

# 6 An Agent of No Society



Neither John nor Charles detailed in public their reasons for separating. John would only say he had become satisfied he could work more successfully alone. Charles wrote nothing about it in the newspaper, and although John's name was dropped from the masthead, he still contributed articles to the paper from time to time. John and his family had been renting a house a few doors down from Charles's, but now John found another house for them, centrally located, where they could take in a few boarders. For the next several years, from that house, close to the courts and the jail, John focused on practical and particular cases of need. Even while he had been a partner with his brother in the newspaper, he had spent much of his time walking the streets and alleys of Boston, moving through one scene of pathos, degradation, and misery after another, "going about, doing good."

John now devoted himself even more to individual cases. He was free, "an agent of no Society." He had even "come out" of the *Prisoner's Friend*. He could tell potential patrons and donors that this meant there would be no bureaucratic obstacles to his giving precise, practical help to real individuals. "Disregarding all sectarian lines, party divisions, national boundaries, and complexional differences," he wrote, "I am endeavoring to do from day to day the work that my heavenly Father calls me to perform."<sup>1</sup> He must have felt upset, betrayed, and disappointed by Charles's having forced him out of the

newspaper, but outwardly he seemed determined to portray the dissolution of his business partnership simply as an opportunity for him to do God's will.

Betsey more likely thought of it as a further downturn in the family's fortunes. Now, some days John left the house in the morning with nothing but a crust of bread in his pocket and no clear idea of what he would do. In fact, Betsey gave John little encouragement. In all the years of their marriage, she had gone out of the house only twice to help him in his work—once, when she had accompanied him to the Leverett Street Jail in Boston to be the second witness to a marriage between two prisoners, and once when, with the help of two of her friends from their days in Barnstable and New Bedford, she had “cheerfully assisted in feeding” hundreds of poor Boston children that John managed to bring out to a grove in Dorchester for a picnic.<sup>2</sup> She was more comfortable at home, in control of things, raising the children, than she was in the public arena of reform work.

John continued to visit the jail and the courts, helping people who had been arrested and who were being held either awaiting trial, or, after conviction, serving out their sentences. He provided bail. If they were young, he wrote to or visited their parents, and in court he asked the judge to remand them to his care. If they were older and married, he located their children or wives. He found legal counsel for those who had not been able to afford it, and he found food, clothing, places to stay, and jobs for convicts who had finished their terms.

At first, he had been unable to make bail for prisoners because, as a non-resistant, he believed he had to “stand outside of all human governments.” This made it impossible for him to swear an oath, which was a normal part of the bail procedure. He later wrote:

There was a poor woman with a child brought into court, and she was friendless and was about to be sent to jail. The officers urged me to become responsible, saying it was very hard for a mother to be sent to jail. I replied that I would be very glad to bail that poor woman if the judge would take me. The judge said, “We have considered the matter and if you will say you will take that poor woman and take care of her for a time we shall be glad when you do it.” So I did, and from that time, though I was seven years in the courts almost daily, neither a judge nor a prosecuting officer asked me to swear.<sup>3</sup>

John learned the details of the Boston courts from John Augustus, who had been doing some of the same work as early as 1841. Augustus had begun by frequenting the police court and making bail for drunkards, with the hope of reforming them under his care. Like Spear, Augustus had been trained as a shoemaker, but he still worked at it during his philanthropic years, as he became—as later historians put it—“the nation’s first probation officer.” On his own initiative, he made bail for more than eleven hundred persons, mostly inebriates, prostitutes, and children.<sup>4</sup> John Spear wrote, “Unitedly we visited prisons, criminal courts, the families of the accused, descended to dens of vice and crime, aided the children of the poor, thus, creating a public sentiment that built Reform Schools and prepared the way for State officers to do for pay what we had done in benevolence.”<sup>5</sup>

But their efforts were controversial. They were criticized for interfering in the great machine of retribution, of interposing themselves between the righteous sword of justice and the ones upon whom the sword should have fallen. These two annoying and self-righteous “good Samaritans,” as the newspapers began to regard them, were accused of making bail for people who later committed other crimes.<sup>6</sup> They were said to be living on the charity of others who donated money to their work. They were accused of building their reputations on the newspaper notices of their work. And the fact that they found temporary housing for prostitutes and for abused or indigent women offered plenty of fuel for gossip.<sup>7</sup> But some of the officers in the courts opposed them for another reason: “The officer’s fee for serving a mittimus to jail being 62 cents, and as no mittimus was required in cases where he became bail, there was no opportunity for earning a fee,” pointed out a clergyman in defense of Augustus.

Spear wrote up annual reports of his missionary work and published them in pamphlet form, distributing them as a way to apprise potential and past donors of his activities.<sup>8</sup> He included press notices, explanations of how his work was unique and filled a need, summary figures for the year of how many people he had helped or made bail for, and how many visits he had made to jails and prisons. He also narrated how one of his typical days went, going from one needy case to another. And he offered pathetic anecdotes, “The Ungrateful Wretch,” “The Aged Prisoner,” or “The Rhode Island Mother and Her Babe.” A twelve-year-old boy was in jail for selling

newspapers without a license. Another one, a recent arrival to Boston from the country, was in jail for taking a coat. A penniless woman's husband had been clapped into prison. A sailor in jail on charges of drunkenness needed someone to get his back pay for him.

In "The Infant Prisoner," John wrote that he had been in police court one day and an officer had led in a small child who "was so short that [the officer] could not easily reach down to take his hand without stooping so low that he could not comfortably walk."<sup>9</sup> John assumed the child was to be a witness, but it turned out he was a prisoner, and was to be charged with assault and battery, "'against the peace and dignity of the Commonwealth, in such case made and provided,' not a single word of which did the little fellow understand." John had a word with the judge:

"May it please your Honor," I said, "the prisoner is not seven years of age. He does not know enough to commit a crime."

"I cannot help it," said the aged judge, looking over his spectacles down upon the child with compassion, "he has been complained of, and the complaint cannot be withdrawn; and besides, the offence is of so serious a character that this Court has not jurisdiction of the case. I must bind him over to appear before a higher tribunal."

"But if the poor child is sent to Jail," I said, "to be kept until he can be tried, who will take care of him while he is there? He does not know enough to undress himself, and put himself to bed at night."

"A cradle should be sent to the Jail for him," said the Clerk, indignant that a mere babe was to be imprisoned with thieves and robbers.

"I am sorry for him," said the Judge, "but I cannot help him."

John persuaded the judge, however, to set the bail at only fifty dollars. He then made bail for the child and took him home. "I gave him food, found his parents, put him to school, and when the grand jury came together, I got word to them of his tender age; they refused to find a bill against him and he was discharged."

A sympathetic writer explained John's work. He wrote that unlike Charles, who was an editor and writer, John was "in constant personal contact with" people under arrest or imprisoned.<sup>10</sup> He was "a noiseless, unassuming minister of mercy whose charities are as voluntary as they are original." He was

“responsible to no man or body of men” and he was “a limb of no philanthropic machine.”

For five years, John also served as an officer in the Massachusetts Society for the Abolition of Capital Punishment, and agitated, as did his brother, for a legislative end to the death penalty. He also continued attending meetings on the subject of prison reform. On a trip to New York for one of these meetings, he met Eliza Farnham, the matron for female prisoners at Sing Sing Penitentiary. She invited him and Charles and the Hutchinson Family Singers to visit the prison. There they conducted an inspirational program, which included poetry readings and songs about mother and home.<sup>11</sup>

At the beginning of 1849, Charles’s wife, Frances, contracted cancer. Her condition rapidly worsened. Charles’s cares threatened to overwhelm him, and John helped with the newspaper while Charles tended to her. On June 23, she died. Charles put her to rest in the “narrow house,” in the Central Burying Ground on Boston Commons.<sup>12</sup> He was left with five children to raise. He had little time to devote to them, however, because John had involved him in a flurry of efforts to have the governor commute the death sentences of two convicted and nationally notorious murderers, first Washington Goode and then John Webster.



## Launched into Eternity

One rainy night in June 1848, Boston police arrested a twenty-nine-year-old black sailor named Washington Goode and charged him with murder. Several prostitutes and pimps had told them they had seen Goode in the fog earlier that evening on Ann Street, the most notorious road in the neighborhood where the “wretched denizens of the city” lived. Someone had discovered the body of another black seaman, Thomas Harding, in the street there earlier that night. No one had seen the murder, but witnesses told police that Harding had argued that evening with Goode about a prostitute.<sup>1</sup>

Goode swore his innocence. He was tried and convicted, however, despite having nine lawyers involved in his defense, paid for by abolitionists, who characterized the evidence against him as merely circumstantial. He was sentenced to hang, and he was spending several months in jail, awaiting execution.

No death sentence had been carried out in Boston for more than a decade. Since the last hanging, a large group of activists there had dedicated themselves to free blacks from bondage and to oppose the death penalty. The conviction and sentencing of Washington Goode enraged them. His race seemed to explain how he had been convicted on what they thought was weak evidence and why he had been given the death penalty for a crime of passion, which was, even if he were guilty, unpremeditated and perpetrated

while he had been drunk. The injustice was compounded, they believed, by the fact that Goode, as a black man, was not entirely a free agent, but was, to some extent, in bondage to a society that set him at a disadvantage.

Antislavery activists worked to have Goode's sentence commuted to life imprisonment. The Society for the Abolition of Capital Punishment, with help from other abolitionists and members of the free black community, organized a petition drive. The Spears were at the heart of it, and received help from others on the society's executive committee, especially from Wendell Phillips, who, with John, issued the call for petitions on behalf of the committee: "Shall he be hung?" it began.<sup>2</sup> The circular asked its readers to write their own petitions to Governor George Briggs. It hit hard on the issue of race: "A Colored Man, too—one whom society most preeminently injures—doomed, with such inevitable certainty, to ignorance and vice, by cruel prejudice and statutes, in almost every part of the country—the child of an abused race. Let it not be said that the last man in Massachusetts suffered to be hung was a colored man!"<sup>3</sup>

John and Charles visited Goode at the Massachusetts State Prison in Charlestown. They were the only ministers who had been to see him. Over the following two months, the Spears set up meetings and lectures on behalf of Goode. In April they organized a meeting in Tremont Temple to rally support for him, and deployed a note of mordant humor in the printed announcement for the meeting, whose purpose was "to hear argument why Goode should be reprieved, or to give plausible reasons why they, the people, require that his neck should be disjointed, and he be choked to death for the good of the state."<sup>4</sup>

John forwarded to the Massachusetts legislature almost twenty-five thousand signatures collected in public meetings in Boston, Worcester, New Bedford, Lynn, Lowell, and Mansfield, asking for the commutation of Goode's sentence. Charles wrote and published his letters to Briggs, in which he argued that the death penalty was doomed, that public opinion had changed. At the end of March, however, he wrote in his journal that it was doubtful whether they could save Goode.<sup>5</sup> By the beginning of May, the Spears still anticipated the worst, and in fact the governor issued no commutation.

The morning of the execution, a large crowd gathered outside the prison walls.<sup>6</sup> John and Charles passed out handbills, but an officer saw a group of people forming around them and told them to disperse. "No mobs," he said.

In the buildings along the street outside the prison, some of the tenants and owners had sold window space on the top floors, which overlooked the prison yard, and from which the scaffolding was visible.

John and Charles were let inside the prison, along with a few invited guests and a hundred or more spectators. The prisoner was then brought out, bound to a chair. He had tried to commit suicide the night before by cutting himself with pieces of glass and swallowing wads of tobacco, but the jailers had discovered him, had brought in the doctor, who had stopped the flow of blood and had “preserved him for a more dreadful end.” He was carried up the scaffold still bleeding and in the chair. The sheriff read the warrant. A prayer was said. A roar began and grew in intensity from the crowd inside and outside the prison walls. The rope was placed around his neck. A hymn was sung—“Soon Shall I Hear the Solemn Call.” A spectator shouted, “Down with your umbrellas, and let’s see the bloody nigger swing.”<sup>7</sup> Goode’s chair fell away through the empty air that opened up under him. His body straightened and stiffened. Frederick Douglass’ *North Star* reported one man at the hanging saying, “I wish they would hang that damned Spear.”

A Boston newspaper, according to Charles, had said that now Goode had been hanged, “We hope Spear and his gang will howl no longer,” but a few days after the execution, a meeting was held on capital punishment, and it was evident that the movement to abolish the death penalty had merged for the moment with the antislavery campaign.<sup>8</sup> Abolitionists were most upset that Governor Briggs, having recognized the growing public sentiment against the death penalty, had previously used his executive power to commute the death sentences of three other men during his tenure. Why had he not done it in this case? The answer seemed clear enough to the abolitionists: Goode had been black; the others had been white. John and Charles spoke at the meeting, as did a string of Boston’s strongest abolitionists.<sup>9</sup>

Not long after, the Spears saw Briggs demonstrate that he would allow the execution of a man who was not only white, but also a member of the privileged, educated class of Boston society—John Webster, professor of chemistry at Harvard Medical School.

On November 23, 1849, Dr. George Parkman disappeared and was presumed murdered. John and Charles knew Parkman as a fellow reformer. He was interested in the institutional treatment of insanity, and he sometimes testified at court as an expert authority on mental illness. He had written



on what was called “monomania,” referring to an obsession that grew in the mind to challenge the person’s own control over himself, whereby an almost independent, alien personality could grow undetected and then suddenly displace the dominant personality. Parkman’s brother Francis, a learned and well-regarded Unitarian minister, had long been an active member of the Society for the Abolition of Capital Punishment. In July 1845, he had joined the Spears on a committee that had persuaded Governor Briggs to commute the death penalty in the case of Orrin De Wolf, a young man convicted of murder.<sup>10</sup>

After a short but intensive investigation, the police arrested Professor Webster and charged him with Parkman’s murder. Webster, who owed Parkman money, had been the last one to see him alive, and the two had been overheard arguing about the debt. A janitor at the Medical School laboratory where Webster worked had become suspicious and turned up human bones and body parts in the ashes of the lab’s incinerator.<sup>11</sup> During a subsequent search, the police found a long knife, a bundle containing more body parts, and tanning chemicals.

The entire city was in a fever about the case. John and Charles became involved, not only because they knew the Parkmans, but because of their reputations as “the prisoner’s friends”—and prisoner Webster needed a friend. They visited him in prison, and also visited his family, who firmly believed he was innocent. Mrs. Webster unnerved Charles by telling him that her husband had been perfectly composed during the entire week after the murder when the police were raking every pond in the city looking for the body and interviewing all the toll takers and railroad conductors about Professor Webster’s alibi. “‘How could I,’ said Mrs. Webster” to Charles, “‘believe my husband to be guilty, when he frequently said, on coming from the garden with the [pruning] knife in his hand, ‘They are searching the Medical College.’”<sup>12</sup>

At Webster’s trial, the prosecution charged that Parkman had come to Webster’s laboratory and had argued with him about the overdue debt, and that, in a rage, Webster had struck Parkman down, killing him, then had dismembered the body and had burned it in the furnace. Professor Webster’s state of mind during the moments surrounding Parkman’s death, in the scenario offered by the prosecution, uncannily resembled the onset of “monomania” Parkman himself had described many times in court, testifying as an

expert witness at trials of people charged with crimes. In these cases, a sentence, or even a verdict, might turn on whether the act was one of pure “passion” or whether there had been “malice aforethought.” Oddly, it was as if Parkman’s spirit appeared in the courtroom, both to accuse Webster of his murder and to offer him a defense from the penalty of death. But he would not admit his guilt, and the court would not release him from it. He was found guilty and sentenced to hang.

John and Charles led a campaign to petition Governor Briggs to commute Webster’s sentence. “We have often been asked our opinion respecting the guilt of Professor Webster,” Charles confessed to his readers a few years later. “We have had no doubts about the act, but about the *motive*. He was, undoubtedly, terribly provoked by Dr. Parkman. This, though not an excuse, is certainly a palliation.”<sup>13</sup>

John, still an officer in the Massachusetts Society for the Abolition of Capital Punishment, collected signatures from all over Massachusetts, asking Briggs to commute Webster’s death sentence.<sup>14</sup> Charles coordinated the petition drive elsewhere around the country and forwarded the petitions to the governor. Professor Webster’s wife, Harriet, was the Spears’ grateful ally. They found it difficult, however, to have her advise them. Charles explained why, remembering the events several years later: “In regard to all efforts for an alteration of the sentence, she said with great earnestness, ‘Do not use the word *pardon* for that implies that my husband is guilty. Ask the Governor and the Council to clear him at once.’ ‘That,’ we replied, ‘is out of the question.’”<sup>15</sup>

The Spears argued that the finality of the death penalty made it an inappropriate punishment in any case where there was the least uncertainty over the facts (as there was, they believed, in this case). They also argued that, even if the prosecution’s case was true, Parkman’s murder was unpremeditated and therefore the murderer did not deserve the death penalty.<sup>16</sup> They argued to no effect. Briggs had no reason to make an exception of Webster. In addition, he was concerned that those who argued to abolish the death penalty had jeopardized the administration of justice by making it difficult to get a jury to convict in an entire range of cases that could conceivably draw the death sentence. He was now prepared—as he seems to have been in the case of Goode—to shore up the ramparts of justice by fending off entreaties for mercy.<sup>17</sup>

Webster and Parkman had both been involved in experiments with mesmerism. In 1836, a French physician and radical Saint Simonian socialist, Charles Poyen, had given demonstrations of it to groups of doctors, professors, and scientists from the Medical College of Massachusetts (the Harvard Medical School), including professor Webster.<sup>18</sup> Poyen had demonstrated how a mesmerized subject could be made to feel no pain. He had taught Webster, among others, how to induce trance and the Harvard Professor had begun his own experiments with the technique. His interest in how it diminished a subject's pain had been merely perfunctory. He quickly turned instead to exploring the peculiar effect by which it seemed that mesmerized subjects—most of them were women—transferred their will to the mesmerizer or “operator.” The transference seemed so complete in one case that Webster thought to walk to a remote corner of the room, far from where the prostrate female lay in trance, where he then asked her questions in the lowest whisper possible. She answered his whispered inquiries without hesitation, even though others present in the room could not hear a syllable of what he had said. It was as if her spirit had separated from her body and followed him.

The mesmeric trance seemed a “mimic death.” Observers looked at it as a practical demonstration of the separation of the mind, the spirit, or the soul, from the body. Here was the soul seeming to leave the body while yet the body lived and maintained its purely animal functions. Here was the body, a prison of corruptible matter in which a spark of eternal, living fire was bound. The Spears sold a book at the Prisoner's Friend office that described the mind and the body in this way: “The body is the house of the soul; in an upper story, confined to an inner chamber, closely imprisoned, and having no communication with the external world, except through the medium of the life principle, resides our immortal being.”<sup>19</sup> What had Webster done during his experiments with his mesmeric subject's disembodied self? Where had it gone? And if it no longer resided in her body, what was the body without it?

Professor Webster had experimented with extracting the will of his young powerless subject through mesmerism and leading that will, leashed to his whispered commands, far from her inert body, from which it had been detached. The state was now about to return the favor to him, by severing his spirit from his body and launching it into eternity.

On the morning of August 30, Webster was led out of his cell at Leverett Street Jail into the yard. The proceedings were closed to the public and, at

Webster's request, the precise time of his execution was undisclosed to his family, who were not present. He was led to the gallows, his arms were pinned, the noose was put around his neck, a cloth hood was pulled over his head, and the platform under him dropped away.

The only good the Spears could see in the execution was the possibility that it would fortify public sentiment against the death penalty. They believed the public would see that executions encouraged violence, rather than discouraged it. At the very least they had no power to deter crimes. As Charles wrote, "It is said to have been the custom of Professor Webster to attend all executions, little thinking that hereafter he would meet a similar fate, and that men could be found hardened enough to stand at the foot of his gallows, and witness the agonies and throes of a fellow-mortal in the tremendous hour of death."<sup>20</sup>

John now undertook other practical actions to oppose the laws of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts—and not just those regarding capital punishment. He had continued his membership in, and leadership of, the Massachusetts and the New England Anti-Slavery Societies. In September 1850, Congress passed a fugitive slave law meant to ensure that the Northern states did nothing to circumvent the rights of slave owners to pursue, capture, and bring back escaped slaves who made their way North. After it was signed, Boston abolitionists called a meeting in Faneuil Hall to demonstrate their opposition to it, and to assure the black residents of Boston that the city would do everything it could to frustrate its enforcement and guard their safety. At the close of the meeting, a group of abolitionists stayed and formed a committee of vigilance.<sup>21</sup> John was on the initial committee of fifty members. Theodore Parker led the group, which eventually came to number two hundred.

In some ways it was a revival of an earlier group of Boston vigilantes, who called themselves the Meeting of Freemen, organized in 1842 to oppose the manumission of fugitive slave George Latimer. John had been one of its leaders, along with other abolitionists, such as Wendell Phillips, Stephen Foster, Walter Channing, Charles Remond, Caroline Weston and Maria Chapman. A petition drive they organized had persuaded the Massachusetts legislature to pass the "Latimer Statute," which forbade state officials and law officers from helping to enforce the remission of fugitive slaves.<sup>22</sup>

The later Boston Vigilance Committee's membership was secret because the group intended to disrupt the enforcement of the fugitive slave law, to shelter and protect fugitive slaves, and to frustrate slave-catchers in the city. Members used passwords and watchwords—"Hide the outcast" and "Betray not him that wandereth."<sup>23</sup> Some of the members, however, felt uncomfortable with the organization's secrecy. To them, secrecy was a mark of antirepublican tendencies—Garrison, in particular, had long been a strong opponent of Freemasonry because of its own "papist" and "monarchical" secrecy.<sup>24</sup> Even he relented here, however, when it became clear that publicizing the particulars of the vigilance committee's activities would alert slave-catchers and others to their methods, and frustrate further efforts to hide escaped slaves and to help them flee the civil authorities.

Over the ten years the vigilance committee existed, it helped a hundred fugitives escape capture.<sup>25</sup> Most of the committee's activity, in any event, was within the law. It used legal maneuvering to tie up the courts by securing writs against officers who tried to apprehend fugitive slaves or by filing complaints against slave-hunters who came to Boston. The committee warned the public of the arrival in Boston of agents looking for escaped slaves. It also published the slave-catchers' names, descriptions, and activities, and displayed and distributed handbills with the same information. Its members followed them around the city to keep a watch on them.

John, like some of the others on the committee, hid fugitive slaves in his house. In the *Prisoners' Friend* he advertised his extra rooms as available to transients. Sometimes these were paroled convicts, but for him fugitives from bondage were little different from released prisoners. John's peripatetic casework, in which he wandered about, looking for whatever he could do to help people, lent itself to aiding fugitives. His familiarity with the jails and lawyers, judges, and police officers also helped him.<sup>26</sup> He was a member of the vigilance committee's first executive committee.<sup>27</sup> As he had already demonstrated, he was willing to undertake risky actions in order to help fugitive slaves. He once took on the role of a "Minuteman," for example, taking the train to New Bedford to alert abolitionists there to intercept a schooner as it docked there and be "on the watch" to take steps to free a slave woman and her children who were on board. When they found the ship, however, they discovered that the slave's former master had already freed her.<sup>28</sup>

Early in April 1851, Thomas Sims, a fugitive slave from Georgia, was seized in Boston and taken to the federal courthouse. The vigilance committee organized public meetings around the state, gathered signatures on petitions to the governor, and plastered Boston with circulars, alerting people to Sims's capture and his impending rendition back to Georgia. Wendell Phillips and others addressed a huge crowd of indignant Bostonians assembled on the Commons.

Meanwhile, some of the vigilantes prepared to undertake more desperate measures. John rented a fast horse and an open chaise. At least one other of his confederates, the Reverend Leonard Grimes, the black minister of Boston's Twelfth Baptist Church, managed to get inside the courthouse, where Sims was being held. During his "pastoral visit" to the prisoner, Grimes whispered their plan to him. On a signal, Sims was to jump out of a window into the chaise (Spear had filled the back seat with mattresses) that John would maneuver into position below it. Sims was willing to give it a try, but the plan fell apart at the last minute, when the authorities had the window secured with iron bars.<sup>29</sup>

One morning soon thereafter, before sunrise, a force of three hundred policemen surrounded Sims and marched him down to Boston's Long Wharf to board the brig *Acorn*, bound for Georgia. John joined a contingent of a hundred members of the vigilance committee and followed them, but they were helpless to free the prisoner. Just before the police lifted the crying Sims onto the small boat that would take him out to the *Acorn*, the whole group paused, and in the dark silence, one of the vigilance committee members called out to the fugitive, "Sims, preach liberty to the slaves."<sup>30</sup>

So it went for John, day by day, making his rounds as a kind of watchman for liberty. He would have continued to travel within the orbits of those organizations formed to abolish slavery and the death penalty, and to help those in Boston's courts and prisons, had not a new sun dawned in the sky of the reform movement. Its gravitational pull would draw him away from most of his family, friends, and former colleagues.



# Urgings of the Spirit

In the August 1847 edition of the *Prisoner's Friend*, John penned a book review of a “new and most wonderful work.” “I have not yet thoroughly read this work,” he wrote, “though I intend to do so; therefore I am incompetent to express an opinion of it, farther than to say that it now appears to me, as far as I have examined it, to be the most wonderful work ever made by mortal man.”<sup>1</sup> It was extraordinary praise, especially for a book he had not yet even finished reading.

The book was Andrew Jackson Davis’s *Principles of Nature, Her Divine Revelations, and a Voice to Mankind*, and, actually, it was purported not to be “made by mortal man” at all, but to have been given “through” Davis in an exalted trance state with the help of the spirit of the eighteenth-century Swedish seer Emanuel Swedenborg.<sup>2</sup> Davis, a delicate young man from Poughkeepsie, had become interested in mesmerism, which had become a public craze after the exhibitions of Charles Poyen, and had begun touring as a “trance lecturer”—speaking while in trance to an audience. He had found many admirers, including several Universalist ministers. The voice that spoke through Davis expounded a series of teachings on the nature and destiny of the universe. Davis’s followers collected and published them as *The Principles of Nature*.

Universalists in particular were attracted to it because of its progressiveness. Davis’s cosmology involved development and evolution. It embraced a

view that set it against the static cosmos envisioned in earlier times. It assumed that causation had a universal extent, and so was “rational.” No finite cause, such as the actions of which humans were capable, could result in an infinite effect, such as an eternal, unchanging destiny. And no finite cause could be without a commensurate effect. So Davis described a complex afterlife for human spirits where the effects of their lives played out.

*The Principles of Nature* made Davis the most well-known exponent of new revelations from the spirit world, the most popular lecturer on the subject, and—in his entranced person—the most vivid demonstration of it. Davis, however, did not invent the phenomenon that soon came to dominate most people’s contacts with the spirits—the opening of a two-way “spiritual telegraph” between heaven and earth, by which the living and the dead could communicate back and forth. Davis provided a theory and a living example of spiritualism, but others provided the practical tools that would transform it into a popular enthusiasm.

In March 1848, two girls, Kate and Margaret Fox (and later their older sister Leah), began to demonstrate, first to their family and then to a growing circle of observers, the presence of spirits in their small house in Hydesville, near Rochester, New York. When the sisters were present, others heard loud raps in their house.

These rappings, interpreted as a code, announced the thoughts of spirits who had once been living in the flesh. They had passed beyond this world and were prepared to communicate with humans, answer questions about the afterlife, give testimony about their previous mortal lives, offer comfort to the bereaved, and initiate a new dispensation. What was novel with the Foxes was not that spirits could speak to the earth, but that those on earth could answer back, that there could be an instantaneous and intimate conversation between heaven and earth. The belief in that communication came to be called “spiritualism.” People soon formed “spirit circles” all over the country, incorporating many of the features of the informal mesmeric circles already in existence, and emphasizing the induction of trance in those who participated in these circles. These entranced participants functioned as “mediums” for transmitting messages from the spirit world.

Spiritualism seemed like a way to reconcile modern science with ancient religion: It claimed to rely on empirical investigations, on testable facts, and on individual judgment, not on unexamined authority or faith. Nevertheless, it supported a belief in a spiritual world, in life after death. It offered