LOVE AND MARRIAGE IN THE WESTERN RESERVE:
THE GARFIELD CASE
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[This dialogue is written to be read by a man and a woman, designated as James A. Garfield (JAG) and Lucretia Rudolph Garfield (LRG). In some cases, they represent the voices of James A. Garfield and his wife, Lucretia Rudolph Garfield, and in others, they serve as narrators. On September 19, 1986, at Lake Erie College, the roles were performed by Damaris Peters-Pike and Hale Chatfield of Hiram College.]

Introduction:

The thesis of this dialogue, if it has a thesis, is simple: love was no different in the Western Reserve a hundred years ago than it is now, but marriage was quite different!

This is the story of the Garfields -- James A. Garfield and Lucretia Rudolph -- as a case in point.

We'll begin right at the beginning with James. Boys, you know, are always a little slow to recognize the attraction of girls, and so was James. He wrote to a cousin early in 1849, when he was just seventeen and at school in Chester:

James Abram Garfield: I often think of the remark you made to me the night before I came away with regard to the girls here. There does indeed seem to be a want of that modest reserve and retiring deportment that so adorn the character of women. There seems to be on their part great coldness. I regard this tendency very pernicious in its effect. It is also very customary for young men to spend Sunday evenings with some young lady of the neighborhood; hence, there is hardly a boy or girl 16 years old who is not "shining" (as they call it) Sunday evenings. Even now Orrin is gone and I presume we will not see him again before 3 o'clock in the morning. You see that it will be necessary for me to guard my social faculties with special care.

Lucretia Rudolph Garfield: Well, guard them he did -- for about three years. But in 1852 he found himself hopelessly in love with Mary Hubbell from Chagrin Falls. She had been one of those bold girls at Chester, and she also went, as James did, to the new Eclectic Institute at Hiram. He wrote mooning love letters to her with abandon.

JAG: I stroll along through the silent halls of the Eclectic -- all these places endeared to me by the fond recollection of you -- and a feeling of loneliness comes over me with the reflection that those bright days are buried forever in the abyss of the past!

LRG: And he wrote Mary enough of that sort of thing to give her the impression that a serious relationship had developed. So she was surprised and upset to find one day in the winter term of 1853 that James, who was her teacher now, was treating her like any other girl in the class; in fact, that he seemed to have cooled in his affection for her. So she wrote him a stiff letter.

JAG: Your note is before me and I must confess that in the first place I was much astonished at its contents.
It is true I have not visited you but twice since the term began, but was it because I did not desire to? Perhaps you are not aware of the amount of labor I have on hand. You refer to my calling you "Miss Hubbell." In answering that, I will ask you a question. Suppose you were teaching a class of which I was a member. Would you call all the rest "Mr." and me "James" in the presence of them all?

LRG: But James never took gracefully to criticism. On February 27, 1853, the blow fell for poor Mary Hubbell:

JAG: Permit me to speak plainly and freely. In the fear of God and guided by my future destiny and happiness, I have studied both our natural dispositions and tastes. I have also reflected that my path has ever been, is now and perhaps ever will be, a rugged one of poverty and toil. The result of all these reflections over which I have spent many wakeful and prayerful hours, is that such a relation would not be conducive to our mutual welfare and happiness, and with this conclusion in my mind, I should do you a great injustice not frankly to tell you that I have come to this conclusion.

LRG: Mary was distraught. She wrote bitterly to James, speaking of the promises she thought he'd made, and of the confidence she had, and everyone else, too, that he was going to marry her. She wrote that her spirit was wounded with sorrow and disappointment.

JAG: James was touched, and he wavered. People at Hiram tried to convince James that he should relent. But not James' mother. She wrote her darling son:

LRG: If anyone is trying to reconcile matters between you and Mary Hubbell consider them not your friend. They are doing it for fear you will do better than some others. You have got out of a net that was spread for you. I beg of you not to be entrapped in the same net . . . I feel that if you should be united to one that was not worthy of you, you would be miserable through life. If you get one worthy of your love, take her to your bosom. She will divide the sorrows and double the joys of life.

JAG: And so Garfield's first love affair, like countless high school kids' love affairs today, ended with misunderstanding, bitterness, and embarrassment on both sides.

LRG: But the story of Garfield's marriage is quite different, and that is owing to the extraordinary character of Lucretia Rudolph. It is the story of this remarkable marriage that we wish to tell you about. From the letters, you can see the way in which Lucretia, through patient suffering and emotional deprivation -- a condition no woman today should have to endure -- gradually comes to be the center of James' emotional life and happiness.

It all began out of the blue, when James wrote Lucretia a letter describing his vacation trip to Niagara Falls. As the uproar over the Mary Hubbell affair was dying down, James had evidently taken a shine to Lucretia. He begins by using showy language, like a peacock exposing his rhetorical plumes in order to gain the attention of an impressionable female.

JAG: Please pardon the liberty I take in pointing my pen towards your name this evening, for I have taken in so much scenery . . .

LRG [breaking in on him]: And Lucretia was impressed. She decides to reply to James, though both of them live right in Hiram; she tells him about the pupils she is teaching during the vacation. She is just 21 and James is now 22.

JAG: James replies immediately, saying that school teaching is a very important enterprise, which . . .
LRG [Interrupting again]: We seem very artlessly to have commenced a correspondence by letter as a substitute for an occasional personal interview ... and as it is in perfect harmony with my inclinations I shall not be the one to discontinue it at present; indeed, I could with the familiarity of a sister ask rather that it be continued, since by your queries concerning my views now in reference to studying the classics you have paved the way for an investigation of their merits, which I do hope will result in some kind of a decision in my mind.

JAG: Courtship by means of the classics! There are more ways than one to skin a cat! Crete played her cards well. She asked questions she knew James wanted to answer, and she replied to his answers with flattering agreement, though with just enough independence of mind to draw him on. In short, he chased her and she caught him. Three months later, on February 23rd, 1854, after sleighrides and classes together (he was teaching a class in Latin and Greek, as we remember from poor Mary Hubbell's experience), the two finally declared their feelings for each other and became engaged in an interview in the lower chapel at Hiram. They were both nervous.

LRG: I remember that first kiss given -- have you forgotten the icy coldness with which it was received? You had not yet reached the heart.

JAG: How long my heart and lips had trembled on that question before it was asked!

LRG: James went to Williams College that spring, studying for his BA degree there during the years 1854, 55, and 56. And during those years the letters exchanged between Lucretia and him were rhapsodic.

JAG: My every thought goes westward singing like a gold seraph its song of rejoicing and love. Need I tell you that it is your pure love that thrills me, fills me with emotions I never felt before!

LRG: O! it is such heaven of bliss to be loved by you, and dearest, do you really think that I am your wife? For a certain anonymous writer in his "theory about wives" says every man is married, has his wife, whether recognized by the law or not; or whether he may have seen her or not or ever will see her. Moreover, he thinks very few ever find "their" wives. He has seen four matches which he thinks made in heaven and considers that a rare piece of luck -- to have seen four! Well, doubtless the man is half right about it, and I will not quarrel with him, if he will only promise ours the fifth. Ours shall be made by the bright ones above, shall it not, dearest? and it is, if in the love my heart so freely and spontaneously gives, you find that completeness of happiness which your love bestows upon me.

JAG: But their marriage was not made by the bright ones above; in fact, they very nearly didn't get married at all. When James came back to Hiram from Williams College, he and Crete found their earlier visions of happiness could not be sustained in the harsh realities of day to day living in the muddy little village of Hiram. Their hopes were dashed. And yet they found themselves miserable apart, as well as unhappy together.

LRG: So gradually, during the years of 1856 and 57, they drifted toward marriage. They had been living in the same village, connected with the same school. Everyone in town expected marriage; James had already achieved a reputation with Mary Hubbell; he had little alternative but to pop the question, if he were to avoid the social wrath of the entire community.

JAG: And so, after months of procrastination, "with much regret for the past and hope and fear for the future, we resolved that we will try life in union before many months." James was nearly 27 and Crete just 26.
LRG: Now, Jamie, I want very much to see you and talk of our plans for the future. I want, too, that you should sit down beside me and tell me how you feel now, whether or not our decision for the future makes you any more unhappy. I expect, James, you will see sad dark hours yet. Indeed perhaps it would not be possible that you should not. We cannot hope for a future all unclouded, but with the right ever before us, as it has been in this our final decision, and with our trust in God to guide us, I believe we shall find more of joy than sorrow awaiting us.

JAG: You ask me if I love to stay with you. I will be frank. I do love to be with you, but there is a restless and unsatisfied feeling about me a good deal of the time, and I can't tell what the cause is. When I am sitting, I long to be walking, and when I am walking I long to be sitting. I either stagnate and rust with inactivity, or am consumed with excess of action. No spot or position on earth seems to offer contentment, unless it be our home.

LRG: I am glad you wrote so frankly of yourself. Doubtless we shall both need to exercise some forbearance, for in many respects we are entirely opposites, but if we center our hopes, joys and love in our home I believe we shall find the truest happiness earth can give us, and I hope, James, it will bring to your spirit peace and contentment. But still 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 its. And firmly as I have determined to make the best possible of what life has left for me, and govern every action by the right, yet there are hours when my heart almost breaks with the cruel thought that our marriage is based on the cold stern word DUTY.

JAG: November 11, 1858, James Garfield and Lucretia Rudolph were married at the Rudolph home in Hiram. There had been rumors that James might not show up: Lucretia's father asked her to send a wedding invitation to him, which she did.

LRG: The first ten years of their married life were fraught with difficulties and disappointments, although the sentimental flow of emotional expressions in their letters might at first deny the dark clouds and hovering shadows.

JAG: Their first great crisis was the death of their dearly beloved child, Elizabeth, named after James' mother, but always called affectionately, "little Trot." She died in November, 1863, just as James was beginning his first term in Washington in the House of Representatives. He had come home to watch her die.

LRG: I read a little while ago a few sentences from a Swedenborgian, which have in them so much beauty that I will give them to you. "Those who pass into the other life in infancy and childhood, will be the embodiment of loveliness. They will be like the privacy and sweet peace of home." And the thought came to me that perhaps our baby who seems so unaccountably taken away from us here, was taken to help people our home in the spirit world. Our children who grow to mature life, go out from us to be the centers of new homes, and, were all to grow to man's estate, perhaps we would be childless in the spirit life. And maybe this little one was taken for our new home after death.

JAG: Though your brave words have made me calmer and stronger, I still struggle with my grief and think of our precious darling with such a yearning agony of heartbreak that at times it seems as though I could not endure it. It is a very bright thought to me that the little girl I mourn for now is waiting for her papa and mamma, to be a child of our home through all the ages. I would that my heart could rest upon it as I, when a child, rested in my mother's words. I pray that my faith may grow stronger.
LRG: My dearest Jamie, it seems to me the days instead of diminishing the sorrow over the little lost face which was ever turning to me in its brightness and love are only adding a new edge to the sharpness of my grief. The void in my heart for that presence grows larger and larger, and when I look into the days and years which remain in life, there is a spot in every place so blank which no other can fill, nothing hides. Our little boy is very dear to me but he seems to me so incomplete without his little sister to lead and guide him. Dear Jamie, do not let me murmur. I am afraid my heart is growing more, rather than less, unreconciled. Pray earnestly for me, my darling husband, that I may gain the resignation of spirit which can look calmly through life to that perfect life beyond where our darling has gone to wait for us.

JAG: In addition to the crisis of Trot’s death, this married couple faced the problem of constant separation.

LRG: James was away more than he was at home; Crete seemed to have no power over his restless need to be on the move.

JAG: First it was the Ohio Senate, then in 1861 it was the Civil War; then in 1863 it was Washington and the House of Representatives. He did not take Lucretia with him during those early years of marriage. For example, in the spring of 1865 he went directly from Washington to Chicago to transact some business having to do with the purchase of oil fields in Pennsylvania.

LRG: On May 8 he wrote:

JAG: I fear I shall have to stay another two weeks.

LRG: On May 22 he wrote:

JAG: I go to Detroit on the 25th to conclude our sale there, but I fear I can’t go on home.

LRG: On June 8 he wrote:

JAG: I am still at work with small prospect of getting through soon. I want to be with you more than ever. I shall make a strong effort to get away for Hiram’s commencement.

LRG: On June 17 he wrote:

JAG: I now think I shall be able to get away from here Sunday evening and reach Hiram by the Tuesday morning train.

LRG: But on June 24 he wrote:

JAG: Phillips thinks it of great importance that I go to Virginia with the committee and I have very reluctantly concluded to do it. It will be nearly the end of next week before I reach home.

LRG: And so what had begun as a two week business trip, tacked onto the end of a long Congressional term in Washington, became a six week sojourn.

JAG: In fact, he came home only to give the 4th of July oration at Ravenna, and to have a farewell occasion with Almeda Booth, one of Hiram’s brightest teachers who had decided to resign from the school.

LRG: I feel so hurt I cannot keep back the tears, that in the little time you were at home almost the only leisure you took from your work was given to mourning over the infidelity of Miss Booth and sighing over that past which gave me only anguish unutterable. I cannot understand
how you can be so sad over the past when I love you so well, if my love is worth anything to you.

JAG: I was very sorry you were dissatisfied with me and unhappy in consequence of my talk with Almeda. You greatly misunderstand me. Had I been in grief over a lost friendship and unsatisfied with yours, it would have been the last topic I should have discussed. Indeed it is surprising to me how completely I have learned to live without that intimate friendship which has been so large a part of my intellectual and social life for so many years. I will not deny that it was a very great struggle for me to lose it, much greater than I have ever told.

LRG: Yes, and besides those many separations, there were James’ beloved companions, like Almeda Booth, whose company he seemed to enjoy so much more than Lucretia’s.

JAG: There was the mysterious Rebecca Selleck, the vivacious, romantic girl Garfield became intimate with when he was a student at Williams College. Crete came to know her and said she loved her like a sister -- at first. Once she wrote James about a wedding of a good friend, saying of the bride:

LRG: She is pretty, well-possessed, and gentle with a very nice taste, and I felt as I looked at her that in her personal appearance and qualities she was the most perfect counterpart of Rebecca I had ever known. I looked at her and thought of Rebecca, while my own faults and imperfections trooped before me until legion was their name, and my heart filled with great sobs of anguish. And I felt as I had never before, that had it not been for me, you too might have been blessed with such a wife.

JAG: A few years later, Crete was able to write to James:

LRG: I want you to know that the last trace of bitterness over the past which was in my heart toward Rebecca is removed, plucked up by the roots and thoroughly cast out. I feel sure of this. I have tested it thoroughly, and not once even in the darkest, hardest moments I have passed, has there come into my heart aught but love and tenderness for her.

JAG: Still later, she wrote:

LRG: There is a letter here for you written in a hand I think I do not mistake. If it contains an invitation to you to meet Rebecca there, I hope you will not go. It would hurt me so to have you meet her there among so many of your friends, who would think "James loves her yet better than he does Crete."

JAG: And finally she could say, with some wistfulness:

LRG: Perhaps, when we have crossed the Jordan I will be able to love her.

JAG: Even harder to take than the affectionate relationship James kept going with Rebecca was his wild infatuation for a New York widow, caught sometime in late 1863 or 64, while he was in Washington alone. James' political advisor, Harmon Austin, cautioned him to break it off for the good of the Republican Party, and James suddenly appeared at his home in Hiram to confront Lucretia, his mother, and Almeda Booth -- the three women living in his house then -- with the facts of the case. He told them he was in love with Lucia Gilbert Calhoun.

LRG: They said, Go to her and end it. Face up to it. Be brave! And Almeda said, You are behaving childish. That hurt!
JAG: I hope when you think over my trip home and balance up the whole of my wayward self, you will still find, after the many proper and heavy deductions are made, a small balance left, on which you can base some respect and affection.

LRG: Crete had no alternative but to forgive James, encouraging him to talk with Mrs. Calhoun in a manly way, and -- oh, be sure to get back the letters you've written her!

JAG: I am glad to be able to say to you I have possession of all the letters which I was fearful might some day in some way be troublesome. And now, Darling, let me say that out of that darkness we have made, and surely shall make, good come. It was a terrible hurt to your love. It was a test and proof of mine.

LRG: As the years rolled by, the Garfields grew closer together. They had suffered the death of their first child, little Trot, and they had gone through constant separation and at least one infidelity on the part of James. Now they seemed more tolerant of one another's incompatible characteristics.

JAG: Perhaps it was that James needed Crete more -- his political career had experienced setbacks in some ways, and he was much more the object of public criticism than he had formerly been. At any rate, the two of them tried hard to accept each other's shortcomings, to make their marriage a happy one.

LRG: Hiram, October 18, 1869. My Darling, I have worked all day and am very weary, but cannot go to bed without saying to you, in answer to your question of this morning that I am indeed lonely without you. It makes my heart ache to think you left me today looking so sad and hurt. Honestly, my darling, there was no occasion for it. The house is empty and desolate the moment you go out of it and however unresponsive I may appear, or in truth be, there is ever a great longing in my heart which your presence alone can satisfy. I do not think I was born for constant caresses, and surely no education of my childhood taught me to need them. Still, I do not believe you know how vacant is every place without you. Nor am I sorry that life to you means demonstration. It has made you the great moral and social power that you are. I am only sorry that my own quiet and reserve should mean to you a lack of love. But, Darling, we have a whole eternity to perfect the harmonies which our natures are beginning to touch.

JAG: In 1870, eleven years after their marriage, James built a house in Washington, at 13th and "T" streets, and he and Crete and their four children could at last live together without those long agonizing separations. The marriage had at last come triumphantly into its own.

LRG: As the house was going up that summer, James watched its progress and wrote to Lucretia in Ohio:

JAG: It is nearly ten o'clock Sunday night, and I will not lie down to sleep till I have told you again that I love you. Surely, love is the fulfilling of the law. And the law of our love is liberty. We no longer love because we ought to, but because we do. The tyranny of our love is sweet. We waited long for his coming but he has come to stay. I wish, my dear love, that God would let us die together when we die; that neither of us might be left in the empty world for a single hour. I go to the lot where our new house is rising nearly every morning before breakfast and stand an hour or more seeing each little device of the workmen, thinking of the place in it where you and the children will be and thinking of the things I can tell you when it is done. Indeed, I begin to feel at home there, and a visit to it is almost like an embrace from you and the children. Soon we will live in that house in the winter, and roll in the grass at Hiram in the summer.
LRG: My precious darling, 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 hearth and heart. Precious one, my heart is so full of sweet emotions and tender loving thoughts which only the eyes can speak or understand.

JAG: Those last years were happy ones for the Garfields. In 1872 James wrote Crete that he had come across a cedar box filled with the letters they had written to each other in past years, and he had sat down in the Washington house and read them through.

LRG (Interruption): He read only the ones he had written to her; he didn't read any of hers to him!

JAG: Darling, I sat and read till the twilight deepened into dusk in the world without; but the reading brought no twilight to my heart, only the clear full high noon of love.

Starting from your home in Hiram, where we sat together, almost children, looking on the blushing blossoms of the peach tree from your window, the letters tell of my stay in Williamstown, which was so full of memory and struggle, and then the letters in the cedar box carried me on past the day of our marriage, through the two winters in the Senate, which everywhere showed signs of the great darkness in which our love was groping. Still, there were rays of light and gleams of hope, for which we both struggled. Then came the Washington letters in which the star of hope and the light of joy began to beam out with a ray doubtful and timid at first but growing steadier and brighter. But still clearer and brighter were the Congressional letters of the late 1860's and the campaign and Chicago letters of those years, and so down through the years that brought me with swimming eyes to the deep twilight of last evening, when I folded away the letters, and looked upon the shelter and rest of our dear home here, built as a monument to our love -- built for you and ours because they and I were all yours. Darling, when has lover had such a review of such a sweet heart? I hail you here from our temple, and I harken to you, for I am forever Your James.

LRG: The years tell me that we have passed the period called "bright youth" and that whatever more of life there is for us belongs to the less enviable time, to the maturity which sober us for the swift coming future. But with our love so perfected, the coming years promise us so much that is sweet and beautiful in the loving trusting gentleness and peace of our united and uniting lives that I look to them with more joy than to all the past. Today there has come into my life and heart a feeling of exultation, almost a feeling that the Good Father is in some way preparing us for a larger grander life of work and love.

JAG: That was in November, 1876. The "swift coming future," Time's Winged Chariot, was indeed hurrying near; soon the gulf of death would divide them. In just five short years James was nominated and elected President of the United States and shortly thereafter killed by an assassin's bullet. Neither Crete nor he had reached their fiftieth birthday, nor their marriage its 25th silver year.

LRG: Now my eyes have seen the beautiful spot and my heart has been filled from the sacred fount of that undying love. My lips touch yours with holy delight and my heart lives in the sacred confidence of your own heart's love. The Jordan is passed and Heaven is gained, and I rest in the arms of your love tonight though miles of hill and valley intervene and throw their darkening distance between us. Darling, I would love to feel the strong close embrace of your trusty arms, I would love to be with you, but I am happy here with your precious children, and with all the knowledge of the past and present to give me faith in your abiding love.