Just past two o’clock on the bitter-cold morning of December 5, 1859, the body of John Brown was secreted from the steamboat landing in New York City, where it had been unloaded several hours earlier, to McGraw & Taylor undertakers in the Bowery district. The hope was to avoid a repeat of the scene in Philadelphia, where, days earlier, a throng of well-wishers, many of them former slaves, had followed the funeral wagon from the depot at Broad Street all the way to the Walnut Street wharf—the massive spectacle drawing workers away from their stations at the factories, the crowd increasing as it went. In New York, where the race debate was now quite fevered, many feared that a public conveyance of Brown’s body would end in violence. Only the night before, on December 4, Reverend Antoinette Brown Blackwell had preached in support of Brown at Goldbeck’s Musical Hall on Broadway, and the Winter Garden

CHAPTER ONE

The Red-Hot Fellows of Those Times

I was a decided and outspoken anti-slavery believer myself, then and always; but shied from the extremists, the red-hot fellows of those times.

Whitman’s preface to William Douglas O’Connor’s *Three Tales*
Theater was set to premiere the antislavery tragedy *The Octoroon*, which the *New York Herald* predicted would touch off riots.¹

Worst of all, a public gathering to debate the morality of inciting slave insurrections had been called for the Peoples’ Meeting, a public hall that, by coincidence, stood less than a block from McGraw & Taylor. Somehow word spread at the meeting that down the street Brown’s corpse was being dressed for burial. By late afternoon the ranks of the curious shook the gate at the rear entrance to the funeral home, demanding admission. To satisfy the mob, police eventually allowed an orderly line to enter for a private viewing, including two of Brown’s old associates, Richard J. Hinton and John Swinton.²

Hinton, an English émigré not yet thirty years old, had first become involved in militant antislavery activities in 1854 while working as a journalist covering the Anthony Burns fugitive slave case in Boston. So swayed was he by abolitionist rhetoric that he joined Thomas Wentworth Higginson and Martin Stowall in the failed attack on the Boston Court House. Within two years Hinton was in Kansas again, ostensibly to report for the *Boston Traveler* and the *Chicago Tribune* on Free Soil radicals, but in fact he was fighting with a new band led by Higginson and Stowall.³

At the Whitney House hotel in Lawrence, Kansas, Hinton formed lasting friendships with other activist-journalists, most important with Swinton, then managing editor of the *Lawrence Republican*, and James Redpath, a reporter for the St. Louis–based *Daily Missouri Democrat*. After the sack of Lawrence, Redpath joined John Brown himself and spent nearly two years gathering narratives from slaves across the South in hopes of gauging their readiness to join in armed revolt. In 1859 these narratives were gathered into a book, *The Roving Editor; or, Talks with Slaves in the Southern States*, which Redpath dedicated to Brown, writing, “You, Old Hero! believe that the slave should be aided and urged to insurrection, and hence do I lay this tribute at your feet.”⁴ After the failure at Harpers Ferry, Redpath, unlike many of Brown’s followers, continued to support him publicly, authoring a series of high-profile defenses of Brown for the Boston *Atlas and Daily Bee*.⁵
Redpath’s editorials caught the eye of the Boston publisher Thayer & Eldridge. William Wilde Thayer and Charles W. Eldridge, former clerks at the publishing house Dayton and Wentworth, were just twenty-eight and twenty-one years old and had not yet published a book when they wrote to Redpath to suggest a biography of John Brown, but the two ambitious young men had bought out their former boss, Horace Wentworth, on credit secured from such influential backers as Senator Charles Sumner, the editor of *The Liberator*, William Lloyd Garrison, and the orator Wendell Phillips, on the assurance that they would publish abolitionist texts on timely subjects. Seeing a great opportunity to launch their business they convinced Redpath to take on the task of writing Brown’s life by promising that a portion of the profits would be given to Brown’s bereaved family. Redpath later explained, “They believed in John Brown; they wished to do him justice; and they desired to assist his destitute family. . . . I could not resist it.”

Redpath quickly sought out Hinton to assist with research, but Hinton had cause for concern. A carpetbag of letters discovered at Brown’s hideout at Harpers Ferry mentioned Hinton, he agreed to work with Redpath only on the condition of anonymity. For most of November, while Brown awaited execution in Virginia, Hinton interviewed Brown’s family in Kansas and Ohio and just happened to be in New York on his way back to Boston when he learned that the hanged man’s body had just arrived in the city.

As Hinton and Swinton stood before Brown’s coffin in the failing light of the afternoon, the lid was removed and the head and shoulders of the abolitionist martyr were exposed. The undertakers had done their work well, removing the noose Brown’s executioners had purposely left around his neck and covering the purple bruises that had blossomed on his brow as the arteries in his head ruptured and bled under the skin. There was no hint of his sudden, violent death; Hinton wrote that he “wore a calm expression as of one asleep.”

But Swinton, who had not seen Brown since he had grown his long grizzled beard, was struck by how the old man, under the flickering gaslights
and long shadows of that late winter afternoon, bore a shocking resemblance to his friend Walt Whitman. Hinton, too, knew Whitman; they had met when Whitman personally delivered a review copy of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* to the *Knickerbocker* magazine, where Hinton worked. The two reporters left the funeral home talking about their mutual acquaintance, Swinton saying that a new edition of *Leaves of Grass* was ready for press but could find no publisher, and Hinton replying that he was going to Thayer & Eldridge the next day and would put in a good word.7

But by then Thayer & Eldridge were focusing their efforts on the Brown biography. All their future books would depend on the success of this first title. The timing was problematic: across the South a movement was afoot to outlaw the distribution or sale of any printed material advocating an end to slavery. As early as 1857 a bookseller in Mobile had been expelled from Alabama for ordering a copy of Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative* for a customer.8 In the wake of Harpers Ferry, Hinton R. Helper’s *The Impending Crisis of the South* was banned in several southern states because it called on poor nonslaveholders to oppose slavery rather than risk getting caught up in a war that did not directly affect them. To counter these book bans a Republican committee printed an abridged edition of *The Impending Crisis* that they distributed surreptitiously throughout the South. Sixty-eight Republican members of Congress signed an endorsement of the book. Among the signatories was John Sherman of Ohio, who was nominated for speaker of the House when the new session of Congress convened on December 5, the very day Brown’s body was dressed for burial in New York. The revelation that Sherman had endorsed *The Impending Crisis* touched off a scandal that resulted in more than two months and forty-four votes of hopeless deadlock over his nomination. This chaos on Capitol Hill also opened the door for Senator James M. Mason of Virginia, author of the Fugitive Slave Law, to call for the appointment of a committee to investigate the Harpers Ferry raid to determine whether “such invasion was made under color of any organization intended to subvert the Government of any State of the Union.”9
The reaction to Brown’s execution and the possibility of slave revolt helped spur interest in Redpath’s biography. On the sole basis of a few advance advertisements in *The Liberator* and the *National Era*, orders flooded into the Thayer & Eldridge offices. By Christmas Eve, barely a month after the book was announced, ten thousand subscribers from New England alone had requested the book, and as the projected publication date of New Year’s Day approached, the volume of orders increased to nearly a thousand per day. Soon other publishers began advertising competing volumes, hastily assembled from newspaper accounts, but Redpath’s book relied on his personal knowledge of Brown, his own and Hinton’s hours of interviews, countless private letters retrieved by Redpath’s wife from Brown’s family in North Elba, Kansas, and Brown’s unpublished autobiography, which Redpath included as an appendix. Were this not enough, Thayer & Eldridge secured endorsements from Brown’s widow and children, including a statement from one of the sons, Salmon Brown, that Redpath “above all others” was the man to write his father’s biography.

By the time the book finally was issued from the press on January 10, 1860, more than thirty thousand copies had been ordered in advance. In Boston’s Suffolk County Thayer & Eldridge had to hire a half-dozen book agents to deliver copies and take additional orders. Just two weeks after the book’s publication, they sent over a thousand dollars to Brown’s widow—her share of their remarkable windfall. It seemed that everything was going better than the two young publishers could ever have hoped.

But the intimate knowledge of Brown’s clan that made the book such a sensation also aroused the interest of Senator Mason’s investigatory committee. They issued a summons for Redpath to appear, along with the Concord radical Franklin B. Sanborn and John Brown Jr., no later than February 6. Redpath responded that pressing business prevented him from appearing, but he was not excused from testifying. When the date passed and the men had not appeared before Congress, warrants were issued and federal marshals were dispatched to arrest them as material witnesses. But the warrants were too late. On February 10, 1860,
The Liberator reported that Redpath had decided to “disappoint the expectations of the Committee” by fleeing for parts unknown, prompting Vanity Fair to muse, “The quickest path out of the country: Redpath.”

Thayer & Eldridge’s best-selling author—its only author—was a wanted fugitive.

Broadway, wrote Walt Whitman, was a “mighty ever-flowing land-river, pouring down through the center of Manhattan Island.” Along either side rose New York’s signature landmarks: City Hall, City Hospital, Barnum’s Museum, the Astor House, the Tabernacle, and the new grand theaters. Sandwiched between stood every conceivable caste of storefront and business: the offices of doctors and undertakers; the shops of haberdashers, hatters, and tailors; hotels and drug stores; booksellers and publishers; and always upstairs the skylit photograph and ambrotype establishments, the studios of portrait painters; downstairs, billiard halls and ten-pin alleys, brothels and opium dens, cheap rathskellers and oyster saloons. One such underground watering hole, on the west side of Broadway just above Bleecker, was Pfaff’s Restaurant and Lager Bier Saloon—though to its patrons it was simply Pfaff’s or, sometimes, “the Cave.”

As its nickname would suggest, the amenities at Pfaff’s were few. The main room held a handful of round tables clustered near the bar. The second room, which tunneled under the sidewalk, held a single long table, informally dubbed “the Bohemian table.” Early advertisements promised “the best viands, the best lager bier, the best coffee and tea, the best wines and liquors, the best Havana cigars, the best company; in fine, the best of everything.” But the reality was much humbler. The saloon’s founder, a Swiss German immigrant named Charles Ignatius Pfaff, used the same pewter mugs to serve both Rhine wine and beer, and he dished up fried beefsteaks and German pfannkuchen. One of the regulars later mused that Pfaff had begun his business with little more than a few kegs of beer and a special talent for making coffee, which was fortunate because Pfaff’s most important customer, Henry Clapp Jr., “subsisted chiefly on coffee and tobacco.”
In addition to being the acknowledged ringleader at Pfaff’s, Clapp was the editor of the *Saturday Press*, declared by the *New York Traveller* to be “the sprightliest, raciest, frankest, sauciest, sharpest, wittiest, most piquant, original, outspoken, and sententious American literary weekly.”\(^{19}\) William Winter, one of Clapp’s associate editors, remembered the man himself in much the same way: “brilliant and buoyant in mind; impatient of the commonplace; intolerant of the smug, ponderous, empty, obstructive respectability; prone to sarcasm; and he had for so long a time lived in a continuous bitter conflict with conventionality that he had become reckless of public opinion.”\(^{20}\)

Each night after dinner Clapp assumed the head of the Bohemian table and became the sharp-tongued center of attention, whose special talent lay in whittling lofty figures down to size with his pithy quips. Asked his opinion of Horace Greeley, the editor of the *New York Tribune*, Clapp declared, “Horace Greeley is emphatically a self-made man,” then quickly added, “and be worshipp be his Creator?”\(^{21}\) Of the high-and-mighty Reverend Samuel Osgood, Clapp said, “He is waiting for a vacancy in the Trinity.”\(^{22}\) It’s no wonder that one detractor remembered, “When he talked it was like snapping glass under your heel,” or that another wrote, “He is a born Yankee; speaks French like a native; plays poker like a Western man; drinks like a fish, smokes like a Dutchman; is as full of dainty conceits as a Spanish or Italian poet, is as rough in his manners as a Russian or a Russian bear.”\(^{23}\)

By the late months of 1859 Walt Whitman was always at Clapp’s right hand. In sharp contrast to the wiry, effervescent Clapp, Whitman was broad-shouldered, his hair and beard mottled with gray, his face always ruddy and eyebrows always arched. He wore plain blue or gray coats with his shirt collars undone, revealing his thick neck and the hair on his chest. He rarely spoke, and when he did he was never an accomplished punster like Clapp; still, his comments could cut the young poets who revered him to the quick. Of William Winter he once said, “Willy is a young Longfellow,” which Winter bitterly recalled decades later as “the perfection of contemptuous indifference.”\(^{24}\)

When Thomas Bailey Aldrich
asked Whitman’s opinion of his poems, Whitman replied, “I like your
tinkles: I like them very well.” To which the wounded Aldrich replied in
the pages of Vanity Fair, “You will kill me with laughter, some day, you
dear owl!”

Whitman may have dismissed the poor efforts of younger poets, but
since self-issuing the second edition of Leaves of Grass more than three
years earlier he had not published any poetry of his own. In the interven-
ting time he had prepared an 1857 edition of Leaves but failed to find fi-
nancial backing; he had been hired and fired as editor of the Brooklyn Daily
Times; and he had slid into what he would later describe as his “slough.”

All that changed when Henry Clapp offered to publish a new poem
by Whitman, titled “A Child’s Reminiscence” (later “Out of the Cradle
Endlessly Rocking”), in the Saturday Press on Christmas Eve 1859. Ap-
pearing in the Saturday Press was an important reemergence for Whit-
man, largely because it carried with it the implied imprimatur of its in-
fluential editor. The New York Dispatch had praised Clapp’s integrity,
claiming he could not “be induced by money or patronage to puff any-
body or anything not deserving free favorable mention.” But Whitman
himself was not above such puffery.

To emphasize Clapp’s endorsement Whitman took out ads in a half-
dozen newspapers in Manhattan and Brooklyn, describing the poem as
the “Saturday Press’s Christmas present.” For the Brooklyn papers he
had planned a six-line excerpt from the poem but apparently couldn’t af-
ford to buy the space. Instead, he wrote an anonymous article for the
Brooklyn City News explaining the poem. He described it as “a curious bal-
lad . . . after the same rude and mystical type of versification” as Leaves of
Grass and played up the fact that the setting was “this island of ours,
under its old aboriginal name of Paumanok.” He warned readers, how-
ever, that “the whole poem needs to be read in its entirety—and several
times at that.” Whitman also convinced Clapp to run an anonymous
editorial to accompany the poem. Combining the language of the ad-
vertisements and the City News article, Whitman wrote:

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Copyrighted Material
Our readers may, if they choose, consider as our Christmas or New Year’s present to them, the curious warble, by Walt Whitman, of “A Child’s Reminiscence,” on our First Page. Like the “Leaves of Grass,” the purport of this wild and plaintive song, well-enveloped, and eluding definition, is positive and unquestionable, like the effect of music.

The piece will bear reading many times—perhaps indeed only comes forth, as from recesses, by many repetitions.39

As Whitman had hoped, the poem aroused a response, but the Cincinnati Daily Commercial scoffed at the editorial, writing, “Curious, it may be; but warble it is not, in any sense of that mellifluous word,” and deriding the description of the poem as “well-enveloped, and eluding definition”: “Indeed! We should think so. For our part, we hope it will remain ‘well enveloped’ till doomsday; and as for ‘definition,’ all we can do in that direction is to declare that either that ‘poem’ is nonsense, or we are a lunatic.”30

Yet for all the vitriol directed at Whitman, the Cincinnati reviewer was particularly disappointed to see the poem represented in the Saturday Press. Clapp had built the paper’s reputation on quick-witted and allusive verse, “sparkling bons mots.” There was no trace of “juicy” puns or “charming piquancies” in Whitman’s work:

How in the name of all the Muses this so-called “poem” ever got into the columns of the Saturday Press, passes our poor comprehension. We had come to look upon that journal as the prince of literary weeklies, the arbiter elegantiarum of dramatic and poetic taste, into whose well filled columns nothing stupid or inferior could intrude . . . [but] that unclean cub of the wilderness, Walt Whitman, has been suffered to intrude, trampling with his vulgar and profane hoofs among the delicate flowers which bloom there, and soiling the spotless white of its fair columns with lines of stupid and meaningless twaddle.31

Never able to resist coming to his own defense, Whitman published an anonymous review of his “lyric utterances,” titled “All About a Mocking-
Bird,” in the January 7 issue of the Saturday Press. He did not stop, however, at explaining the methods of his poem in response to the “tip-top cutting-and-slashing criticism from the Cincinnati Daily Commercial.” He also claimed:

We are able to declare that there will also soon crop out the true Leaves of Grass, the fuller-grown work of which the former two issues were the inchoates—this forthcoming one, far, very far ahead of them in quality, quantity, and in supple lyric exuberance.

Those former issues, published by the author himself in little pittance-editions, on trial, have just dropped the book enough to ripple the inner first-circles of literary agitation, in immediate contact with it. The outer, vast, extending, and ever-wider-extending circles, of the general supply, perusal, and discussion of such a work, have still to come. The market needs to-day to be supplied—the great West especially—with copious thousands of copies.

By this point Whitman may have been aware that Richard J. Hinton was lobbying his publishers on Whitman’s behalf. Certainly the article seems less a defense of his one poem than an advertisement for the edition he envisioned.

In service of this goal Henry Clapp was only too happy to continue the controversy over “A Child’s Reminiscence” into the next issue of the Saturday Press. First, “Umos,” the paper’s correspondent from Washington, delivered a humorous account of attempting to read Whitman’s poem aloud to his wife. He likened the experience to his first time on ice skates and wondered if Whitman wasn’t upon his “muse-ical skates for the first time.” He asked his wife what Clapp could have seen in such “wretched trumpery,” to which she replied that “she didn’t think it trumpery . . . she thought there was something in it.” The author did not press further, he said, in order to maintain the peace of his household, but it was his “private opinion,” he wrote Clapp, that “Whitman found a lot of dictionary pi going off at auction, bought it for a song, employed a Chinese type-setter from the Bible House to set it up in lines of unequal length, and then sold it to you as an original Poem.”
In a neighboring column, Whitman's fellow Pfaffian, the actress and novelist Ada Clare, took issue with the denunciation of Whitman's style voiced by Umos. She declared that “a practiced versifier might go on rhyming until the seas were dry” without achieving any emotional effect; as an example, she pointed to the prim meters and rhymes of William Winter. Whitman’s poem, however, “could only have been written by a poet, and versifying would not help it.” She admitted, “I love the poem.”

Henry Clapp did not weigh in on the controversy directly, but he certainly recognized the value of a literary dustup. On the front page, in the same position he had published “A Child’s Reminiscence” three weeks before, he published another Whitman poem, “You and Me and To-Day,” and soon followed it with two more poems, each titled “Poemet,” and another titled simply “Leaves.” At the same time Clapp began featuring regular parodies of Whitman’s poems written by an anonymous Philadelphian, who identified himself only as “Saerasmid.” The secret author, Charles Desmarais (an anagram of Saerasmid) Gardette, was a former reporter for the New York Evening Post who now wrote for the Philadelphia Evening Journal and also contributed frequently to the Saturday Press; whenever he was in New York he joined Clapp, Whitman, and the others at the Bohemian table. An accomplished parodist, Gardette achieved his greatest fame when challenged by his friends to create a perfect imitation of Poe. His homage, published in the November 19, 1859, issue of the Saturday Press, was so convincing that it continued to surface in volumes of Poe’s collected works into the twentieth century, even after Gardette published detailed accounts of its composition.

Gardette’s “Yourn, Mine, and Any-Day” lampooned Whitman’s “You and Me and To-Day” line by line. His send-up of “Poemet” was not so much a parody as a series of asides built within Whitman’s own text—what the author called “parentheses, analytical, antithetical, philosophical, and explanatory.” Thus Whitman’s line “And if the memorials of the dead were put indifferently everywhere, even in the room where I eat or sleep, I should be satisfied” became Gardette’s “And if the memorials of the dead (i.e. posthumous biographies, etc.) were put up indifferently,
The constant attention, the fiery back and forth may finally have convinced Thayer & Eldridge that Whitman’s work had captured the public’s imagination and might match the sales he so brazenly promised. They may also have learned that Emerson had convinced James Russell Lowell to publish Whitman’s “Bardic Symbols” (later “As I Ebb’d with the Ocean of Life”) in Boston’s highly influential *Atlantic Monthly*. Or they may simply have concluded that, if they intended to make their business an ongoing concern, they were now in need of authors. They had already written to the young fiction writer William D. O’Connor, offering to pay him a salary if he would write a novel, but Whitman bragged of having a book at the ready.\(^{37}\)

On February 10, the day James Redpath was discovered to have fled Malden, Massachusetts, Thayer & Eldridge wrote, “We want to be the publishers of Walt. Whitman’s Poems–Leaves of Grass,” promising Whitman, “[We can] put your books into good form, and style attractive to the eye; we can sell a large number of copies.” Their enthusiasm, however, exceeded their knowledge of Whitman’s intentions; they were forced to conclude by asking of his poems, “Are they ready for the press? Will you let us read them? Will you write us? Please give us your residence.”\(^ {38}\)

Late on the day that Thayer and Eldridge wrote to Whitman, they convened a meeting in the back room of their bookshop on Washington Street. The counting room doubled as the regular meeting space of a militant group of abolitionists in Boston, known as the Black Strings for the thin black ribbons members wore under their collars to identify each other. This loose-knit network, hastily assembled after Harpers Ferry, formed a kind of Underground Railroad for Brown’s confederates, providing them with safe houses and spiriting them from one place to another under cover of darkness. For several weeks Thayer had been...
concealing Charles Plummer Tidd, one of the Harpers Ferry Raiders, at his home on Myrtle Street, waiting for the opportunity to send him north to Canada but also relying on him for information about the area surrounding Harpers Ferry as plans were made for rescuing other members of Brown’s party. The Unitarian minister, writer, and radical abolitionist Thomas Wentworth Higginson came to Boston from Worcester on February 10 to meet with Tidd at Thayer & Eldridge to discuss his plan to break two of Brown’s accomplices, Albert Hazlett and Aaron Stevens, out of the jail in Harpers Ferry.

Despite Tidd’s discouraging assessment of the terrain and the hostility of the populace around Charlestown, Higginson was determined to forge ahead. He had already sent Hinton to Kansas to gather a band of Brown’s faithful followers, and Hinton had wired that the party, including the jailbreaker Silas S. Soule and Brown’s close confidant James Montgomery, was on its way to the rendezvous point in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, some fifty miles from the jail. Thayer offered Higginson eight hundred dollars for what was expected to be a long period in hiding. He gave nearly four hundred up front and promised to deliver the rest personally to Harrisburg the next day. Higginson took the money and left immediately.

The rash plan had all the earmarks of a second Harpers Ferry, with even longer odds and a more certain outcome. Higginson himself summarized the “difficulties” he perceived:

The enterprise would involve traversing fifty miles of mountain country by night, carrying arms, ammunition, blankets, and a week’s rations, with the frequent necessity of camping without fire in February, and with the certainty of detection in case of snow. It would include crossing the Potomac, possibly at a point where there was neither a bridge nor a ford. It would culminate in an attack on a building with a wall fourteen feet high, with two sentinels outside and twenty-five inside; with a certainty of raising the town in the process, and then, if successful, with the need of retreating, perhaps with wounded men and probably by daylight. 39
Were this not ambitious enough, the plan was not to take Stevens and Hazlett north, but rather to go over the mountains to the south and all the way to the coast in hopes of buying passage—with the money supplied by Thayer—on a ship to Cuba or Haiti.40

Despite grave doubts, Thayer left the next day for Harrisburg with the remainder of the promised money “in small bills sewed in a bag that was fastened between my legs at the crotch” and a bag of tools, including “field glasses, saws and files for jail window bars.” After a restless night at the Astor House in New York, fearful of being robbed, Thayer arrived at the United States Hotel in Harrisburg, where he met up with Higginson’s Massachusetts men and Hinton’s Kansas party. All agreed to spend the next days in reconnaissance.41

On February 18 Soule sneaked into Charlestown, feigned drunkenness, and was thrown into the same jail as Hazlett and Stevens. He told them of the plot to help them escape, but they asked Soule to call off the rescue, fearful that the jailer, who had shown such kindness to John Brown, would be killed in the attempt. Soule was released from jail the next morning and made his way back to Harrisburg with the discouraging news. At the same time, Montgomery returned with word that a blizzard was headed their way from the west. A meeting was called in the tavern of the hotel and a vote taken; all were in unanimous agreement that the mission should go forward despite the obvious risks. After the vote Montgomery, though he considered it folly, acceded. “I will lead you,” he said.

But Higginson had changed his mind. Many years later Thayer remembered that Higginson pushed his chair back from the table and demanded, “Why then shall 15 men lose their lives and at that fail to save the prisoners? If the latter could be done, it might have some justification for the attempt. No, you must not go.” He concluded his speech by saying simply, “I was the man who asked you to come here. I command you to disperse.”42 The Massachusetts men left for home, but the Kansas party decided to remain close, in case a better opportunity for the rescue should present itself. It never did.
On the morning of March 16 Aaron D. Stevens and Albert Hazlett were led to the gallows and, precisely at noon, were dropped by the neck. Hazlett died instantly, but the younger, stronger Stevens struggled and convulsed for several minutes before finally falling limp.

Back in Boston Whitman had arrived to see to the publication of his new edition of *Leaves of Grass*, but Thayer and Eldridge attended a public memorial for the executed prisoners at Meionson meeting hall. Many of Brown’s close confidants, including Soule and Montgomery, were in attendance, and several, such as Dr. John Doy and Higginson, addressed the crowd. But the evening belonged to Hinton. He spoke movingly of his friendship with Aaron Stevens and the urgent rage against slavery that the young man displayed, but Hinton reminded the more temperate members of the audience that political resolve was needed as well. He urged the crowd to support William Seward for the Republican nomination for president and to pressure Seward to stay true to his antislavery beliefs. “The contest is deepening,” Hinton told the crowd. “And the time has come when we should fling out a new banner, writing thereon: ‘The Abolition of Slavery—under the Constitution or over the Constitution; through the Union or out of the Union. It’s abolition by all means and through every agency.’ Marshalled under this banner, we can exert a moral force through the ballot-box never felt before.”

In faraway Ohio another rally had been organized at the Jefferson Courthouse in Ashtabula County, where John Brown Jr. and Owen Brown were in hiding from federal marshals. William C. Howells, the editor of the *Ashtabula Sentinel* and a supporter of John Brown, had assured his readers, “We can maintain secrecy; we can frown on, and refuse intercourse with spies; we have houses, and homes, and hearts, to lend refuge.” Howells had reason to be confident. James Redpath had not fled to Canada, as widely reported, but to Ashtabula, where he and Howells had started an Ohio branch of the Black Strings. A writer for the *National Democrat* who attended the rally reported, “There is a band here pledged to resisting, even unto death, whose distinguishing mark is a black ribbon worn around the neck.” The intention of the members in
Boston was that Ashtabula would serve as a stronghold to which Brown’s conspirators could be smuggled.

But Redpath had larger—and more revolutionary—plans. Like Hinton, he had been a close friend of Aaron Stevens, and the news of his execution enraged him. “Stevens is dead,” Redpath told the crowd packed into the courthouse. “His brave life was choked out of him for presuming, without asking Senator Mason’s permission, to believe in the Declaration of Independence.” Redpath called on his Ashtabula brethren to follow Stevens’s example:

*To those of you who are ready to imitate Stevens, this only need be said: “Be prepared; bide your time; ere long you will be called.” For I tell you, men of Ashtabula, that the strangling of John Brown was not the death of his cause; and that, ere many more moons revolve, the slave will be offered succor again. Six months before the blow at Harper’s Ferry I stated that it would be made, and even indicated by whom: and again, I give the slave driver a solemn warning to set his house in order, for his doom is pronounced—“be shall die and not live.”* 

Redpath called on the crowd to give generously to support the cause. He was also planning a follow-up book for Thayer & Eldridge, a collection of sermons, essays, and poems in tribute to Brown that he hoped would sell as well as the Brown biography. The eventual volume would include William Dean Howells’s poem “Old Brown,” originally published in his father’s *Ashtabula Sentinel* on January 25. The younger Howells, in addition to being an aspiring poet with a slim volume of poems coauthored with John J. Piatt and published by Follett & Foster, was also a writer for the *Daily Ohio State Journal* in Columbus. And he was a devoted reader of the *Saturday Press*.

Howells had mentioned Whitman several times in his *State Journal* columns during the early months of 1860, but it was Redpath who apparently gave Howells the new issue of the *Atlantic Monthly* with “Bardic Symbols,” published that weekend without an author’s byline (as was all work in the *Atlantic* at that time). The anonymity was not effective. The
New York Times declared that this “fantastical seadrift” of a poem needed “no ghost of a publisher’s lead-pencil to inform [readers that it] came out from ocean-deeps of that remarkable ‘Kosmos,’ Mr. Walt. Whitman.” The Saturday Press recognized the poet’s “unmistakable impress of genius” and took the opportunity “to congratulate the Magazine on the acquisition of Walt Whitman as one of its contributors.” Howells not only recognized the author but showed intimate knowledge of him. In a review in the State Journal he mentioned that Whitman had briefly driven a Broadway omnibus in late 1859 before “he suddenly flashed upon us in the New York Saturday Press, and created eager dissension among the ‘crickets.’”

Howells also denounced the critics who had too quickly dismissed Whitman, asserting that the poet had “higher claims upon our consideration than mere magazine contributorship” because Leaves of Grass, “whatever else you may think, is wonderful.” But even Howells felt forced to admit that “Bardic Symbols” appeared “more lawless, measureless, rhymeless and inscrutable than ever.” He may have recalled Whitman’s warning months earlier that “A Child’s Reminiscence” would “only [come] forth, as from recesses, by many repetitions,” but Howells found repeated readings of no help: “No one, even after the fourth or fifth reading, can pretend to say what the ‘Bardic Symbols’ symbolize. The poet walks by the sea, and addressing the drift, the foam, the billows and the wind, attempts to force from them, by his frantic outcry, the true solution of the mystery of Existence, always most heavily and darkly felt in the august ocean presence. All is confusion, waste and sound. It is in vain that you attempt to gather the poet’s full meaning from what he says or what he hints.”

Despite Howells’s professed ambivalence, he soon after wrote a Whitmanesque, free verse poem entitled “The Pilot’s Story” and sent it to the Atlantic.

On the morning after the execution of Stevens and Hazlett, Ralph Waldo Emerson appeared unannounced in the counting room of Thayer & Eldridge. Emerson was to deliver his lecture “Moral Sentiment” for
the Parker Fraternity at the Music Hall on that Sunday night and, arriving a day early from Concord, learned that Whitman was in Boston. He had come to oversee the printing of the new edition *Leaves of Grass*, and now Emerson wanted to see him. Charles Eldridge put everything aside to escort Emerson directly to the top floor of the Boston Stereotype Foundry, where Whitman was reading proofs.\(^{52}\)

Emerson was no ordinary visitor. He was one of the select few who had championed the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855, sending Whitman what today stands as one of the most famous letters in American literature. A large measure of its fame is due to the fact that Whitman used the letter repeatedly to promote the first edition, publishing it first in the *New York Tribune*, then printing small broadsides that he pasted onto the marbled endpapers of the book, and finally printing it as part of a group of reviews that he included in later bindings of the book. Emerson had not given permission for the use of his letter and he considered Whitman’s broadcasting of it “a strange rude thing,”\(^{53}\) but his support for the work never wavered, even when Whitman went so far as to emblazon the spine of the 1856 edition with Emerson’s words in gilt lettering: “I greet you at the beginning of a great career.”

The Boston Stereotype Foundry was not the sort of place Emerson usually frequented. Even on a cold Saturday morning it radiated heat, and even on this St. Patrick’s Day in Irish Boston the factory was in full swing. Typesetters in shirtsleeves on the top floor set text in movable type; among them Whitman recorded a black man “working at case” with “no distinction made between him and the white compositors.”\(^{54}\) When a page was complete, sample sheets were pulled from the proof presses for Whitman to approve. He had been given the use of a shabby little office on that floor, furnished with little more than a desk and a pair of chairs.\(^{55}\) Once he signed off on the proof, the trays of type were sent downstairs to be cast as electrotype forms, which in turn were filled with hot lead in the basement foundry. The heat of the furnaces and the stench of molten lead made the rooms inside the foundry stifling.
When Eldridge and Emerson found Whitman here, the poet suggested that Emerson join him on a walk. Whitman told one correspondent that Emerson “kept possession of me all day,” including during “a bully dinner.”

More than likely it was on this day that Whitman showed Emerson the letter from Thayer & Eldridge, to which he was supposed to have remarked that “there was hope for freedom of thought and a free press when such a publishing house . . . had its home in Boston.” It may also have been on that day that Whitman and Emerson strolled together, arm in arm, on Boston Common and Emerson attempted to dissuade Whitman from publishing certain sexually explicit passages in *Leaves of Grass*:

During those two hours he was the talker and I the listener. It was an argument-statement, reconnoitring, review, attack, and pressing home, (like an army corps in order, artillery, cavalry, infantry,) of all that could be said against that part (and a main part) in the construction of my poems, “Children of Adam.” More precious than gold to me that dissertation—it afforded me, ever after, this strange and paradoxical lesson; each point of E.’s statement was unanswerable, no judge’s charge ever more complete or convincing, I could never hear the points better put—and then I felt down in my soul the clear and unmistakable conviction to disobey all, and pursue my own way.

“What have you to say then to such things?” said E., pausing in conclusion. “Only that while I can’t answer them at all, I feel more settled than ever to adhere to my own theory, and exemplify it,” was my candid response. Whereupon we went and had a good dinner at the American House.

The conversation could have taken place that day, as Emerson introduced “W. Whitman, Brooklyn, N.Y.” at the Boston Athenaeum on the eastern edge of Boston Common and secured him reading privileges. But it just as easily may have happened any number of times in March and April of that year. Whitman later recalled that he and Emerson “would occasionally meet” for dinner at the American House or the Parker House. Charles Eldridge, too, remembered that “Emerson frequently
came down from Concord to see [Whitman], and that they had many walks and talks together, these conferences usually ending with a dinner at the American House.” These meetings were fixed clearly in Eldridge’s memory because Whitman and Emerson “met by appointment in our counting room.”

On whatever particular day the conversation occurred, Eldridge later attributed it to “the largeness of Whitman’s charity” that he did not publish Emerson’s arguments against publishing the poems. But Eldridge felt no such compunction, especially because Emerson’s objections were not on artistic grounds:

I cannot forget Walt said to me at the time that Emerson’s principal arguments were directed to showing that if the objectionable passages were retained it would interfere with the general circulation of the book, and thereby impede, if not wholly prevent, his early recognition as a poet. That men would not buy the book and give it to women, and that it would scarcely be allowed under the conditions place on parlor center tables. Walt frankly acknowledged that he was saddened to find such temporal considerations the chief arguments offered by so great a man as Ralph Waldo Emerson.60

But Whitman did not seem at all troubled. He told his friend Abby Price that Emerson “treated me with the greatest courtesy” and not only wrote Fred Vaughan, one of Whitman’s early lovers, that Emerson was “very kind” but recommended that Vaughan attend Emerson’s upcoming lecture in New York.61

Indeed, many years later Whitman warmly recalled the conversation to Horace Traubel, emphasizing that Emerson was not concerned about “small fry moralities” but was “only putting up a worldly argument” for cutting certain poems. “He wanted my book to sell,” Whitman remembered. “I said: ‘You think that if I cut the book there would be a book left?’ He said: ‘Yes.’ Then I asked: ‘But would there be as good a book left?’ He looked grave: this seemed to disturb him just a bit. Then he smiled at me and said: ‘I did not say as good a book—I said a good book.’ That’s where he left it.”62 Whitman believed that Emerson knew he
would not accept this alternative: “[He] liked me better for not accept-
ing his advice.”

Henry Clapp agreed with Whitman’s response to Emerson. “I think
you would have done well to follow Mr. Emerson’s advice,” he told Whit-
man, “but you may have done better as it is. At any rate, the book is
bound to sell.” He had reason to be optimistic. Not only were Thayer
& Eldridge proving to be devoted promooters of Whitman’s work—
willling even to publish poems too racy for Emerson—but they had
shown a willingness to bail out Clapp’s ever-struggling Saturday Press.

At the end of March Clapp wrote to Whitman asking if the young
publishers might be willing “to do a good thing for me”:

To wit, advance me say one hundred dollars on advertising account—
that is if they mean to advertise with me. Or if they don’t to let me
act for them here as a kind of N.Y. agent to push the book, and ad-
ance me the money on that score.

I must have one hundred dollars before Saturday night or be in a
scrape the horror of which keeps me awake o’ nights. I could if nec-
essary give my note at three mos. for the amount and it is a good
note since we have never been protested.

Of course I know how extremely improbable it is that Messrs.
T. & E. to whom I am an entire stranger will do anything of the
kind: but in suggesting it, I have done only my duty to the Sat. Press,
and, as I think, to the cause of sound literature.64

The threat of bankruptcy was real enough. Whitman told Horace
Traubel in later years, “Henry was always in financial difficulties: the
Press never had anything but a hand to mouth existence: it was always at
the point of passing in its checks.”65 William Winter, a coeditor of the
Press in those months of 1860, later remembered bolting the doors of the
office “to prevent the probable access of creditors.” They had no money
to pay their writers or the printer. One day they were “engaged in seri-
ous and rather melancholy conference as to the obtainment of money,”
Winter wrote. “Suddenly there came a loud, impatient knocking upon
the outer door, and my senior, by a warning gesture, enjoined silence.
The sound of a grumbling voice was then audible, and, after a while, the sound of footsteps retreating down the stairs. The caller was Richard Henry Stoddard, a regular contributor come to collect his check, but Clapp sat steadfastly silent, smoking his pipe and listening for several minutes, until he was sure that Stoddard was safely gone. Such were “the embarrassing circumstances under which the paper struggled.”

Clapp told Whitman that he was “up to my eyes” in unpaid bills and mounting debts, “and over my eyes even to blindness.” Friends, he said, had offered their “cheering words,” but “the printer will not be paid in words.” He feared that he would be unable to publish any more issues of the *Saturday Press*, and all “for the want of a paltry two or three hundred dollars which would take the thing to a paying point, and make it worth ten thousand dollars as a transferable piece of property.”

Whitman refused to ask Thayer & Eldridge on Clapp’s behalf for money, so Clapp wrote to them directly. Still flush from the sales of the Brown biography and eager to try a new venture, Thayer & Eldridge sent a check for two hundred dollars. In return Clapp would advertise *Leaves of Grass* for six months in the *Press* and insert as many mentions of the book as he prudently could. Whitman disliked being “the solicitor and medium of pecuniary aid” for Clapp’s paper, but when pressed he conceded that the *Press* was an “original” and that, though Clapp himself was often reckless with money, Thayer & Eldridge’s outlay had been “well enough invested.”

Franklin B. Sanborn, one of the “Secret Six” who financed John Brown’s raid, was upstairs at his desk when he heard a knock at the door of his house in Concord, Massachusetts. It was after nine o’clock on April 3. Sanborn had just returned from dinner at a friend’s home, and he was already in his slippers. He put on a robe and went down to answer the door; there, outside in the darkness, were two men. “Does Mr. Sanborn live here?” one demanded. When he identified himself, Sanborn was grabbed and told he was under arrest. “I am from the U.S. Marshal’s office,” said
the other man and began reading from a warrant issued by the Mason Committee. Before Sanborn knew what was happening, two more men were upon him, handcuffing him, and a fifth rode up with a carriage to whisk him away. Sanborn called to his sister to run to the neighbors and began screaming for help, struggling and kicking against the side of the carriage to keep from being thrown inside.

In no time Sanborn’s neighbors had come to the rescue. They blocked the path of the carriage, and one, a lawyer, shouted to ask Sanborn if he wished to demand a writ of habeas corpus. When Sanborn replied that he did, the neighbor took off running for Judge Ebenezer Hoar’s house. In the meantime Emerson, newly returned from Boston, arrived on the scene and petitioned for calm until the judge returned. Not long after, Judge Hoar approached with the writ held high for all to see. The marshals uncuffed Sanborn and were jeered out of town by the assembled crowd, but a ruling on the validity of the writ was scheduled for just the next day in Boston before Massachusetts Chief Justice Lemuel Shaw. While Henry David Thoreau slept at the Sanborn home to guard it against further invasion, Sanborn and his sister spent that restless night with friends.

Best known to literary scholars as Herman Melville’s father-in-law, Judge Shaw was a cantankerous octogenarian with a reputation for strict adherence to the letter of the law. Sanborn knew he was no friend to the abolitionist cause; he had outraged the antislavery movement—and drawn public scorn from Emerson—a decade earlier when he upheld Mason’s Fugitive Slave Law in a Massachusetts court. There was every reason to expect him to submit to Mason’s authority again. But Sanborn had the best possible legal representation in John Andrew and Samuel Sewall. (Within a year of the proceedings, Andrew would be the governor of Massachusetts and Sewall its second chief justice, succeeding Shaw.) Nevertheless, Sanborn’s radical friends were not willing to take the chance that he might again fall into the hands of federal marshals.

Summoned from Ohio, James Redpath slipped into Boston covertly late on April 3. He and William Thayer quickly agreed to attend San-
born’s hearing with concealed pistols, despite the obvious risk that Redpath himself would be arrested. Thayer (under the alias William Handy) wrote to Higginson to inform him:

Mr Redpath has got home from the West. In case of arrest by U.S. authorities he will place himself under jurisdiction of our State court and thoroughly exhaust all legal test of power between the General and State Gov’ts and then he wont go to Washington—provided that at the outset a body of friends will help him personally if the decision goes against him.

Now we propose if his case is tried in Boston, to have in the court room during the trial 25 men well armed under a competent leader. If the judge decrees that he must go to Washn, we will encircle and defend him against the Sergeant or U.S. Marshall.

The following afternoon, as the courtroom was readied, Thayer and Redpath loaded their revolvers in the counting room at Thayer & Eldridge. Their plan was simple. If Shaw ruled that the marshals could take custody of Sanborn, then Redpath and Thayer, seated at the back railing of the courtroom on either side of the aisle, would “leap over, draw [their] revolvers, rush to Sanborn and drag him away.” Joining them were Eldridge, Hinton, William D. O’Connor (then at work on his novel for Thayer & Eldridge), John Le Barnes (whom Whitman had befriended at the Boston Water Works), and Whitman himself—though Thayer, when recalling the scene decades later, did not list Whitman among those armed. Seated at the front of the courtroom, the first four were responsible for overtaking the marshals, while Whitman, seated at the rear, was supposed to usher out Sanborn and his rescuers and then guard the door. As he listened to Andrew and Sewall argue his case, Sanborn remembered seeing Whitman: “He sat on a high seat near the door, wearing his loose jacket and open shirt collar, over which poured the fullness of his beard, while above that the large and singular blue eyes, under heavy arching brows, wandered over the assembly, as some stately creature of the fields turns his eyes slowly about him in the presence of many men.”
Whitman was not the only one scanning the room for trouble. While the court was in recess for Shaw’s deliberation, one of the marshals recognized Redpath and started across the courtroom toward him. Redpath was alerted by Thayer, but he had wearied of running from federal agents. “Damn him, let him come on,” he told Thayer. “I’ll fix him.”

But before the courtroom could erupt into violence, Shaw returned to deliver his ruling.

He found that the Mason Committee had the authority to issue an arrest warrant and that it could be served anywhere in the United States. However, the Committee’s warrant specifically authorized the sergeant-at-arms of the Senate to make the arrest, and Shaw ruled that the sergeant-at-arms had no authority to “deputize his power to others out of the District of Columbia.” He ordered Sanborn’s release, and the courtroom burst into applause. In the wake of the jubilation *Vanity Fair* proposed a change to Webster’s dictionary, such that henceforth “Concord” would be a synonym, not an antonym, of “discord.”

Despite the victory, Thayer worried that pro-slavery elements might still attempt to kidnap Redpath. He gathered his group of radical abolitionists in the counting room at Thayer & Eldridge on April 5 and called another meeting for the following night “to decide upon some plan.” He told Higginson, “None but *fighters* are eligible. We are now fourteen in number who are willing to shoot or be shot at at five minutes notice in the cause of the United States vs. Sanborn or Redpath or any other man who represents a principle of right—liberty.” No record exists identifying these fourteen men or whether Thayer expected that Whitman would join the fight if called upon.

After his narrow escape from the Sanborn courtroom, Redpath returned to Malden, Massachusetts, and holed up at home. Thayer & Eldridge were typesetting the pages of *Echoes of Harper’s Ferry* and began to advertise the book along with a reissue of Redpath’s interviews with southern slaves. But the Sanborn incident had driven Redpath into a paranoid exile. Despite Judge Shaw’s explicit ruling that U.S. marshals could not legally arrest men
called before the Mason Committee, Redpath braced himself for their imminent arrival. “I shall stay at Home & fire at the first intrusion on my premises,” he told Higginson. “I have thought the whole matter carefully over & believe that this course will be best & most effective in advancing the cause. That the body of a U.S. Marshal is not impervious to a bullet well directed, is a lesson which I think now needs to be demonstrated—and the times are ripe for it.”

Redpath was still in hiding when *Echoes of Harper’s Ferry* was released at the beginning of May, but the book was already another success for Thayer & Eldridge; they had received more than ten thousand advance orders. Less than two weeks later *The Liberator* estimated that the book had sold more than thirty thousand copies. “It should be read,” the paper proclaimed, “not by tens of thousands only, but by hundreds of thousands. Buy it, read it, lend it, talk of it.”

Even with this second success Thayer & Eldridge were frustrated by the delayed release of *Leaves of Grass.* A frontispiece portrait engraved by Stephen Alonzo Schoff from a painting by Charles Hine was blocking publication, and the reading public in Boston, who by now had taken notice of Whitman’s presence in the Hub, were growing eager to see the book. A reporter for the *Boston Saturday Evening Gazette* wrote:

> The poet of “Leaves of Grass,” (who hails from New York,) has been spending the last four weeks in Boston, busy in the overseeing of a much larger and superior collection of his tantalizing ‘Leaves,’ which, after running the gantlet of the United States and Great Britain, and receiving divers specimens of about the tallest kind of indignant as well as favorable criticism, seem to have arrived at a position where they can be read, their title clear to be considered something, at any rate. Whether good, better, or best,—or bad, worse, or worst—we shall be better able to tell when we get the new volume.

Thayer & Eldridge were forced to issue a statement on May 5 that the book, originally announced for May 1, would “not be published until next week on account of some delay in finishing the steel portrait of the author which is to accompany the volume” and published another
announcement the following week that the release would “be delayed until the 1st of June, in consequence of the Engraver being unable to finish the Portrait in season.” But Whitman, too, was growing impatient. “We are just now in ‘suspenders’ on account of the engraving,” he wrote his brother Jeff. He decided to have a thousand copies printed from the incomplete plate and to let Schoff finish his work for use in successive printings.

Even with the incomplete engraving, the results were impressive. The book weighed in at a hefty 456 pages, the poems were set in a daring combination of decorative display faces and an elite body text, and die-cut illustrations decorated blank spaces—all undertaken at Whitman’s personal direction, as he designed each page and read proof at Rand and Avery through most of April. Everything about the book was meant to emphasize its extravagant elegance. Even Whitman acknowledged, “The printers and foremen thought I was crazy, and there were all sorts of supercilious squints (about the typography I ordered, I mean).” But everyone was delighted with the results. Whitman told his brother Jeff, “The foreman of the press-room . . . pronounced it, in plain terms, the freshest and handsomest piece of typography that had ever passed through his mill.”

But the cost to Thayer & Eldridge was dangerously high. Striking the stereotype plates alone tallied eight hundred dollars—for a book that sold for only $1.25. The young publishers considered the book an investment, “increasing by months and years,” Whitman wrote, “not going off in a rocket way, (like ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin.’)” Still, after the cost of paper, binding, and printing, Whitman would have to make good on his promise of selling “copious thousands of copies” just for Thayer & Eldridge to break even.

On May 12 Henry Clapp received several copies of the book and became the first person in Whitman’s New York circle to render judgment. He offered “high praise” to Thayer & Eldridge “for the superb manner in which they have done their work” but withheld comment on the poems for the review he planned to write for the Saturday Press, teasing Whitman, “The poet . . . shall hear from me next week.” Clapp also in-
structed, “You should send copies at once to Vanity Fair, Momus, The Albion, The Day Book, The Journal of Commerce, Crayon—also to Mrs. Juliette H. Beach, Albion, N.Y., who will do you great justice in the S.P. (for we shall have a series of articles)—to Charles D. Gardette Esq, No 910 Walnut Street, Philadelphia, to Evening Journal, Philadelphia, and also some dozen copies to me to be distributed at discretion.”

At least two of the copies sent to Clapp were passed along to William Dean Howells in Ohio and Bret Harte in San Francisco. Whitman had Thayer & Eldridge send additional copies to the New York Times, the New York Herald, the New York Illustrated News, the Herald of Progress, Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper, and the New York Evening Post, as well as to Pfaffians Ada Clare and Ned Wilkins. Thayer & Eldridge also peppered various Boston publications, including the Atlantic Monthly, the Banner of Light, the Liberator, the Cosmopolite, and the Boston Post.

Whitman asked all the reviewers to publish their notices on the new official date of the book’s release: May 19, 1860. The publication date of Leaves of Grass, a Saturday in the middle of the month, might at first seem an odd choice, but Thayer & Eldridge had selected it with care. It was the same day they would publish Richard Hinton’s biography of William Henry Seward, a release timed to coincide with Seward’s presumed nomination as the Republican candidate for president.

Late in the evening of May 14, 1860, John E. Howard Jr., a reporter for the New York Times (known to his contemporaries simply as “Howard of the Times”) arrived in Chicago via the Southern Lake Shore Railroad from Buffalo. The train carried the eastern delegates to the 1860 Republican Convention, and a brass band was on hand to greet the train at the station. A parade of twenty thousand enthusiastic onlookers followed the delegates down brightly illuminated Lake Street to the heart of the city, where an enormous convention hall, dubbed “the Wigwam,” had been erected especially for the gathering.

Chicago was electric with anticipation. Fabric stores had sold out across the city as the organizers draped the Wigwam with banners and

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bunting; the keepers of hotels, boardinghouses, and restaurants had been readying for the influx for weeks; and the Chicago Press and Tribune warned visitors that the “light fingered fraternity” of pickpockets had sent their own delegation to the convention. Inside the Wigwam the Young Men’s Republican Club of New York had strung a banner over the west end of the stage, emblazoned with stars and two blanks following the lines “For President” and “For Vice President.” “These blanks were eloquent with a purpose,” wrote the Tribune, “the purpose of the entire Convention, all ready for the campaign but waiting for the names.”

As Howard of the Times surveyed the scene just three nights before the Convention officially began, he tried to read the mood of the crowd. The feeling was strong for William Henry Seward of New York, he wrote, but “the main question seems to be who can be elected? Can Mr. Seward?” As the torches burned late into the night, Howard polled the wire-pullers and campaign insiders: “The Seward men are very confident. The Chase and Wade men work together. The Banks men are quiet, but expect a rally will be made in his favor at an early period.” As an afterthought he added, “Illinois alone works hard for Lincoln.”

But Howard, like many of Lincoln’s opponents, underestimated the advantage Lincoln enjoyed in Chicago. Strong with supporters in the area, he was able to dispatch men to spend days lobbying delegates from the lower North—especially Pennsylvania, Maryland, Indiana, and Missouri—making the argument that Seward could not carry their states in a general election. When the first ballot was cast on the night of May 17, Seward was short of the required 233 votes, with 173 ½, but Lincoln polled a surprising 102 votes, putting him firmly in second place. His campaign had packed the galleries by distributing counterfeit tickets to ten thousand bellowing Lincoln boosters, hooting their approval.

On the second ballot only a dozen delegates defected to Seward, bringing his total to 185, but in response to the crowd’s voluble support scores of delegates switched their votes to Lincoln, bringing him nearly even at
When the second results were announced a reporter for the Chicago Press and Tribune wrote that the roar “was positively awful”: “Imagine all the hogs ever slaughtered in Cincinnati giving their death squeals together, a score of big steam whistles going together . . . with a stamping that made every plank and pillar in the building quiver.”

By the third ballot Lincoln had gained a kind of raw momentum as delegate after delegate was swept up by the excitement. Six defected from Vermont and Massachusetts, eight from New Jersey, nine from Maryland, four from Kentucky, and fifteen from Ohio. Lincoln now had 231 1/2 votes as the crowd waited breathlessly for the announcement of the final four votes from the chairman of the Ohio delegation. At last he stood. “I rise Mr. Chairman,” he said, “to announce the change of four votes of Ohio from Mr. Seward to Mr. Lincoln.”

Suddenly, the Tribune reported, “there were thousands cheering with the energy of insanity.... The Lincoln yawp swelled into a wild hosanna of victory.”

No one was more surprised—or exulted—by the outcome than Howard of the Times. “The work of the Convention is ended,” he wired back to New York. “The youngster who, with ragged trousers, used bare-foot to drive his father’s oxen and spend his days in splitting rails, has risen to high eminence, and Abram Lincoln, of Illinois, is declared its candidate for President by the National Republican Convention.”

The fact that the top political reporter at the Times did not know the correct name of the new candidate underscores what a surprise Lincoln’s win was.

Thayer and Eldridge, however, were dismayed. Their carefully researched biography of Seward—timed for release on May 19, when newspapers were expected to carry news of his nomination—was suddenly a dead title. They hastily withdrew all advertising for the book (not a single review is known to have appeared) and turned their attention to Lincoln. Today fewer than ten copies of the Seward biography survive, including the personal copies retained by Hinton and Seward themselves. Whitman’s new edition of Leaves of Grass, rushed through the press to be shipped to stores on the same day, suddenly had to carry
its own weight—indeed, the full weight of Thayer & Eldridge. While Hinton set to work on a biography of Lincoln, Whitman's book would have to sell well enough to carry his publishers through a lean month.

Unfortunately Whitman had urged his friends to run their reviews as near to May 19 as possible. At the New York Times John Swinton, probably distracted by hurriedly gathering information on Lincoln, commissioned the review rather than write it himself and apparently had it sent to typesetting without reading it. Thus, on the day that the 1860 edition of Leaves of Grass finally appeared, the newspaper managed by Swinton—the man who had set the book's publication in motion—ran the first damning review. The reviewer has never been identified, but it was certainly not Swinton himself because the column not only condemned Leaves of Grass as “pretentious” with a “tendency to fall into the vulgar” but, in an accompanying review, also lambasted Swinton's old friend James Redpath's anthology Echoes of Harper's Ferry, singling out Redpath's contributions to the volume as “wretched trash” and denouncing him personally as “arrogant,” “egotistic,” and “flippant.”

By comparison, the review of Whitman seemed almost temperate, allowing that the poet occasionally upturned a “handful of gold” by “throwing filth . . . from his moral cesspool.” Thus the reviewer gave voice to a complaint that would soon grow into a chorus. Leaves of Grass was not only vulgar, it was obscene, gross, repulsive: “He seems to delight in contemplation of scenes that ordinary men do not love, or which they are content to regard as irremediable evils, about which it is needless to repine. Mr. Whitman sees nothing vulgar in that which is generally regarded as the grossest obscenity; rejects the laws of conventionality so completely as to become repulsive; gloats over coarse images with the gusto of a Rabelais, but lacks the genius or grace of Rabelais.”

Luckily Henry Clapp published his anonymous review of Whitman on the same evening in the Saturday Press. The unabashed puff was worthy of Whitman himself, and some have occasionally suspected Whitman’s own hand in writing it, though Clapp’s letters suggest otherwise. He began with grand pronouncements:

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We announce a great Philosopher—perhaps a great Poet—in every way an original man. It is Walt Whitman. The proof of his greatness is in his book; and there is proof enough.

The intellectual attitude expressed in these Leaves of Grass, is grand with the grandeur of independent strength, and beautiful with the beauty of serene repose. It is the attitude of a proud, noble, vigorous life. A human heart is here in these pages—large, wild, comprehensive—beating with all throbs of passion—enjoying all of bliss—suffering all of sorrow that is possible to humanity.  

The review proceeded along these lines for nearly two full columns, heaping the praise on Whitman himself (“No man could utter himself more fully and truly”), his book (“No book exists anywhere more beautifully in earnest than this”), and even his eccentric poetics (“It rises and melts into sweet and thrilling music whenever impelled by the beautiful impulse of a grand thought or emotion”).

At the close of the review, however, probably in an effort to temper his praise, Clapp quoted Edward Everett Hale’s sole disappointment in Leaves of Grass when it first appeared in 1855: that it contained “one or two lines which he would not address to a woman.” From the time that Emerson first voiced his reservation that “men would not buy the book and give it to women,” Thayer & Eldridge had feared this sort of criticism more than any other. And rightly so. In the coming months the discussion of Leaves of Grass would be dominated by allegations of obscenity that would so consume both the Saturday Press and Thayer & Eldridge that neither would survive.