“Out the back, Jack”: Early Years of the Garfield Marriage
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In August of 1856 James Garfield returned to Hiram from Williams College in Massachusetts. He had entered that institution two years before, a poor country boy, largely self-educated, insecure in his background preparation, and much in awe of his privileged and sophisticated fellow students, and the learned faculty, particularly Mark Hopkins, Williams’ president. By the time he had graduated two years later, Garfield was first in his class, a favorite among the students and Mark Hopkins’ prize pupil. Returning to Hiram after such an accomplishment, it is no wonder Garfield felt despondent and uncertain. The pond at Hiram was pretty small after his brilliant successes in Massachusetts.

Furthermore, Garfield’s highly romantic love affair with Lucretia Rudolph, a local Hiram girl, had gone off the boil. Engaged two years earlier, Garfield stretched his manly sense of duty to the breaking point, as he considered whether or not he ought to marry her. Also, to complicate matters, Garfield had been enamored of the vivacious Rebecca Selleck back in Massachusetts. What to do? Which girl should he marry? He finally married Lucretia (whom he called Crete) in November of 1858.

My thesis here is that whatever the lure of politics might have been, or the excitement of a command in the Civil War, what propelled Garfield into the world of larger affairs, away from Hiram, was at first his unhappy marriage. The evidence for such an argument lies within the letters exchanged between Lucretia and James between 1856 and 1864. One hardly has to read between the lines of these marvelous documents to perceive the difficulties and disappointments of the two young people, as they tried to work out their problems. Lucretia—Crete—is the star of the letters. Her wisdom and insight, her self-understanding and perceptions regarding James shine through everywhere. While the letters are interesting for many reasons, they are most unusual, it seems to me, for the light they shed upon this complex 19th century marital relationship. After 1866 Garfield appears to have fallen in love with his wife; she had won him over. And the letters, expressing this warm mutual affection, become interesting for the intensity of their love, often beautifully expressed, rather than for the revelation of their dissatisfactions.

I would like to quote from these early letters in order to illustrate my point, that Garfield “ran away” from his marriage during those years.

Beginning, then, with Garfield’s return from Williams College in 1856, we find him writing Lucretia of his unhappiness with life back home. Lucretia had gone to Cleveland to teach school, thus escaping the humiliation of her failed relationship with James. James writes:

Half dead with visiting even with my nearest earthly relations, I have taken the stillest corner of Uncle Boynote’s table, around which half a dozen are now determinedly chatting about all topics from President Buchanan down to the last batch of neighborhood gossip... there is no thread of discourse or line of conversation that does not bring me out to Hamlet’s conclusion: “How stale and flat and profitless are all the uses of this unfriendly world.” And still the fault is probably in myself and not in the world. I came home determined to be as good and brave as I could be, and spent most of the time visiting with mother and the rest of my folks—but really I seem to have lost all that I possessed in common with my kind. Oh, how the hours drag! Hour after hour full of insipid commonplace talk of life! I don’t know how I can live through another week. (82-3)

Lucretia, greatly disappointed herself in how things had turned out, continued seeing James and corresponding with him, whenever he wrote her. But she, too, was suffering from deflated dreams. Gradually, she came to find out about her rival, Rebecca Selleck. “James,” she wrote in 1857, “I am more and more convinced that somewhere there has been a great wrong,” and she added later:

I blame you for nothing, for whatever you may have done, I believe in your heart’s faithfulness; [but you] have allowed the generous and gushing affection of your warm impulsive nature to go out in all its fullness [to another]. All innocently as this was done, I cannot blame you, and could the effect of all the past of our intimacy... be blotted out. I would say to you this hour, go and marry Rebecca and trust not your heart so far. (90)

“I could never,” she wrote at this time, “be your wife unless every feeling of your heart seconded the decisions of reason. Perhaps I ask too much, but, James, to be an unloved wife, O heavens, I could not endure it.” (90)
Such was the problematic background of their marriage, and Crete did indeed have to "endure it." During the two years, 1856 to 1858, when James at last decided to marry Lucretia, he had become president of the Eclectic Institute at Hiram, and he un-doubtedly felt he had to make a decision regarding this long-standing relationship. Lucretia, much in love with him, allowed herself to be drawn into the marriage, knowing full well that James was marrying her out of his sense of duty. As she contemplated her wedding in the late summer of 1858, she wrote James:

The return of these last days of summer brings to me many sad hours. My heart is not yet schooled to an entire submission to that destiny which will make me the wife of one who marries me because an inexorable fate demands it. There are hours when my heart almost breaks with the cruel thought that our marriage is based upon the cold stern word duty.

(99)

Lucretia realized that one of the couple's basic problems stemmed from the fact that James' hardly knew her, despite the two years of passionate letters they had exchanged. His impressions of her were almost entirely from these letters. "All you have known of me," she wrote, "was gained not from my life or my actions but from my pen." (87) She said that most people, as they settled into the marital state, came to accept the disillusionment of their "golden expectations." But for James, she wrote, the fading of this promised future into the common realities of life was "like the going out of the sun." Fully aware she could never measure up to his expectations, she wrote: "How many, many times I felt that if you would only love me just enough to come and tell me all [you were thinking about me], I could endure to know the worst; but to see you shrink away from me as though you could not endure my presence... was almost more than I could bear." (89)

Restless and unhappy at the Hiram Eclectic Institute, and dissatisfied with his marriage, Garfield cast about for what to do. Such a charismatic figure, such a riveting orator and preacher, such a warm, hearty outgoing character, he was soon and easily persuaded to be a candidate for the Ohio senate. One gets the impression of the marital situation at this time, shortly after their marriage, when Lucretia writes James on the fifth anniversary of their engagement in 1854. In her note, she hopes the five years might have brought them into a "nearer and truer relation." But, using the metaphorical language typical of 19th century novels, avoiding more stark expressions, she speaks of their domestic scenes "wild and fierce, darkened with gathered clouds and terrible with heaving billows of our tempest tossed life." (100)

A year later, when she knows she is pregnant with their first child, Crete writes again, hoping the marital situation can be improved:

I have turned my back upon the mists and poisoned vapors of the low valley of life through which we so long have laid our pathway... the past shall be a sealed book, and we will live in the glorious NOW—will we not, dear Jamie? can we not? Yes, we can and we must. If not for our own sakes, we must for that little one which we are hoping soon to come and bless us. We must ignore all that has been wrong in our past, and live as though it had never been, unless we would embitter that little life with all the desolation that gathers around the homes of those whose parents fail to know that perfect union which marriage should always find. (102)

But James is not so sure. To these encouraging words of Crete, he grumpily replies coldly from Columbus, using short, dreary sentences: "Much of the time since I left home I have felt sad and unhappy... I shall try to make life for you and myself as pleasant as possible. I have not been feeling as though I could write before. I hope we may be able to get along as pleasantly and happily as is possible [given] the chances and changes of life." (103)

To this Lucretia replies passionately:

Please don't be "sad," don't be "unhappy" anymore. Please don't think me just an unreasonable little body who will not be gratified [except] by making you as miserable as possible. I acknowledge my liability to be unreasonable and selfish, but not my intention to be so. I confess, too, that there is a strong probability that I am too tenacious of my own opinions of right and wrong, but it does not seem to be that I am so extreme in this as to make quite justifiable the way you receive everything which I speak of which seems to me not quite right in your treatment of me and of others. Would you not think me unjust if, Jamie, whenever you reprove me for my abrupt and harsh way of speaking sometimes, I should lay it to heart as a wilful desire and determination on your part to deprive me of one of my
privileges? You asked from me the promise before we were married that if those things of which I spoke ever became a source of unhappiness to me that I should unhesitatingly tell you of them... and it seemed a little hard, then, to have you tell me in return for so doing that you had for several months felt that it was probably a great mistake that we ever tried a married life.

Crete then goes on to promise she will try harder than ever to be the best wife possible. She closes the letter adding: "You need not be a bit afraid of my introducing one of those long talks—such a terror to you—ever again." (104)

What an insight these remarks reveal of those early days of their life together. Lucretia, needing constant assurance of James' love, beset with a sense of inadequacy as a wife, suspecting that his persistent absence from home was a result of his "shrinking" from her tendency to hold long discussions about their problems; and James uncertain about the course he should take, not wanting to openly or frankly discuss their difficulties, offended by her criticism of his attitudes and values, and feeling guilty about his continual absence from home. For all his magnanimity of character, criticism was obviously not easy for James to accept. The best solution was "out the back, Jack," in the words of the old song. Hence, Crete could say to James, that of the first five years they had been married, he had been with her for less than six months.2

Perhaps the fundamental problem in their relationship during these years was an emotional incompatibility. When James first went to Columbus, Crete wrote him, using figurative language but with sexual overtones:

I believe my nature has been too much of the receptive order. Instead of diving into the honey cups I have rather lain down among the flowers and waited for them to shake down their sweetness upon my life, and when for honey they have scattered over me only withered leaves, I have said in my heart this is all life has left me, and have yielded almost to despair. It seems to me I see my error now as I have never seen it before. (101-2)

Later on in the 1860’s, after ten years of marriage, in a revealing letter, Crete wrote: "I do not think I was born for constant caresses... I am only sorry that my own quiet and reserve should mean to you a lack of love." (259) Again, at about this time, she wrote: "Before when you were away my heart missed you, now my whole self mourns with it and longs and pines for your presence, my lips for your kisses, my cheek for the warm pressure of yours. In short, I understand what you meant when you used to say, 'I want to be touched.'" (165-6)

We need not recount here Garfield's continuing regard for Rebecca Selleck, a relationship giving Lucretia many painful hours. He often visited her on his swings east, much to Crete's bitter annoyance. Also, his tempestuous extra-marital affair with Lucia Gilbert Calhoun in 1864 brought deep humiliation to Lucretia. But the true cause of Garfield's early absence from home was largely his unhappy relationship with his wife. Fortunately, in time James and Lucretia worked out their differences, so that James no longer "shrank" from her presence, but, on the contrary, brought her to Washington to be with him. He built a home for her there in 1869. In her response to this decision by James to build in Washington, Lucretia wrote:

It seems to me almost like a beautiful dream, the home my darling is building up for my kingdom, and I believe I feel more a bride than I did eleven years ago. I am sure if your home should be really finished and you permitted to take me into it, that I shall feel more than ever before that I am your wedded wife taken to your heart and heart.

And to conclude this letter, she writes: "Precious one, my heart is so full of sweet emotions and tender loving thoughts which the eyes alone can speak or understand. I hope you can stay... a little while when you return and rest. I will stop and rest with you, too, and we will forget that we are not in the sweet dawn of love dreaming the dreams that the perfume of early flowers brings. Darling, we will be Lotus Eaters or anything that the enchantment of love can make us. Come, Darling, Come. Lovingly and longing ever, Your own Crete. (250-51)

Much later, in 1876, James and Lucretia Garfield moved to a farm near Mentor, Ohio—Lawnfield. So we can say, in conclusion, though Crete could not keep James "down on the farm" in the early days, he not only returned to the farm later on: he bought it!
Works Cited

Notes
1 Crete and James. Personal Letters of Lucretia and James Garfield, edited by John Shaw (East Lansing: Michigan State UPess). All references to Lucretia and James' letters will be to the pages of this edition.
2 Alan Peskin, Garfield, 244.