

# JAMES BUCHANAN AND ANN COLEMAN

BY PHILIP SHRIVER KLEIN\*

IT IS a particular honor and pleasure to me to have the opportunity of addressing an audience in Lancaster on the subject of James Buchanan and Ann Coleman. Their story has always been deeply rooted in the traditions of this community, and the memory of their tragedy still lingers in the shades of Wheatland. The visitor to that shrine almost instinctively frames in his mind the question—how different might have been the course of American history had Ann Coleman become the presiding lady of that gracious household, the helpmeet of its distinguished but ill-fated master.

I had at first thought of calling this story "The Biography of a Love Affair," but abandoned the idea because I feared that to a modern Kinsey-wise American audience this would suggest a study in sociology rather than in history. It was thus a satisfaction to me to note the recent publication of a book entitled: *Mary Lincoln: The Biography of a Marriage*. Of this volume, the reviewer said, "it is history"; history defined as "the rethinking of the thoughts of those who have preceded us, entering into the situations in which they had to act, confronting their problems with them."<sup>1</sup> By this view our judgment of a man is measured not in terms of the extent of his influence on affairs of state or on society at large, but in terms of his capacity as an individual to

\*Dr. Philip S. Klein, Head of the History Department of the Pennsylvania State University, is the author of, among other things, *The Story of Wheatland and Pennsylvania Politics, 1817-1832*. The present paper, which grew out of a biography of Buchanan which Dr. Klein is now writing, was read at the annual dinner of the Pennsylvania Historical Association, Lancaster, October 23, 1953.

<sup>1</sup> Review by Jeannette P. Nichols of Ruth P. Randall's *Mary Lincoln*, in *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, LXXVII, No. 4, Oct., 1953, p. 499.

shoulder successfully the burdens which life lays upon him. It is in this latter spirit that I wish to unfold the story of Buchanan and Ann Coleman.

But before trying to recreate the story, let us look at a few of the reports of it which have gained wide currency. The affair received national publicity primarily on three occasions: first, during the election of 1856 when Buchanan was the Democratic candidate for president; next at the time of his death in 1868; and finally during the few months after the publication of George Ticknor Curtis' biography of Buchanan in July, 1883. Most of the stories show some similarity in broad outline, but they vary greatly in detail and none of them make clear the sources of information. Let me emphasize, before presenting a few samples of these stories, that all of them contain demonstrable errors. Instead of trying to correct these, *seriatum*, which would be tedious, I will shortly offer a version of the tragedy, based at least on identifiable evidence, which will afford a specific basis of comparison with the earlier explanations.

As good a place as any to begin is with the rumors current in Washington, D. C., in the fall of 1856. Mrs. Leonora Clayton wrote to Mrs. Howell Cobb in August of that year that the capital city had become much interested in Buchanan's youthful romance. "There is a cousin of his lady love residing here," she confided, "a Miss Coleman—and I have heard the family bear him no good will, dating from that event. The story I heard—the lady committed suicide in a fit of jealousy, believing he had ceased to love her."<sup>2</sup>

Curiosity had been stirred, in part, by a melodramatic but highly unreliable account which had just appeared in the August, 1856, issue of *Harper's Monthly*. According to this article, Mr. Buchanan, while a Senator, had been visiting in the home of a distinguished married lady of Washington. In the course of a jesting conversation on the respective merits of bachelorhood versus the marriage state, the lady began to urge Buchanan to think seriously about paying court to a very attractive young acquaintance of hers. Buchanan immediately became excited and announced with agitation that "to love he could not, for his affections were

<sup>2</sup> August 9, 1856. Cobb Papers, on deposit at University of Georgia.

in the grave." The lady, who had heard whisperings of the Coleman affair, now pressed Buchanan for the full story and ultimately got him to tell it.

According to the *Harper's* article, Buchanan now explained that when he was a young man he fell in love with one of the most beautiful young ladies of Lancaster village. Her only living parent was her mother, a very wealthy and imperious woman who wished a fashionable marriage for her daughter, Ann, and for this reason bitterly opposed Buchanan who at that time had nothing to offer but prospects. Nonetheless, mutual attraction overcame parental disapproval and James and Ann became engaged in the late summer of 1819. Shortly thereafter James went to Philadelphia to argue a very important case before the Pennsylvania Supreme Court. He had planned to be gone a month, but the case stretched out to six weeks. During all that time he was agonized with doubt and worry because he received not one letter from his fiancée. Instead, he said, "the atmosphere was filled with rumours that the person upon whom I had set my affections had been seduced into the ambitious designs of her thoughtless parent, and that I had been discarded."

The minute the case was concluded, Buchanan set out for Lancaster by stage. On the way his impatience reached the breaking point, he left the coach, rented a "fleet steed," and galloped post-haste toward home. But on the outskirts of Lancaster the horse stumbled and dashed its rider to the road, breaking his arm and seriously bruising him. With difficulty he was brought to his rooms in the village, where he was attended by a surgeon. In the meantime a friend called to break the news to him—Ann Coleman, during his absence, had become engaged to a highly eligible young man of a neighboring city.

As soon as the surgeon had completed his work, Buchanan, his broken arm hidden under a great-cloak, went to the Coleman home. There in the parlor Mrs. Coleman curtly informed him of the state of affairs, while Ann stood behind her in a doorway, "the picture of despair, yet silent as the grave." Stunned and desperate, the rejected suitor returned to his rooms and penned a hasty letter to Ann, demanding the return of his letters and gifts. These she sent, with the exception of one trifling keepsake.

That night, accompanied by a family servant, Ann went to Phil-

adelphia to visit at the home of her uncle. Upon arrival she complained of fatigue and sent her servant to a drug store to get some laudanum which, she said, would help her to sleep. The drug was delivered and Ann retired. The next morning the family found her dead in her bed, tightly clutching in one hand the single token from Jimmy Buchanan which she had kept.

Her uncle accompanied her coffin to Lancaster. There, in the Coleman parlor, he angrily displayed to the mother what he unflinchingly termed "the result of her work." Mrs. Coleman then sent for Buchanan who, in the words of the *Harper's* article, thus described the cruel interview: "Over the remains of the daughter, she revealed the particulars that led to the awful result. My letters and hers, by untiring industry, the command of large resources, and paid agents, had all been intercepted. The reason for my prolonged absence had been explained as the result of the fascinating charms of city belles. All this while the victim had been full of hope. She had heard of my arrival in Lancaster, but not of my accident; for long weary hours she was in the parlor waiting my presence, yet doomed to disappointment. Here was seeming indifference, a confirmation of all that she had heard. On the other side, I was made the dupe of the mother's arts, and the friend who had poisoned my ear was merely the agent to carry forward the great wrong. . . . The result was death to one party, and the burial of the heart of the other *in the same grave*."<sup>3</sup>

So much for the *Harper's* article. The most casual inquiry into the facts would reveal the inaccuracies in it. Ann's father was very much alive in 1819, and Buchanan did not break his arm that year, to mention only two.

Party newspapers hostile to Buchanan's election twisted this romanticized *Harper's* story into a political canard. James Gordon Bennett's *New York Herald* reported: "It is said that Mr. Buchanan, in the flower of his manhood, was crossed in his first love, and never had the courage to look after another. It is said that the young lady, driven to despair by the despotic course of a hard-hearted mother, took laudanum and died! It is also stated that, with this lamentable result, Mr. Buchanan, in his desperation, attempted his own life, and that the consequence was a con-

<sup>3</sup> *Harper's Magazine*, No. LXXV, Vol. XIII, August, 1856, 421-422.

traction of the muscles on one side of his throat, which gave him that kink or twist in his neck, which he carries to this day.”<sup>4</sup> When he saw this article, Mr. Buchanan said that he hoped one of his New York friends would horsewhip Bennett or “the vile and despicable wretch” who had written the story.<sup>5</sup>

At the time of Buchanan’s death another series of reports on the Coleman tragedy appeared in various newspapers. A correspondent of the *Cincinnati Enquirer* presented a plausible explanation which he claimed to have had from the lips of informed Lancaster citizens. According to his story, Ann Coleman had always been jealous of Buchanan’s popularity with other girls of the village. Proud and sensitive, she was quick to fancy neglect and to magnify gossip involving herself. Shortly after the engagement Buchanan went to Bedford Springs for a brief vacation. Upon his return, while on his way to call on Ann, he passed the home of a business friend, where some young ladies of his acquaintance were staying. Seeing him approach, these girls “asked him to walk into their parlor.” As the conversation was pleasant, he sat out an hour there. Meanwhile, Miss Coleman had been advised of Buchanan’s whereabouts, and after waiting some time, she became nervous and finally angry. Directly, Mr. Buchanan knocked at the door. A sister of the lady replied, “She is not in to you, sir!” The next morning Ann left suddenly for Philadelphia where she died.<sup>6</sup> This version has been generally accepted, and forms the basis of most printed accounts which have appeared since 1868.<sup>7</sup>

The publication on July 27, 1883, of George Ticknor Curtis’ *Life of James Buchanan* brought other stories of the affair to public notice. Curtis drafted a pretty full and presumably accurate account of the matter—an account which unhappily cannot now be located. This he submitted to Samuel L. M. Barlow, a friend of his and of the Buchanan heirs, for criticism. Barlow replied: “I am clearly of opinion that you should not print any

<sup>4</sup> *New York Herald*, August 1, 1856.

<sup>5</sup> Article by Alfred Sanderson in undated clipping of *Reading Eagle* in John Lowry Ruth scrapbook, York, Pennsylvania.

<sup>6</sup> Account by “Swede” in *Cincinnati Enquirer*, June, 1868. Clipping in Swarr Estate Book, E. E. Bausman collection, Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

<sup>7</sup> For example: George Barton in *Philadelphia Public Ledger*, Aug. 31, 1903; *Philadelphia Record*, June 17, 1934; *Lancaster Sunday News*, July 21, 1940.

considerable portion of what you have written on the subject of his engagement to Miss Coleman." Curtis should mention the engagement, said Barlow, that it was broken by the death of the lady, that because of his great grief Buchanan entered politics, that he was through his whole life true to this first and only love, that he carefully treasured her correspondence while he lived, and in dying ordered the packet to be burned, unopened. "And this is all," concluded Mr. Barlow. "In this view Mrs. Barlow agrees fully."<sup>8</sup>

Curtis acceded to the spirit of these suggestions, extending himself only to state in his book that "it is now known that the separation of the lovers originated in a misunderstanding, on the part of the lady, of a very small matter, exaggerated by giddy and indiscreet tongues, working on a peculiarly sensitive nature."<sup>9</sup> Guarded as this was, it left no room for doubt that Curtis knew much more about the matter than he had put in print, and that the true story had not yet been told. This merely heightened the mystery, and became the basis for continued attempts to get at the bottom of it.

One of the most lurid tales was printed in the *Boston Herald* whose Philadelphia correspondent alleged that the notorious Emma Jacobs, when on her death-bed in a Philadelphia almshouse, had spoken of Buchanan's intimacy with her during her youth in Lancaster and had declared that this was the cause of the broken engagement. The Buchanan heirs, after threatening a libel suit, obtained a grudging and left-handed retraction from the *Herald*. In Lancaster, Major Hiestand of the *Daily Examiner* published a lengthy refutation of the canard concluding that the *Herald* story was false "in each and every particular."<sup>10</sup> These, then, are a few of the versions which have gone into general circulation throughout the years.

The remainder of this paper will attempt to unravel the tangle of conflicting details by applying to the main elements of the story some newly-discovered evidence, and by viewing the whole affair against the background of Lancaster society in 1819.

<sup>8</sup> Barlow to Curtis, Oct. 17, 1881, Buchanan Foundation MSS, in Franklin and Marshall College Library.

<sup>9</sup> George Tichnor Curtis, *Life of James Buchanan*, N. Y., 1883, I, p. 21.

<sup>10</sup> *Boston Herald*, Aug. 28, 1883; *Boston Post*, Sept. 12, 1883, containing the refutation.

In those days Lancaster was a proud community which was still quite conscious of the fact that it had recently been the capital of the Commonwealth and a center of its social life. The wealthiest families of the city comprised two groups, the iron masters and the lawyers, who between them set the tone of society and of politics. It was James Buchanan's fate to become involved, with tragic and far-reaching consequences, in the affairs of four of these families: the Colemans, the Jacobs, the Hopkins, and the Jenkins.

Robert Coleman, Ann's father, was born near Castle Finn, County Donegal, in Ireland and migrated to America in 1764 when a young man of sixteen. Curiously the Coleman homestead in Ireland was only about twenty miles from the ancestral home of the Buchanans.<sup>11</sup> Coleman at first went to work as a common laborer for Curtis and Peter Grubb at Hopewell Forge. He later became a clerk for James Old, famous iron-master of Reading, and capped his fortune by marrying Old's daughter, Ann. He soon came into possession of several of the finest iron properties in the East, at one of which, Elizabeth Furnace, he made his home. It was typical of Coleman that he should hire Baron Stiegel, former owner of Elizabeth Furnace, as his foreman. By 1792 he had built Colebrook Furnace, was utilizing Cornwall ore, and sending finished pigs to his Martic Forge in southern Lancaster County. After 1800 he served as an associate judge of the Lancaster County Court of Common Pleas, became a trustee of Dickinson College, a warden of St. James Episcopal Church, and entered actively into civic affairs. By 1819 he was generally acknowledged to be the richest man in Lancaster and one of the richest in the state.

As a self-made man, he was self-conscious about his wealth and continually suspicious that others had designs on it; as a member of the newly rich, he was sensitive about social prestige and hungered for public deference. He had the reputation of being strong-willed, exacting, hot-tempered, and vindictive when aroused. The town long remembered how Judge Coleman had gotten a verdict against William Dickson, editor of the *Lancaster Journal*, by intimidating the jury.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> A. W. P. Buchanan: *The Buchanan Book*, Montreal, 1911, p. 211; *Genealogy and History*, Washington, D. C., Aug. 15, 1940, and Sept. 15, 1940.

<sup>12</sup> Franklin Ellis: *History of Lancaster County*, Philadelphia, 1883, p. 499.

In 1809, the same year that James Buchanan came to Lancaster, Robert Coleman also moved to the city where he established his family in a large brick mansion at the northeast corner of East King and Christian Streets, just a half block from the Court House on the Square.<sup>13</sup> The Colemans at this time had five grown sons and four daughters. The eldest daughter, Margaret, had already married Judge Joseph Hemphill of Philadelphia, commonly known as "Single-Speech Hemphill" because his maiden speech in the 7th Congress proved also to be his swan song. The other three Coleman girls, Ann, Harriet and Sarah, aged 13, 9 and 7, lived with their parents in the King Street house.<sup>14</sup>

Robert Coleman's brother-in-law was Cyrus Jacobs. The two had met in the old days as fellow laborers for James Old. Jacobs, like Coleman, won in marriage the hand of a daughter of his employer, Marguaretta Old. The Coleman and the Jacobs children were thus first cousins. Cyrus Jacobs, senior, amassed great wealth in the iron business but was satisfied to think of himself as a rough-cut gentleman farmer and to stay on his Pool Forge estate near Churchtown. His children became Buchanan's link with the Coleman family. Young Cyrus Jacobs came to study law in Buchanan's office; a daughter, Eliza Jacobs, became the sweetheart of Buchanan's law partner, Molton C. Rogers.<sup>15</sup>

James Hopkins, head of the third family connected with the Coleman tragedy, was the outstanding lawyer at the Lancaster bar. Hopkins lived in a fine mansion which stood on the site of the present County Court House, half a block from the Colemans. In addition to his reputation for acumen in the law, he was widely renowned for the price of his services. A burlesque biography of him noted that: "In his intercourse with mankind, he conceived the first duty to pay a fee; any dereliction from this important ceremony was a crime equivalent to high treason."<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Purchase from Christopher Hager, June 18, 1807. Deed Book Y, 3, p. 561, Lancaster County Court House.

<sup>14</sup> For the Coleman family cf. Com. on Hist. Research: *Forges and Furnaces in the Province of Pennsylvania*, Pennsylvania Society of Colonial Dames of America, Philadelphia, 1944; H. M. J. Klein and Wm. F. Diller: *History of St. James Church*, Lancaster, 1944; and Ellis, *History of Lancaster County*, pp. 304-305, 465-466, 478, 911. Also Robert Coleman's will, Book O, 1, pp. 347-352, Lancaster County Court House.

<sup>15</sup> For Jacobs family, cf. *Forges and Furnaces*, *op. cit.*, and Cyrus Jacobs' will, Book P, 1, 481.

<sup>16</sup> E. C. Watmough: *Scribblings and Sketches*. Phila., 1844, p. 27



Hopkins was also an iron-master, owner of Conowingo Furnace near the Buck Tavern. James Buchanan began to study law in his office in the fall of 1809, and became a favored protégé of the old gentleman. The town soon, and not unnaturally, began to think of Buchanan as a minor edition of Hopkins.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, there was the Jenkins family. William Jenkins, about twelve years older than Jimmie Buchanan, became one of his intimate friends. He frequently invited Buchanan to associate with him in legal cases, and employed him on several occasions to purchase property.<sup>18</sup> Jenkins lived on South Duke Street near the Farmers' Bank, of which he was then President, between the Coleman home and Buchanan's rooms, and just a few doors from each. It was Jenkins, incidentally, who later built Wheatland, the home Buchanan was to make famous. As a son of the founder of Windsor Forges, Jenkins was a hereditary member of the iron fraternity, and as a distinguished student of James Hopkins, he was equally at home on lawyers' row. He married Mary Field Hubley, whose younger sister was to play an important role in the Ann Coleman affair.<sup>19</sup>

It was into the lives of these families that James Buchanan stepped in the autumn of 1809. Ann Coleman was just 13 years old as this handsome, fair-haired, seventeen-year-old six-footer began his daily treks past her home from Hopkins' office to the Court House. Little by little young Buchanan worked his way into the confidence of Lancaster society, and at length was admitted to its most exclusive echelon, the iron circle. He had some initial contacts through his Dickinson College mates, notably Henry and Jasper Slaymaker, and George Ross Hopkins, his preceptor's son. He got to know Molton Rogers, son of the Governor of Delaware, as a fellow student in Hopkins' office. Rogers became intimate with Jenkins, as they were both Princetonians. Buchanan expanded his circle of acquaintances when he joined the Shippen Guards, Lancaster's elite cavalry corps which went

<sup>17</sup> For Hopkins, cf.: G. W. Hensel: *Reminiscences of 35 Years', Lancaster Inquirer* Reprint, 1873; Alex. Harris, *Biographical History of Lancaster County*, Lancaster, 1872, pp. 318-319; Klein and Diller, *St. James Church, op. cit.*; and obituary clipping, unidentified paper in Ruth Scrap Book, p. 27.

<sup>18</sup> Sheriff's Appearance Dockets, 1814-1820, Prothonotary's office, Lancaster County Court House.

<sup>19</sup> For Jenkins family, see Harris, *Biographical History of Lancaster County*, 327 ff.

to the defense of Baltimore during the War of 1812. Nearly every family in the social register had a father or a son in this troop.

After the war, Buchanan bought a house in partnership with John Passmore, Lancaster's amiable 450-pound prothonotary and town character, who was soon to become first mayor of the newly chartered city. These quarters on East King Street just beyond Duke where Buchanan set up his law offices and maintained rooms, placed him within a block of the Court House and of the homes of President Judge Walter Franklin, the Colemans, the Hopkins, the Jenkins, and the Slaymakers.<sup>20</sup> By 1816 he had come far enough up the social ladder to be named as one of the managers for a high society ball, along with Rogers, Jasper Slaymaker, and Gerardus Clarkson, son of the Episcopal rector.<sup>21</sup> Shortly thereafter he was admitted to the Masonic Lodge, the final accolade of social approval.

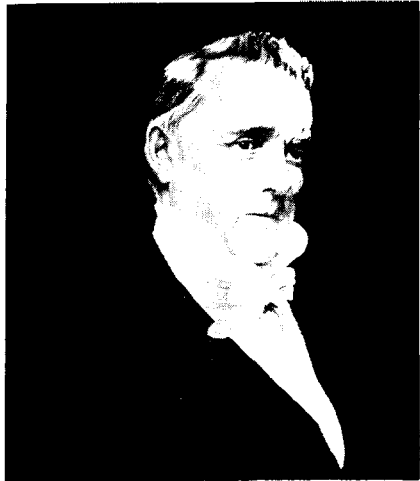
In about 1818, to facilitate business, he began to share offices with Molton Rogers with whom he regularly dined at the same bachelor mess. It was at this time that Cyrus Jacobs, Jr., became a student in Buchanan's law office, and that Rogers began to court Eliza Jacobs. It was at this time that Buchanan began to get interested in Eliza's fair cousin, Ann Coleman.

Ann Caroline Coleman was the outstanding "catch" of Lancaster in 1819. It was for that reason, perhaps, that she was still unmarried at twenty-three. Her wealth and social position were enough to awe the timid; her quiet and introspective disposition and her father's protective care created a shield against the overzealous. We wish we knew more of Ann Coleman. She was by all accounts a slim, black-haired beauty with dark, lustrous eyes in which one might read wonder, doubt, or haughtiness as the mood suited. Proud, gentle, full of sensibility, lovely in person, tender and affectionate, intelligent and thoughtful—these were characterizations of her by her friends.

Under ordinary circumstances it might have been considered presumptuous for a young unknown of no particular family background to pay court to the beautiful daughter of the town's chief citizen, and it seems as if father Coleman inclined to this view of the affair. But the circumstances were not quite ordinary. By

<sup>20</sup> Deed Book 7, 100, 206, April 1, 1814. Lancaster County Court House.

<sup>21</sup> Oct. 24, 1816. Invitation in Foundation MSS, F. & M. Library.



JAMES BUCHANAN

1819 Buchanan had built a fine reputation in politics and in the law. He had served as a prosecuting attorney and as a state assemblyman. He had gained wide praise for his successful defense of Judge Walter Franklin before the bar of the state Senate in two successive impeachment trials. His able arguments had brought him not only prestige but a greatly increased practice to which he applied the Hopkins training with regard to fees. After all, what client would not be partial to a lawyer to whom the presiding judge owed his place on the bench? In 1819, Buchanan was making \$8,000 a year from his practice, a fortune in that day.

Jimmie and Ann became engaged sometime in the summer of 1819. Father Coleman, now 71 years old, undoubtedly examined this development with his customary thoroughness. One wonders whether he distrusted the Buchanan men because he had heard, in his youth, of the disappearance of Buchanan's grandfather back in Ireland, leaving a wife and several small children, including Jimmie's father, to the care of maternal grandparents. It is very likely that, as a trustee of Dickinson College, he pondered the advisability of marrying his daughter to a young man who had been once dismissed and twice under faculty discipline there. As a careful business man, he probably disapproved of the wager on the 1816 election by which Buchanan lost three tracts of Warren

County land to his friend, Rogers.<sup>22</sup> On this point he may also have been dismayed by the antics of some of Buchanan's associates, such as Jasper Slaymaker and John Reynolds, who had gained notoriety a few years before by a practical joke which cost them \$6,700. These two, while riding past a public sale in a carriage, had shouted out this bid, then whipped up the horse and driven off. They were recognized and the auctioneer knocked down to them as high bidders a hotel and ferryboat line in Columbia.<sup>23</sup> According to Robert Coleman's lights, these were not the ways to protect or develop a fortune. That father Coleman was actively hostile to Buchanan we do not know. We do know, however, that he was not a man to ease the path of a suitor for his daughter's hand.

The autumn of 1819 was a nightmare to men of property and to the lawyers who handled it. By August the delirium of panic had reached its peak, and Buchanan was frantically busy. In the latter part of the summer he drove to Mercersburg in a gig to see his parents, and then proceeded to Bedford Springs for a brief rest.<sup>24</sup> On his return to Lancaster, he jumped back into the case which was taking most of his time—a suit upon which depended the continued existence of the Columbia Bridge Company, a speculative enterprise in which many local people had a financial interest. The case involved Jenkins' bank and had ramifications in Philadelphia which required Buchanan's presence there from time to time.<sup>25</sup>

As if this were not enough, the political scene was in uproar, and the local Federalist party was falling apart. Democrats had just been elected to Congress and to the State Senate, an unheard of result in Lancaster. Buchanan, one of the leading young Federalists, was needed to repair the damage. Furthermore, the Mis-

<sup>22</sup> Ruth Scrapbook, p. 70. Undated clipping of *Philadelphia Press*, ca. 1860, notes an oil land title of Garfield, Warren County, which had traced back to this transaction.

<sup>23</sup> Ellis, *History of Lancaster County*, p. 547.

<sup>24</sup> Ruth Scrapbook, p. 70; and Annie Gilchrist, "First on the Turnpike," in *Bedford Inquirer*, Dec. 30, 1950, quoting reminiscences of Dr. C. N. Hickok, of Bedford.

<sup>25</sup> Buchanan to William Wright, Pres. of Columbia Bridge Co., Sept. 13, 1819, Foundation MSS; *The Union, United States Gazette and True American*, Phila., Nov. 30, 1810; Sheriff's Appearance Docket, Lancaster, 1819-1819, entries for fall term, 1819. Pages 84-85 contain notes in Buchanan's handwriting on the case.

souri question was at this very moment inflaming the country. During the week of November 23, Buchanan was appointed to a committee with James Hopkins and William Jenkins to prepare official resolutions of instruction to the district congressman, reflecting the sentiment of Lancaster voters on the question of slavery in Missouri.<sup>26</sup>

With these preoccupations, Buchanan apparently did not spend very much time in his courtship during October and November, 1819. Taking for granted that all was well, he let Ann Coleman take a place secondary to his legal and civic responsibilities. Always conscientious and willing to serve, he consumed his time in business without pausing to recognize the possible implications of his activity. The town did otherwise. If Buchanan had achieved some public notice in his own right before his engagement to Ann Coleman, he became a major subject of conversation after it. His every act or omission was now subject to special scrutiny. Under these conditions, two of Buchanan's well-known traits appeared to his great disadvantage: his driving ambition to become financially successful; and his unfailing good manners, which seemed to some to take the form of especial affability to young ladies. Though presenting many variants, gossip based on these observations seemed universally to center on two ideas as simple and deadly as they were ill-considered and unfair; Buchanan loved the Coleman fortune; he did not love Ann Coleman.<sup>27</sup>

Sometime in November, Ann began to worry about this gossip, which inevitably found its way into the Coleman household. Her parents did nothing to ease her mind on the subject. Gradually she began to believe, as one of her friends expressed it, "that Mr. Buchanan did not treat her with that affection that she expected from the man she would marry, and in consequence of his coolness she wrote him a note telling him that she thought it was not regard for her that was his object, but her riches."<sup>28</sup>

Ann's letter put Buchanan in a particularly difficult dilemma. This reflection upon his integrity hit him where he was most sensitive; it hurt his pride and self-respect. These very elements

<sup>26</sup> *Lancaster Journal*, Sept. 16, Oct. 19, 1818; Oct. 22, 1819, for the political situation; *ibid.*, Nov. 27, 1819, for the Missouri resolutions.

<sup>27</sup> Hannah Cochran to her husband, Dec. 14, 1819, Slaymaker Collection, Lancaster.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

of his character made it impossible for him to solve the problem in direct and unequivocal terms. He must have felt that, in the light of Ann's suspicions, any marked quickening of his interest thereafter would only be construed by her as additional proof of her charge. Curbing his anger and frustration, he turned for a solution to what was always to be his ultimate sanctuary—resignation and faith in the morrow. In short, he determined to continue as before. He answered Ann's note politely, but came to no explanation.<sup>29</sup> As there was as yet no formal breach, matters still might have been happily resolved had not another incident occurred.

This we may present in the words of a niece of Grace Hubley, the lady who unwittingly precipitated the crisis. "Some time after the engagement had been announced, Mr. Buchanan was obliged to go out of town on a business trip. He returned in a few days and casually dropped in to see . . . Mrs. William Jenkins, with whose husband he was on terms of intimate friendship. With her was staying her sister, Miss Grace Hubley, . . . a pretty and charming young lady. From this innocent call the whole trouble arose. A young lady told Miss Coleman of it and thereby excited her jealousy. She was indignant that he should visit anyone before coming to her. On the spur of the moment she penned an angry note and released him from his engagement. The note was handed to him while he was in the Court House. Persons who saw him receive it remarked afterward that they noticed him turn pale when he read it. Mr. Buchanan was a proud man. The large fortune of his lady was to him only another barrier to his trying to persuade her to reconsider her rejection of himself."<sup>30</sup>

The final crisis developed during the week beginning Monday, November 29. For several days thereafter Ann was so distressed and low spirited that "her Mother persuaded her to go to Philadelphia hoping that would ease her depressed spirits."<sup>31</sup> Her vitality was already low, and she caught cold on the way to the city.<sup>32</sup> She left Lancaster on Saturday, December 4, in company with her

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Article by Blanche Nevin in Ruth Scrap Book, p. 44. The author was a daughter of Rev. John W. Nevin and Martha Jenkins Nevin, daughter of Robert Jenkins of Windsor Forges.

<sup>31</sup> Hannah Cochran to her husband, *loc. cit.*

<sup>32</sup> Samuel Dale to Jacob Hibshman, Dec. 16, 1819, Hibshman MSS, Pennsylvania State College Library.

younger sister, Sarah, to visit with sister Margaret, wife of Judge Hemphill, who lived on Chestnut Street. A special attraction and diversion was the series of plays and operas currently being offered at the Philadelphia Theatre.<sup>33</sup>

After Ann left for Philadelphia, Buchanan immersed himself in business. On Monday, December 6, he succeeded in getting a settlement out of court of part of the Columbia Bridge Company case. He was at the prothonotary's office for a considerable part of the day, entering the decisions of the arbitrators, getting signatures of the principal parties to the agreement, and winding up the details.<sup>34</sup> It was a great triumph for him, which doubtless compensated his pride somewhat for the cruelly disheartening upset of his marriage plans.

Early Thursday morning, December 9, the thunderbolt struck. A special messenger from Philadelphia brought the shocking news that Ann Coleman had died suddenly at her sister's home shortly after midnight. What happened may be related as Judge Thomas Kittera of Philadelphia, who knew the Colemans, recorded it in his diary on that fatal Thursday which was to change the course of James Buchanan's life, and with it possibly the course of American history.

"At noon yesterday," wrote Kittera, "I met this young lady on the street, in the vigour of health, and but a few hours after [,] her friends were mourning her death. She had been engaged to be married, and some unpleasant misunderstanding occurring, the match was broken off. This circumstance was preying on her mind. In the afternoon she was laboring under a fit of hysterics; in the evening she was so little indisposed that her sister visited the theatre.<sup>35</sup> After night she was attacked with strong hysterical convulsions, which induced the family to send for physicians, who thought this would soon go off, as it did; but her pulse gradually weakened until midnight, when she died. Dr. Chapman,<sup>36</sup> who

<sup>33</sup> *Democratic Press*, Nov. 29-Dec. 8, 1819.

<sup>34</sup> Sheriff's Appearance Docket, 1819-1820, pp. 84-85.

<sup>35</sup> To see Joseph Jefferson and Mr. and Mrs. Bartley in a company presenting a play, "Grecian Daughter," Collins "Ode on the Passions," and the comic opera, "Adopted Child." *Dem. Press*, Dec. 8, 1819.

<sup>36</sup> Nathaniel Chapman, M.D. (1780-1853), was in 1819 Prof. of the Practices and Institutes of Clinical Medicine at the Univ. of Penna. His reputation as a physician "grew to surpass that of any other physician of his day." Charles Morris (ed.), *Makers of Philadelphia*, p. 37.

spoke with Dr. Physick,<sup>37</sup> says it is the first instance he ever knew of hysteria producing death. To affectionate parents sixty miles off what dreadful intelligence—to a younger sister whose evening was spent in mirth and folly, what a lesson of wisdom does it teach. Beloved and admired by all who knew her, in the prime of life, with all the advantages of education, beauty and wealth, in a moment she has been cut off.”<sup>38</sup>

Judge Kittera might well have added, what crushing intelligence to her late fiancé! The news swept through Lancaster like a soul-chilling wind. One gentleman wrote of it as “the most affecting circumstance that has ever taken place here since I have been an inhabitant.”<sup>39</sup> There immediately arose the hint of suicide, though no one could produce any valid evidence of it. The hideous part was that nobody apparently did know exactly what had happened, and it is entirely probable that James Buchanan lived out his whole life haunted by doubts and self-accusations on this very point.

All the evidence here is circumstantial. We know only that cases of attempted suicide by laudanum were common in Philadelphia at this time,<sup>40</sup> and that it was Dr. Chapman’s practice to administer opium, or laudanum, as a sedative in cases of hysteria.<sup>41</sup> This merely adds a little weight to the numerous stories that Ann died of an overdose of laudanum, whether taken by instruction, by accident or by intent.

But people thought and talked even if they did not know. One Lancaster lady wrote of the public reaction against Buchanan, “I believe that her friends now look upon him as her Murderer.”<sup>42</sup> The Colemans seemed to feel that way about it.

When Buchanan got the news, he immediately wrote an anguished letter to Mr. Coleman requesting permission to see the corpse and to walk as a mourner. The letter was dispatched to the Coleman home by messenger, refused at the door, and returned

<sup>37</sup> Philip Syng Physick, M.D. (1768-1837), in 1819 Prof. of Anatomy at the Univ. of Penna. *Ibid.*, p. 194.

<sup>38</sup> Extract from Kittera diary in notes of G. T. Curtis, Buchanan Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

<sup>39</sup> Dale to Hibshman, Dec. 16, 1819, *op. cit.*

<sup>40</sup> Case book of Dr. George B. Wood, College of Physicians of Philadelphia.

<sup>41</sup> G. D. Gilliam’s notes on Dr. Chapman’s lectures, 1818-1822, opposite page 210. University of Pennsylvania Library.

<sup>42</sup> Hannah Cochran to her husband, *loc. cit.*



to the sender, unopened. In this note, Buchanan had written: "It is now no time for explanation, but the time will come when you will discover that she, as well as I, have been much abused. God forgive the authors of it. . . . I may sustain the shock of her death, but I feel that happiness has fled from me forever."<sup>43</sup>

As he came face to face with the bitter hatred of the Colemans and the insidious suicide rumors, Buchanan slowly began to recognize the full horror of his situation. Unable to endure solitude, and even less able to confront people on the street, he fled to the rooms of Judge Walter Franklin, who was then living next door to the Coleman home. Here he tried to compose a fitting last tribute to Ann for publication in the *Lancaster Journal*. A printer's devil from editor Dickson's office, who was sent for the copy, recalled finding Buchanan at Franklin's, "so disturbed by grief that he was unable to write the notice," and said that Judge Franklin finally composed it himself.<sup>44</sup>

The Hemphills brought Ann Coleman's corpse to Lancaster on Saturday, December 11. On the Sabbath she was buried in the St. James Episcopal churchyard in a dreary ceremony witnessed by a vast number of people.<sup>45</sup> The appearance of the yard fitted the mood of the mourners. On this bleak December day the church structure lay half dismantled; the burying ground was littered with building materials for the new structure then in progress. It was symbolic of the wreckage of the life of this poor girl, and of the distraction of him who had loved her.

Buchanan tried to get a grip on himself and go back to work, but soon found this task impossible. Hannah Cochran's report suggests what he had to face. "After Mr. Buchanan was denied his requests," she wrote, "he secluded himself for a few days and then sallied forth as bold as ever. It is now thought that this affair will lessen his Consequence in Lancaster as he is the whole conversation of the town."<sup>46</sup> After a brief exposure to this, he

<sup>43</sup> Curtis, *Life of Buchanan*, I, p. 18.

<sup>44</sup> Ruth Scrapbook, pp. 56 and 64, undated clippings from Wyandot *Union* and *Boston Budget*. Curtis, in *Buchanan*, I, 16, states that Buchanan wrote the notice, basing this on an unidentified diary, possibly that of Judge Franklin, which cannot now be found. The "printer's devil" allegedly wrote the *Union* article.

<sup>45</sup> Dale to Hibshman, *loc. cit.*

<sup>46</sup> Hannah Cochran to her husband, *loc. cit.*

fled—no one knows where—but probably to his Mercersburg home.<sup>47</sup>

Buchanan eventually returned, prepared to walk the stony path which lay ahead. Although he now had powerful and bitter enemies, his friends came loyally to his support and obtained for him a nomination to Congress in the spring of 1820. As an example of what he was up against in the campaign, I may quote briefly from a long letter addressed to him by "Colebrook," a name that suggested the authorship of Ann Coleman's brother, who managed Colebrook furnace. "Allow me to congratulate you upon the notoriety you have acquired of late," it ran. "Formerly the smoothness of your looks and your habitual professions of moderation had led those who did not know you to suppose you mild and temperate." But now, the "late incidents of your life exhibit no small degree of defect in your moral conformation." Buchanan might get to Congress, said Colebrook, but if he did his constituents would have to expect his fee to be at least a thousand dollars a day.<sup>48</sup>

There are two short epilogues to this distressing tale, one relating to the Colemans, and one to Buchanan.

A year after Ann Coleman's death, Reverend William Augustus Muhlenberg came to Lancaster as co-rector of St. James Episcopal Church. This compelling twenty-six-year-old grandson of Frederick Augustus Muhlenberg rapidly developed an affectionate interest in Sarah Coleman. By 1822, however, a controversy had developed between the Reverend Mr. Muhlenberg, who wished to initiate evening church services, and Robert Coleman, then rector's warden and leading layman of the church, who refused to tolerate any such innovation. "When Mr. Muhlenberg insisted on his duty and his rights as a clergyman and determined to institute such a service, Judge Coleman forbade him ever to enter his house again."<sup>49</sup> Coleman now wrote into his will a long provision that the \$50,000 he was leaving to Sarah should be kept in trust for her by her brothers, and should not be accessible to her husband after she married.<sup>50</sup> Mr. Muhlenberg, on his part, con-

<sup>47</sup> Amos Ellmaker to Buchanan, Dec. 20, 1819, Buchanan Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

<sup>48</sup> "Colebrook" to Buchanan, July, 1820, MS in Foundation Collection.

<sup>49</sup> Klein and Diller, *History of St. James Church*, 102-105.

<sup>50</sup> Will prepared in March, 1822.

fided to his diary that "for no earthly consideration whatever, not even the attainment of the dear object of my heart, will I sacrifice what I believe to be the interests of my church. Oh Lord, Help me!"

Robert Coleman died on August 14, 1825, and his will was entered at the Court House on September 3 of that year. Shortly after the provisions of the will became public knowledge, Sarah Coleman left abruptly for Philadelphia, where she mysteriously died at precisely the age of Ann at the latter's death.

Her brother Edward then forced Muhlenberg out of the church by offering the vestry \$5,000 if he would resign by a given date—an offer which the vestry accepted and Muhlenberg validated by retiring a week before the stated deadline. Muhlenberg never married and never returned to Lancaster.<sup>51</sup>

These events had an important bearing on Buchanan. They made it clear to the people of Lancaster that his had not been the entire responsibility for what had happened to Ann Coleman. After Sarah and William Augustus Muhlenberg had encountered a very similar experience, the community was inclined to shift some of the onus from the unhappy suitors on to the Colemans.

Nor did James Buchanan ever marry. The Ann Coleman affair of itself was enough to have produced this result. Yet there were other events of the same period which may also have given him pause until he concluded, as he did by 1840, that he was too old to establish a family.

Recall for a moment John Passmore, the jovial prothonotary. He invited Buchanan to join him in quarters in 1814, just a few months after he had suffered the full burden of sorrow which can be allotted to a family-loving man. Passmore had lost his seven-months-old son in 1812, his two-year-old boy in 1813, and his wife the following spring—the whole family gone in three successive years. Buchanan was very close to him, and learned from him some of the risks of the married state.

Molton C. Rogers, Buchanan's law associate and constant companion, experienced an equally crushing misfortune. His young wife, Eliza Jacobs Rogers, died during the birth of her first child in 1822, plunging her husband into a state of almost inconsolable

<sup>51</sup> Klein and Diller, *loc. cit.*

grief. The little daughter survived motherless only eleven months.

At about the same time, in 1821, Buchanan's father died, leaving James as the eldest and financially most competent man of the family, to take care of his mother and six children. Of four sisters, three were married to husbands who had all they could do to provide the necessities for their families. The two boys were still of school age. By the time Buchanan had made adequate financial provision for the immediate family, his sisters and their husbands, in rapid succession, died, leaving him as legal guardian for their children. Three of these came to live with him permanently, mothered largely by his housekeeper, Hetty Parker, when they were not away at school. For seven other nephews and nieces who were only half-orphaned, Buchanan became the financial security as long as he lived. By the 1840's, when time had healed the wound of his unhappy romance with Ann Coleman, he had acquired a substantial family of his own kin from which he derived many of the experiences and satisfactions of home life. Furthermore, he was by then fifty years old.

I hope that this background may suggest some new meaning to the why and the wherefore of Buchanan's failure to marry—his "anti-matrimony" as a friend described it. Not only his remorse, but also the fact that he preserved Ann Coleman's letters throughout his life, suggest that he never fully recovered from his love for this girl or from her tragic death.

In many respects, Buchanan's experience with Ann Coleman was symbolic and typical of his whole life. It represented the cup of his fondest ambition, turned bitter at the very moment of fulfillment through no evident fault of his own. Thus it was, too, in the pattern of his political career. In 1861, as in 1819, James Buchanan became the central figure in an emotional storm which became only the more violent when he applied to it the strongest traits of his own character: self-respect, self-restraint, and a hyperconscientious devotion to civic duty. This picture of a man, driven by the deepest and finest elements of his own nature, to actions which inevitably must lead him to personal misfortune: this picture portrays human tragedy in its most classic sense.