

A fiery end to a girl on the town

By R. Marc Kantrowitz



With smoke and terror filling the hallway, the madam of the house, Rosina Townsend, pounded on the bedroom doors. As screams of “fire” rang out, everyone scrambled — the prostitutes for safety, their customers

for anonymity.

When Rosina rushed into Helen Jewett’s room to rescue her, she found Helen’s smoldering, lifeless body, swimming in a pool of blood. Her nightclothes were reduced to ashes and half her body was charred to a crusty brown, like a roasted marshmallow. There were three deep, bloody gashes on the once vivacious 23-year-old’s battered forehead.

Helen had been murdered.

The real Helen Jewett will never be known. When one dies in 1836, there often is little to mark his or her existence. While some disagreed about who she was and how she appeared, no one denied her strong, if not overpowering, attraction to men, many of them rich and powerful.

Born Dorcas Doyen to poor parents in 1813, a decade later she worked as a house servant to a local judge and his family. There she was exposed to books, knowledge and style.

At 18 or so, Doyen left, changing her name and profession to that of a girl on the town, a euphemism for prostitute. Before long she landed in New York City as Helen Jewett.

In the big, bustling metropolis, she made her mark cavorting and sleeping with the rich and well to do, whom she bedazzled in dress, jewelry, style and intellect. A personal maid tended her room as she captivated the city.

And then she met Richard Robinson, who used an alias when consorting with prostitutes.

Robinson was 18, good looking and from a large, respectable Connecticut family. He moved to New York like many of his generation, seeking to stake out a career. He soon found work as a clerk in a dry goods store.

Helen and Richard met in June 1835. As with many of her lovers, a lively correspondence soon sprang up between the two, characterized by poetic letters and rich imagery. Despite being four years younger than Helen, a deep and mutual affection grew. That she was a prostitute was seemingly an accepted aspect of their relationship.

LAW 'n HISTORY

When he strayed, however, it brought harsh rebukes from Helen. And soon the romance started to crumble.

When Richard arrived to visit Helen on what would be her last night of life, he was warmly greeted and went up to her room. Within a few hours, Helen was dead and Richard in custody.

The authorities quickly assembled the many pieces to the puzzle. It was a scenario of murder that implicated Richard.

The suspect was with Helen; after he killed her, he lit a small fire to burn the evidence and exited through the rear door, going over a white fence. In his haste, the murder weapon, a hatchet, dropped; twine holding it ripped from the cloak he was wearing, which also was discarded and recovered in a nearby yard. The hatchet came from the store in which he worked, as did similar twine that had held the hatchet to his coat.

When Richard was arrested at his apartment, his pants contained a white stain that matched that of the white fence in his backyard. A miniature was found in his possession, taken from Helen’s room.

It was a hanging case — until the newspapers and Richard Robinson’s clever attorneys got involved.

Many today trace the birth of the tabloids to the Jewett affair. While “unseemly” crime was ordinarily avoided and went unreported, here it

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sat big and bold, front and center. The brutality of a crime involving a young boy from a good family and a beautiful prostitute captivated the city.

Public opinion quickly switched from the victim to her alleged killer. Condemnation rained down on the victim, who was accused of engaging in sinful activities and receiving, in the end, a richly deserved fate. Rosina Townsend and those who worked for her found themselves harassed, causing the brothel to be shuttered.

It was against that volatile backdrop that the trial started.

Despite the overwhelming circumstantial evidence, the stars started to align for the young defendant. Behind him in court sat his influential father, with ties to the governor and the presiding judge who, like the defendant, harkened from a well-established family. Robinson was represented by three eloquent and savvy lawyers who easily outmatched the district attorney and his associate.

As if the talent discrepancy weren't enough, the judge provided further assistance, sustaining nearly every objection raised by the defense and barring the introduction of powerful evidence.

Still, damning circumstances were produced: the hatchet, the twine, the cloak, the paint stain on Robinson's pants, and the miniature taken from Jewett and found with Robinson.

To counter the allegations, the defense showed that many similar hatchets were manufactured; that the cloak was similar to, but not definitively the same as, Robinson's; and that the white paint stain came from the store, which recently had been painted and where Robinson worked.

As for the other damaging testimony, the defense savagely attacked the character of the witnesses, arguing that the words of low-life prostitutes could never be believed. Many in the courtroom shouted their approval.

The hammer for the defense, however, came from the surprise testimony of Robert Furlong, a small grocery store owner who placed Robinson in his shop on the night in question.

Robinson's roommate added to the alibi, testifying that Robinson was in their shared room at the time Rosina Townsend had him on her premises.

When the testimony closed, the room belonged to the defense, which in closing captured the spellbound jury. Comments by the judge compelled the outcome. In the guise of jury instructions, he added another summation for the defense. Words of prostitutes could never be believed, as opposed to the truthful testimony of Furlong. As for the hatchet, it was understandable why one would bring it to a hellhole of a brothel. And on it went.

Finally, after a 14-hour day, and despite it being after midnight, the jury was sent out to deliberate. Within a few minutes there was a verdict of not-guilty.

Epilogue

In the end, the case was more about class than murder. Young privileged boys played. Prostitutes were a commodity to be used and discarded.

As for Robinson, he left New York for Texas, where he married and became a successful businessman. The Nacogdoches Courthouse today sits on the land that once accommodated his large house. He also donated hundreds of acres for a local college.

On a business trip in 1855, Robinson fell fatally ill. In his final, highly feverish hours, he was tended to by an elderly African-American caretaker who didn't quite understand his delirious ravings about some woman named Helen Jewett. **MLW**