew her in Augusta, and who has furnished us with the above particulars relative to her. If she acquired the rare accomplishments attributed to her, it must have been while she was in New York, which, from her mode of life, is not very probable. Her personal beauty, we are informed, was not at all extraordinary—her figure was short and full, and her face rather prepossessing. She is described as having been shrewd and very artful and as having contributed as largely to the ruin of young men as any female of her character in the same space of time.[25]

So here was an independent version, quite negative, of Jewett's background, printed in a Boston newspaper that for the preceding three days had contented itself with reprinting the columns of the *Sun*, the *Herald*, and the *New York Evening Star*. Its great specificity seemed to confer on it a higher degree of credibility than the other versions of Jewett's life, and it too traveled and gained currency on a circuit of wide reprintings in newspapers around the country. The *Post* described its informant as "one who knew her in Augusta, and who has furnished us with the above particulars relative to her." The *Post* did not point it out, but obviously its informant was someone who had also followed Jewett's career after Augusta, through six years of aliases and prostitution locations.

When the *Boston Post* article reached New York, Bennett reprinted it directly and completely in his *Herald* of April 19, without any editorial commentary whatsoever—a very unusual silence, for him. (The *Transcript* had acquired the *Post* article first and reprinted it on April 18; the *Sun* never reprinted it at all.) Perhaps Bennett stayed mum because he hoped before long to be able to ferret out and to lay before his readers the true identity and childhood of the mystery victim. On April 14, just after his second visit to Rosina Townsend's brothel, Bennett set in motion plans to contact Judge "Western" in Augusta, to ask him directly about Helen Jewett. He was awaiting an answer to a letter.

THIS IS A BORZOI BOOK

PUBLISHED BY ALFRED A. KNOPF, INC.

WWW.RANDOMHOUSE.COM

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

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