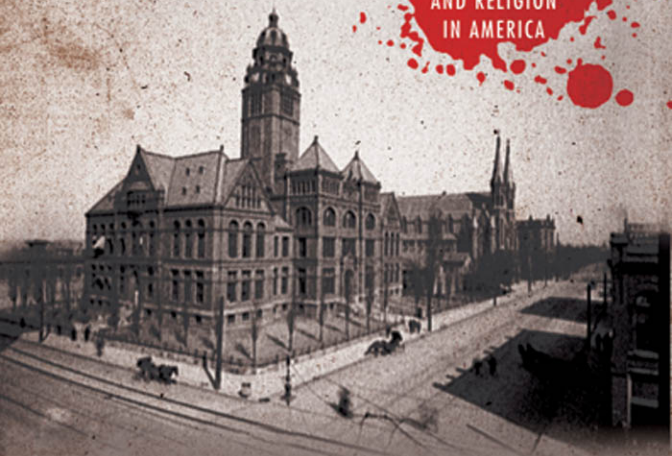


RISING ROAD

A TRUE TALE
OF LOVE, RACE,
AND RELIGION
IN AMERICA



SHARON DAVIES

Rising Road

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*A True Tale of Love,
Race, and Religion
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For Alan, Heather, and Tyler

*May the road rise up to meet you.
May the wind be always at your back.
May the sun shine warm upon your face;
the rains fall soft upon your fields and until we meet again,
may God hold you in the palm of His hand.*

—Traditional Irish Blessing

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

THE EVENTS DESCRIBED in this book are true. To remain true to them, throughout, I use the terms for African Americans and others that the nation used at the time, words like “Negro” and “colored,” or worse. I hope that readers will understand that I intend no offense by using the outdated and sometimes deliberately hurtful terms so frequently used when these events occurred.

About the Book's Title

The inspiration for the title *Rising Road* was the aged Irish blessing set out at the front of the book. It seemed an appropriate homage to the life of Father James Coyle, native son of Ireland. More broadly though, the title is offered as a reminder of our very human (if at moments largely aspirational) journey away from fears that can divide us. Perhaps it is always in hindsight that we are best able to see the failings of our prejudices. If so, may the road continue to rise before us, bringing us closer to the day when it is our commonalities rather than our differences that we see most clearly.

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Rising Road

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Prologue

THE SOREST MISFORTUNE of Ruth Stephenson's young life was not that she was born (and died) a decade or more too soon to ever really enjoy the promises women's suffrage would bring. Nor was it that she was born into a region of the country that could be relied on to be particularly unpliant when it came to the concern of women's liberation. Nor even that she was born into a household ruled by an ordained Methodist minister with a taste for discipline and guns and a love for the robes of the Ku Klux Klan. The sorest misfortune of Ruth Stephenson's young life was that she was raised an only child.

Ruth's mother had given birth to one other child, but the baby had not survived, which left only Ruth. Perhaps had Edwin and Mary Stephenson had other children (as their parents before them had done, and their closest neighbors to boot), maybe even a pack of them, as was the habit of their day, Ruth's parents might have developed that special resilience of those too outnumbered and beleaguered to worry over nonfatal threats to their offspring. Or perhaps if they had had just one more besides her, the inevitable perplexing contrast between the two children would have convinced Edwin and Mary that the flaws they observed in them must be the children's own. For if the parents and their rearing habits had not varied, only the inherent character and character flaws of the children themselves could explain such differences. And with that realization Edwin and Mary Stephenson might have relaxed, and let Ruth's missteps (if missteps they were) be her own.

But for whatever reason, and though it was not the custom of the time, Ruth Stephenson was Edwin and Mary Stephenson's only child, and as such, they dutifully showered on her every suffocating over-protection, every

unrelenting expectation, every crushing judgment they could muster, in the loving expectation that through these lessons she would come to share their loves and convictions, as well as their hates and fears. So when the girl began to think differently, her flaws (if flaws they were) must have seemed like Mary's and Edwin's own—defects in *their* house, which of course needed to be cleansed.

Birmingham, Alabama, 1921

There was little to distinguish Thursday, August 11, 1921, from any of the other days that choked Birmingham that week beneath a blanket of heat, with the exception that Ruth Stephenson and Pedro Gussman chose it as their wedding day. And likely the unremarkable character of the day was part of the couple's plan, as they would have wanted a day with as little to commend itself as possible. A day less apt to stand out; one that would draw no attention. As if only on a day so pedestrian, and by a strategy uncluttered by its particulars, could they ever hope to bring the thing off.

The trouble was not that the law prevented Ruth Stephenson and Pedro Gussman's union, though in 1921, like most states, Alabama had a great deal to say about who could marry whom, and who could not. At minimum, most states specified the age at which couples became free to make the decision to wed by themselves, without the consent of a parent. Alabama set it at twenty-one for men and eighteen for women. Younger lovers than that could marry, provided their parents concurred, but to protect against fraud in such cases the state gave the youths only two choices: either present their ostensibly "consenting" parents to the probate judge in person, or produce the guardians' assent in writing, the authenticity of which the couple was required to guarantee by agreeing to pay the state the mammoth sum of \$200 if the consent of any of their parents was proven false.¹

Both Pedro and Ruth had cleared the state's age hurdles. Pedro long before; he was forty-two. And Ruth had celebrated her eighteenth birthday on August 29th the year before; she would be nineteen by the end of

the month. Though some in Birmingham might have disapproved of the twenty-four-year gap between them, there was ample precedent for such generational chasms. The critical thing was that no law precluded it.

On the question of how Pedro Gussman had snared a fiancé twenty-four years his junior, pictures of him in 1921 provided one answer: Pedro enjoyed a distinctly youthful appearance. His draft registration card, filled out in 1919, described his height as “medium” and his build “slender,” the naturally lean frame of a man accustomed to muscle-straining work. Since his arrival in Birmingham about fourteen years before, Pedro had made his living by hanging wallpaper for Sherwin Williams in homes around the city. He was undoubtedly strong and fit. Born in “Porto Rico” (the accepted spelling at the time), his complexion was smooth and tanned, and his dark clear eyes sloped ever-so-slightly downward, giving him a faint look of sadness and a vague vulnerability with its strong romantic appeal. Even if other men his age could no longer attract the attention of young women like Ruth, apparently Pedro Gussman had little trouble.²

When it came to state tinkering on the question of appropriate and inappropriate marriage partners, however, age restrictions were only the tip of the iceberg. Far more serious constraints were state laws based on race. At one time or another, most of the states had passed laws that banned marriage and sexual intimacy between the races, albeit with a robust disagreement around the question of precisely which racial partners needed to be kept apart. In many states the answer took on a decidedly regional cast, varying with the types and numbers of racial “undesirables” with which they happened to be cursed. For most of the northern Atlantic seaboard states, therefore, simple demographics seemed to make the threat of whites marrying anyone but Negroes pretty much a minor concern. The most common cross-race ban in that part of the country prohibited whites from marrying or fornicating with Negroes or the offspring of Negroes, but no one else. California, by contrast, with its significant “Chinese problem,” banned whites from marrying or laying with Negroes, Mulattoes, or *Mongolians*.³

The rules did not always follow such an easily understood path, of course. As is so often the case with laws that nest within fear, demographic logic sometimes slipped away when lawmakers dwelled on the threat that the amalgamation of the races posed to the “integrity and purity” of the white race—that “abominable mixture,” that “spurious issue.” Even states blessed with overwhelmingly white populations seemed to fear that a failure to prohibit interracial unions would attract them, like fleas. Taking no chances, the state of Nebraska banned whites from marrying or laying with Negroes despite the fact that according to the 1920 census, only 1 percent of its population

was black, and Idaho, with a defilement of only 920 Negroes in the entire state—a meager 0.2 percent of its population—thought it wise nonetheless to declare marriage between whites and Mongolians, Negroes, or mulattoes “illegal and void.”⁴

But no part of the country could out worry the Deep South, where the numbers of Negroes were greater, and attention to skin color bordered on hysteria.⁵ Long before Ruth Stephenson and Pedro Gussman decided to wed, lawmakers in Alabama had declared the marriage of any white person to any “Negro or any descendant of a Negro” to be a crime. Yet voters in the state seemed to lack confidence that the law was sufficiently indelible. As if living in fear that their elected representatives might someday reverse themselves and decide that marriage between whites and Negroes was tolerable after all, white voters decided an additional precaution was necessary, and they fashioned a section of the state’s constitution to provide it: “The Legislature shall *never* pass any law to authorize or legalize any marriage between any white person and a Negro, or a descendant of a Negro,” the Alabama charter read.⁶

Occasionally, a couple would attempt to buck the rules, of course, but even if the lovers managed somehow to procure a marriage certificate and someone to take their vows, upon discovery, the anti-miscegenation states regarded their union a nullity—without binding effect, a colossal waste of time. If the newlyweds thought they might escape this fate by fleeing to a sister state without an anti-miscegenation ban, they would quickly be disabused of the notion upon their return. The home states considered themselves under no obligation to honor such out-of-state liberalities. Worse, offenders of the racial marriage rules were not just ignored, they could be unceremoniously tossed in jail, including anyone who had knowingly helped them. For it was common for such states to threaten not only the cross-race couples with criminal punishment, but the clerks who issued them licenses, and any cleric foolish enough to perform their ceremony as well.

Ruth Stephenson and Pedro Gussman would have been aware of these restrictions when they decided to marry; Birmingham authorities kept it no secret that offenders of the state’s anti-miscegenation rules would be promptly prosecuted. There was a need for vigilance. The roots of the laws, their proponents claimed, could be traced back to the Bible. God himself had decreed the separation of the races.⁷ The lawbreakers could expect no lenience. Thus, earlier that year, the grand jury had indicted Edith Labue, a married Italian immigrant, and Jim Rollins, a Negro, for having sex when it became clear that Rollins had fathered a child with the married woman. For a time, Edith LaBue had explained her baby’s dark complexion by claiming she

had been scared by a Negro man during her pregnancy, as if it were possible for such an emotional trauma to actually defile a child's appearance. Labue's husband, who worked late driving a taxi down at the Metropolitan Hotel, seemed to accept the story, especially after his wife's doctors told him that "it was possible that she could have got scared at a Negro." But something caused the police to be suspicious, as one night in early March 1921, while her husband was off at work, the police arrived at the Labue home at 2216 Avenue F, kicked the door in, and found Edith Labue and the Negro Jim Rollins "standing up right close to one another" in the back kitchen. The baby looked just like Rollins, one of the officers said, and the Negro eventually confessed his paternity.⁸

But as far as Ruth Stephenson and Pedro Gussman were concerned, the fact that no white person could marry or have sexual contact with a Negro had nothing to do with them. Ruth was the white daughter of Edwin and Mary Stephenson, and Pedro was Puerto Rican, an ethnic group that state and federal authorities had tended to classify as "white," or at least not "Negro," since Spain had ceded Puerto Rico to the United States at the conclusion of the Spanish-American War in the Treaty of Paris of 1898. Like many of the other immigrant groups that flooded into the country in the beginning of the twentieth century, newcomers like Pedro Gussman may have arrived at their ports of entry without a "racialized" world view of themselves, but if so they quickly learned to develop one. And not surprisingly the race that all preferred to lay claim to in America was "white."⁹

In truth, many of the "native whites" considered the waves of immigrants spilling into the country as only slightly more palatable than the Negroes; an antipathy that for a time made the newcomers from southeastern Europe and elsewhere, with their darker complexions and their foreign tongues, perhaps best considered the nation's "in-between peoples." But that was enough to spare them the Negro's special degradations, a species of disadvantages lost on no one. For if in the world of social interaction Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, Italians, Greeks, and Jews (and even at one time the Irish) were considered by their white Anglo-Saxon neighbors as not precisely "white," they could take solace in the thought that neither were they deemed "black or belonging to a race proscribed by law." Although the process would take some time, they were becoming "white by default,"¹⁰ a status that seemed to suit them, for as one historian later put it, the "new immigrants and their children quickly learned that 'the worst thing one could be in this Promised Land was 'colored.'"¹¹

This meant that even if Pedro Gussman's tan complexion and noticeable Spanish accent put off some of the "native white stock" of Jefferson County, when it came to his marriage to Ruth Stephenson, they could keep

it to themselves. For legal and social purposes, he counted as white, just like Ruth. And if anyone cared to look for proof of Gussman's racial *bona fides*, evidence in color-conscious Birmingham was abundant. He roomed in all-white boardinghouses, and he ate in sections of restaurants cordoned off for white patrons. Some years before, he had married a white woman without objection. The U.S. Census of 1920 listed him as white, as did his voter registration card, which meant that he was entitled to vote in the primaries in which only whites could vote—a strategy devised to disenfranchise Negroes near the turn of the century. Years later, Pedro Gussman's death certificate again would list his race as white, and throughout the years he lived and worked in the city, he was spared the letter *c* for "colored" next to his name in the *Birmingham City Directory*—the equivalent of today's phone book—an ignominy all the Negroes in Birmingham silently endured, as if, even in print the need to segregate whites from blacks could not be overemphasized.¹²

With no racial bans standing in their way, once Ruth Stephenson reached the age of majority on her eighteenth birthday, the law of Alabama had little to say about the wisdom of her decision to wed Pedro Gussman. There was no *legal* obstacle to the marriage. If there was trouble with the union, therefore, the problem lay outside the state—with her church or her household—for quite naturally, Ruth's family or neighbors might be less keen about the coupling for reasons of their own.

It is difficult to know just how much Ruth Stephenson really liked Pedro Gussman when she agreed to marry him. She might have liked him very much, as Pedro was the kind of man capable of capturing the hearts of women. He had certainly done so before. A woman from Nashville had hoped to make a life with him after he arrived in the states as a young man, and she married him—mute testimony to his appeal—but then she died, leaving Pedro without a mate. After her burial, Pedro found a fresh start in Birmingham, where women continued to take notice of him.¹³ Besides his dark good looks and fit physique, Pedro Gussman was soft-spoken and dependable. He had a reputation for kindness and for working hard. It is not difficult to understand his appeal. So it is entirely possible that Ruth Stephenson was drawn to Pedro for many of the same reasons other women had been.

But it is also possible that what Ruth Stephenson saw in Pedro Gussman was more a convenient means of escape than a lifetime of happiness. By their wedding day, though the couple had known each other for nearly five years, they could not have spent a lot of time alone together. Ruth was only thirteen years old when the two first met, when her parents hired Pedro to hang some wallpaper at their home. It must have taken some time to complete the

job, as Pedro later said that the family permitted him to board in the house while he worked. But Mary Stephenson, as the matriarch and homemaker, would usually have been somewhere about the house, and it seems unlikely she would have left her teenage daughter alone with Gussman for long. Even if the two managed to talk now and then, their conversations could not have been many. Yet Pedro came to like the girl, enough to ask her to marry him, despite her youth.

Many years later, Ruth told others about Pedro's proposal, but never in a way that made it seem as though she had considered it seriously. Perhaps she realized that there was no sense in entertaining the idea, for even if she had been tempted, at age thirteen the law would have required her parents' consent, surely a nonstarter. If Ruth was flattered by the attention of the hardworking paperhanger with the doleful eyes, the prospect of their spending a life together must have appeared unlikely.¹⁴

The best evidence, then, that Ruth was actually attracted to Pedro, and that she might actually have taken his marriage proposal seriously, is the fact that, after he completed his work at the Stephenson house, the two stayed in contact with each other. Sometimes they met by accident, on the street on their way to somewhere else. When they did, Pedro would pass Ruth little slips of paper with his current telephone number so that she would know how to reach him. The numbers changed over the years, as Pedro boarded with the families for whom he worked, or roomed at one of the many boardinghouses in the city when his patrons were unable to make room for him. No matter where he happened to be, with Pedro's slips of paper, Ruth could reach him if she liked. And it seems she did use them, for according to Ruth, sometimes the two met by design rather than accident.

In a city with few secrets, it is difficult to think that these meetings could have been frequent. But occasionally, Ruth said, she and Pedro would slip away and meet each other at a picture show, where a romance kindled at age thirteen could have been reignited under the theater's soothing cloak of darkness. Over those years, Ruth told a reporter later, Pedro renewed his proposal of marriage more than once. So it is possible that Ruth and Pedro's romance was true in fact, a simmering attraction that built slowly, fueled by hidden smiles and stolen scraps of time alone as Ruth approached the age of majority. But it is also possible that Ruth had reasons besides love to accept Pedro Gussman's offer of marriage, six years after they met. Perhaps on August 11, 1921, her chosen wedding day, she was just tired of waiting for things in her life to change.¹⁵

Had things been different, Ruth and Pedro would probably have preferred to be married in Birmingham, at the magnificent St. Paul's Catholic Church on

Third Avenue, where Pedro had long been a parishioner. But St. Paul's was only two doors down from the Jefferson County Courthouse, Ruth's father's preferred base of operations, and the odds of running into him there were simply too great. They could not risk it.

The irony of having to travel out of the city to be married to avoid crossing paths with Reverend Edwin R. Stephenson, of all people, could not have escaped the couple. In Birmingham, Stephenson was well known as the "Marrying Parson," a moniker he had earned for his daily traipses to the Jefferson County Courthouse, and the great number of runaway couples he had married there. Every day of the week, Ruth's father would stand on the courthouse steps "on the lookout for business," or linger about the probate court, where youngsters came to obtain marriage licenses. The minister was tall and slim, dressed all in black, and had a mustache so full it hid his top lip almost entirely from view. And he was the picture of helpfulness. *Are you looking to get married?* he would ask the couples solicitously, before explaining that he was an ordained minister. He would guide them to the office that could issue them a license. Why should they know how to find it? He would help them find witnesses. Did they need someone to perform the ceremony? He could do it for a small fee.¹⁶

Once the state of Alabama had seen fit to issue such couples a license to wed, Edwin Stephenson was not one to stand in the way of love. Though he must have known that many of the young men and women he approached chose haste over pomp out of fear of interference with their plans, there is no evidence to suggest that he ever refused to perform the rites, or probed for information about their families' feelings about the union, or inquired about the couples' preparedness. On occasion he was known to delay the nuptials, but only long enough to lecture the young lovers about the seriousness of marital vows, as if a sermon by the willing minister was somehow needed to lend the occasion solemnity.

As for venue, the weddings took place where they had to under such circumstances, as Stephenson was what was known at the time as a "local preacher": he had preached to audiences on special occasions, but he had no regular pastorate. With no pulpit or altar to offer the young couples, he married them in stealth, secluded from the protestations of their families, in the only place he could: a darkened corner of the Jefferson County Courthouse—"near the end of the hall on the second floor."¹⁷

My father should have been the person best able to understand our decision to wed the way we did, Ruth must have thought.

Edwin Stephenson had not always been the city's "Marrying Parson." When the Stephensons moved from Georgia to Birmingham in 1909, Edwin took

a job at a barbershop on Twenty-second Street, and for the next five years, whenever he was asked about the nature of his work, he answered that he was a “barber.” Entries in multiple issues of the *Birmingham City Directory* confirmed this as his professed trade through 1918. The idea of trying his hand at any other work might never have occurred to Stephenson, had he not shot a bullet through his foot while cleaning his pistol one day. The wound was not fatal, nor even life threatening, but it never healed properly and it pained him greatly. When he could no longer stand on it for hours on end as barbers must do, he was forced to put up his shears and look for other work.¹⁸

There is no record of how Edwin Stephenson first thought to use the ministerial credentials he had brought with him to Birmingham when he moved his family there. Even then he had claimed his ordination into the Methodist ministry—back in Newnan, Georgia, he said, in 1905 at the age of thirty-five—but it wasn’t until after the shooting accident that he began to claim the ministry as his vocation. In contrast to the description he had given the census taker in 1910 of his work—“barber” he had said—by the time the 1920 census taker came to call, Edwin Stephenson had routinely begun to refer to himself as “the Rev. E. R. Stephenson,” even without a pulpit from which to preach. Entries in subsequent issues of the *Birmingham City Directory* listed him that way as well, and soon he was known as the city’s “Marrying Parson.”¹⁹

It can no longer be known precisely when it was that the Reverend Robert Echols, presiding pastor of the First Methodist Episcopal Church, South (M.E.C., South), first learned that Edwin Stephenson was “hanging around the courthouse” marrying people. But some time around August 1920, Reverend Echols decided he had to take action, and he asked his parishioner to come to the church for a meeting. The M.E.C., South had had no trouble with Edwin Stephenson up to that time. When Stephenson had moved his family to Birmingham years before, he had mentioned his ordination within the ministry to Echols, but the newcomer had never been awarded a pastorate, and he had seemed to understand that the M.E.C., South had no post to offer him. There had never been a question about the man’s real trade; and the church had been happy to welcome the barber and his family into its fold.²⁰

Reverend Echols probably thought to himself that the whole mess could have been avoided had Stephenson just been a little more careful with his gun. But, as far as Rev. Echols was concerned, the fact that Stephenson had shot himself in the foot did nothing to enhance his pastoral standing. Had his parishioner sought Echols’s advice about what he might do to support his

family after his injury, Echols might not have had many good ideas, but he certainly would have counseled Stephenson against marrying runaway couples for a fee. Weddings were solemn events, and a Methodist minister who rummaged after misguided lovers in the hallways of Birmingham's courthouse was a rank embarrassment. So when the two men met, Echols told Stephenson that the business just had to stop.²¹

The meeting of the two ministers took place sometime around Ruth's eighteenth birthday in August 1920 at the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, which stood proudly on the corner of Nineteenth Street and Sixth Avenue. The handsome building was built of rustic stone in the American Romanesque style invented by Mr. Henry Hobson Richardson, the widely acclaimed architect of Trinity Church in Boston. Work on the M.E.C., South had been finished nearly twenty years before, after much hand-wringing over the spiraling costs of its construction. In August 1890, church planners had thought \$80,000 would surely be enough, but only a month later they raised the figure to \$100,000. By January 1891, the prediction had jumped again, to \$125,000, then to \$150,000 in June. When the church finally opened its doors later that year, the final cost of the project totaled \$160,000, twice the original estimate (an amount that excluded the value of the land on which the church stood, which Colonel James W. Sloss had generously donated to the parish free of charge).

Despite the steep price tag, the congregation must have been pleased. The M.E.C., South was the very picture of the Protestant break from the Gothic architectural style so favored by the Catholics. Unlike the soaring interior arches, haunting stone sculptures, and "distant altar" of St. Paul's Catholic Church on Third Avenue, the "reform" architecture of the M.E.C., South enclosed a grand auditorium that seated twenty-four hundred, juxtaposing a massive, circular balcony over the square footprint of the sanctuary below. Every seat in the house enjoyed the same focal point—the pastor's pulpit—enabling Reverend Echols to deliver his sermons and read passages from the scriptures literally surrounded by his congregants, for the circular design of the room situated the parishioners "always immediately before him, gathered in the community of prayer." Grand, rounded stained-glass windows echoed the chamber's circular themes and let in filtered light.²²

It is not hard to imagine the wave of resentment Edwin Stephenson must have felt during that meeting with his pastor that day, as Robert Echols demeaned the services he had provided to couples in the courthouse. He was an ordained minister just like Echols, Stephenson probably thought to himself, even if he had never enjoyed the same comforts: the pleasures of a

devoted congregation; the privileges of a lectern from which to preach. As an ordained member of the clergy, the laws of Alabama plainly authorized him to perform marriages wherever and whenever he chose. Did Robert Echols imagine himself wiser than the state?

There can be little doubt that part of Stephenson's reaction to his pastor's scolding that day was due to the fact that he had already grown accustomed to the privileges of the cloth. It must have felt good to be able to refer to himself and his profession as "minister" or "preacher" instead of "barber" when people came to call. Imbued with inherent stature, the position even seemed to demand that its bearer don a particular look to carry it off. So Stephenson had begun to wear the garb of the ministry—the all-black suit and crisp white shirt—and he must have liked the deference and respect the uniform seemed to evoke. Admittedly, the shift did not move him into the top-ranking stratum of Birmingham elites: that top 1 percent dominated by the owners of the iron and steel companies, coal mines, and railroad or banking interests. But it did place him in tier of men just below: the realm occupied by the city's attorneys, engineers, journalists, physicians, clergymen and teachers. The workforce of Birmingham could be sorted into three fairly distinct classes at the time: the industrialists plainly ranked at the top. As James Bowron put it after moving to the city to oversee the financial operations of the Tennessee Coal, Iron and Railroad Company: "I found on coming to Birmingham that to be in the iron trade was to be respectable; to be an officer of an iron making corporation was to have the entree to the best of society; but to be the chief residential officer of the largest corporation was to carry the key to the Kingdom of Heaven."²³ Though not in that revered company, Edwin Stephenson's metamorphosis to "minister" situated him within the group of professional men in the "middle-ranking set," and dissociated him from the lowly company of the city's "wage earners"—the men who comprised the bottom 80 percent of the city's workers—where barbers were lumped unapologetically alongside farmers, grocers, saloon dealers, and worse, coal miners.²⁴

So when Echols demanded that his parishioner cease his marriage practices in the Jefferson County Courthouse, Edwin Stephenson simply refused. He and Mary would sooner switch churches, the Marrying Parson told his pastor coldly. And that is exactly what they did.²⁵

Edwin and Mary Stephenson considered themselves good parents. They took seriously the need to cabin the influences to which their daughter Ruth was exposed. So as the list of dangers that threatened Ruth seemed to grow larger

with every passing day, Edwin Stephenson sought comfort in the fellowship of men of like mind: the brotherhood of the hooded empire.

The crosses of the revived Ku Klux Klan had burned with renewed intensity since the chilly Thanksgiving night in 1915 when William Simmons and a small troupe of white-robed men had climbed the slopes of Stone Mountain in nearby Atlanta and heralded the return of the secret brotherhood. Although it would take some time for the Imperial Wizard to reignite the country's passion for the furtive (and at one time, disgraced) organization, by the 1920s Simmons's dreams for the revived Klan had begun to ripen, and the fruit in Birmingham seemed especially promising. Within a year of the Klan's revival, Simmons had chosen Birmingham as the site of Alabama's first chapter, naming it the "Robert E. Lee Klavern No. 1" after the Confederacy's greatest war hero. It quickly lived up to its name, becoming the Klan's most active affiliate and a potent disseminator of the organization's dire warnings. Although Negroes would forever remain "the foremost Klan target," during this period Catholics, Jews, and foreigners were added to its list as well, and the brotherhood's literature made clear why the members of each of these groups created dangers against which every loyal American should be on guard. On the question of Catholics, the Klan leadership in Alabama "accused the Pope of making secret treaties to bring on World War I" and "of stockpiling arms for an imminent Catholic takeover of Washington," and circulated "ghastly tales about the carnal lust of priests and the evils of parochial education."²⁶

A subscriber to such views, Edwin Stephenson had sworn the brotherhood's eternal vow of secrecy upon his initiation, pledging never to disclose its confidences. Yet despite the Klan's code of secrecy, Mary and Ruth were well aware of Edwin's membership. Evidently, within his home he did not bother to hide it. Neither did he trouble about putting the telltale sign of his allegiance to the brotherhood—a set of the empire's signal white robes—out of sight of his curious daughter. One Halloween, Ruth surprised Edwin and Mary Stephenson by fetching the robes and donning them as her chosen costume. Her parents' peals of laughter, Ruth said later, exhibited their approval.²⁷

It is unlikely that Mary and Edwin Stephenson saw Charles Sweeny's article published in the *Nation* in November 1920 reporting that death threats had been made against the life of Father James E. Coyle, the presiding pastor of St. Paul's Catholic Church and Birmingham's most prominent Catholic leader. Ruth's parents would have disliked the progressive bent of the *Nation*. They tended to rely on the local papers for their news, and if they considered other reading materials at all, periodicals with an anti-Catholic bent would

have been more in keeping with their way of thinking. There were plenty to pick from. The country was awash in anti-Catholic literature at the time, and not only in the South. Publications like Tom Watson's *Jeffersonian* and Wilbur Phelps's *Menace* crowded the newsstands everywhere one looked.

Tom Watson of Georgia had begun his wildly popular series of articles denouncing the Roman papist threat in 1910, beneath such irresistible titles as "The Roman Catholic Hierarchy: The Deadliest Menace to Our Liberties and Our Civilization," or "How the Confessional Is Used by Priests to Ruin Women," and "What Happens in Convents." Other installments played on his audience's racial fears as well, like: "The Sinister Portent of Negro Priests." Watson's readers loved them.

Capitalizing on his success, Watson launched a new series in 1912: a string of open letters to James Cardinal Gibbons, the Archbishop of Baltimore and public face of the nation's Roman Catholics. The letter-writing campaign ran uninterrupted in every issue of the *Jeffersonian* that Watson published over the next decade, which according to noted historian C. Vann Woodward, gave it the feel of a "deliberately planned crusade," "matchless in its insulting offensiveness." In one of the letters, Watson lamented the inadequacy of the English language itself to capture the depths of his scorn for the Catholics' beliefs: there simply "is no discoverable vocabulary" that will ever "adequately express the profundity of my loathing and contempt for your stupid, degrading faith," Watson wrote to Cardinal Gibbons. The thirst of his readers for such loutish messages appeared unquenchable: after completing each series, Watson's articles were bundled together, bound into books or pamphlets, and sold again.

Tom Watson had not always displayed such antipathy for Catholics and Negroes. When running for political office as a younger man, Watson had bucked the crowd. At a time when demands for white supremacy were the currency of the day, Watson called instead for an "alliance" with Negroes, as the only way to protect the interests of poor farmers and the working class. In hindsight, this populist message was almost certainly strategic—demanding not so much *social* equality for Negroes, as political equality—for if the votes of the great number of freed Negroes living in Alabama at the time could be added to those of poor and laboring whites, their champion (whom Watson hoped to be) would be unbeatable. For a short time, the calculation proved right, and Watson was swept into the U.S. Congress as an "Alliance Democrat" in 1890. But his victory was fleeting. Only two years later, Watson lost his bid for a second term, and he was defeated again in 1894. Sorely embittered, Watson attributed these defeats to the manipulations of big-city corporate elites who had co-opted, he thought, the votes of "easily duped"

Catholics and Negroes. Years later, these bigoted resentments exploded raw and ragged in the columns of his *Jeffersonian*: soulless Southern industrialist elites were determined to crush America's most glorious, agrarian traditions, Watson warned. Catholics were "laying in guns and ammunition" in preparation for their plot to seize power, "working day and night, spending money like water to 'Make America Catholic!'" Negroes "simply [had] no comprehension of virtue, honesty, truth, gratitude and principle," he wrote, making it necessary to lynch or flog them occasionally to show "that a sense of justice yet lives among the people."²⁸

With such venom-filled messages filling the pages of the *Jeffersonian*, Wilbur Franklin Phelps was inspired to launch his own anti-Catholic weekly, *The Menace*, in Aurora, Missouri in 1911. Following in Watson's footsteps, Phelps and his staff railed against the encroaching Catholic threat in each issue, exalting the patriotism personified by the simple, honest lives of rural Americans. The nationally-circulated "patriotic" weekly plainly struck a chord. Within three years the *Menace* boasted a circulation of over a million subscribers, and employed a staff of 135, who ran a fully-equipped publishing plant that, in addition to the paper, churned out a slew of anti-Catholic booklets and "arranged engagements for anti-Catholic lecturers" as well.²⁹

Even if Edwin and Mary Stephenson had not read the *Nation's* article about the death threats against Father James Coyle and the pledges to burn his church to the ground, they certainly would have heard word of the threats buzzing around town. But there is no reason to think the news would have troubled them. Ruth Stephenson had known her whole life that her parents hated Catholics, she said later. Although their feelings on the matter could not have been clearer to their daughter, knowing how children sometimes reject the good guidance of their elders, and perhaps especially that of their parents, Mary and Edwin directed Ruth's attention to the wealth of evidence that existed to support their view of the "Romanists." Couldn't she see? The better part of Birmingham feared that Catholics were plotting to overthrow the government. The fear had fueled the resurgence of the Klan, and set the agendas of other secret fraternal anti-Catholic organizations as well: groups like the Masons, the Knights of Pythias, the Odd Fellows, the Guardians of Liberty (G.O.L.s), and the True Americans, or "T.A.s," as they were popularly known around town. Mary Stephenson told her daughter many times that she wished she could put the bomb beneath St. Paul's Catholic Church herself.³⁰

The beliefs fomented by these groups were hardly confined to the South, although there were some particularly loud voices in that region dedicated

to getting the anti-Catholic message out into the public. Learning from earlier miscalculations, Tom Watson in nearby Georgia, one of the “chief instigators of southern anti-Catholicism,” had gotten himself elected to the United States Senate running on an anti-Catholic platform.³¹ In 1916, Florida voters signaled their concern about the Catholic menace as well, by electing Baptist minister Sidney Johnston Catts governor after he vowed to roll back the papist tide. On the campaign trail, the dark horse candidate had deliberately exploited the voters’ anti-Catholic fears to outmatch his more experienced opponents. “Nothing in Florida above the Nation’s flag,” one of Sidney Catts’s campaign ads bellowed with patriotic bluster: “As Roman Catholicism puts her allegiance to the pope above the flag, Mr. Catts stands against the invasion of the state of Florida in her politics!” Winning the election by a margin of over nine thousand votes, Catts promptly made good on his campaign promise to pass a law that had been defeated twice before: an act that empowered the state to inspect convents and monasteries without a warrant.³²

Through these and other sources, Protestants of good will like Edwin and Mary Stephenson had been put on the alert: the Catholics worshiped idols, the messengers warned. They kidnapped young women and children, and enslaved them in their monasteries and convents. They opposed the public school system. Their white nuns ran schools for Negro schoolchildren, which threatened the dominance of the white race. The Knights of Columbus, supposedly a benevolent Catholic fraternal organization, were actually trained soldiers; men who had sworn an oath to wage “a war of extermination and mutilation of all heretics.”³³ They were planning to take over the country, it was said. They were storing arsenals of weapons and ammunitions in the basements of their buildings, just waiting for the moment when their foreign leader, the pope, directed the insurrection to begin.³⁴

It would thus be hard to overstate the supreme disappointment Edwin and Mary Stephenson must have felt when their daughter, still a child, began to exhibit clear, undeniable signs of being seduced by that hated religion. Despite all they had tried to teach her, their daughter was beguiled by the deceptions of popery! So Edwin warned Ruth that if she continued her childish fantasies about the Catholic Church she would end up getting someone killed.³⁵

Despite his warning, Edwin Stephenson discovered Ruth at age twelve sitting and talking with Father James Coyle on the porch of St. Paul’s rectory one day, as if her being there was the most natural thing in the world. The sight of his daughter sitting with a Catholic priest in full public view must simply have stunned the man. And James Coyle was not just any priest; he

was Birmingham's leading "Romanist." He was the priest who defended the indefensible through his endless letters to the editors of the city's newspapers; editors who, for reasons beyond Stephenson, seemed never to decline to print them. Letters plainly designed to lure the gullible, to ensnare the foolish, and there with him on the porch sat Stephenson's own daughter, not even a teenager, with her fingers just inches from that fire!

Stephenson did not condescend to enter the gated yard of the rectory when he saw his daughter on the porch with Father James Coyle that day. He offered the priest no greeting. He simply barked the child's name from the sidewalk where he stood, enough to cause the girl to scurry off the porch and out to the walk. At age thirty-nine, over six feet tall, he would have towered over her—years later, when the Birmingham newspapers described Ruth, they consistently referred to her as "petite"—and as the Stephensons lived less than a block away, the walk home would not have taken long. But for little Ruth Stephenson each step must have been like torture. She knew her parents' feelings about Father Coyle and the Catholic Church, even if she was inclined to disagree. Her father had said many times that Coyle was "one of humanity's biggest enemies" and that he wished Coyle was dead.³⁶

Ruth said later, without elaboration, that her father's punishment was "severe."³⁷

The proximity of the Stephenson household to St. Paul's Church and its rectory might well have been part of the problem. The Stephenson family lived at 2231 Third Avenue, on the south side of the street. The Catholic Church and the home of its priest sat in the middle of the next block on the north side. So despite her parents' warnings, or perhaps in spite of them, Ruth was able to take stock of the Catholics for herself.³⁸

Rather than repulsing her, what she saw of the Catholics simply stoked the embers of her curiosity. There always would have been something to see. Some of the Catholics, especially the women, came to church every day, with their hats, and gloves, and rosary beads, in time for the morning mass. Others came to make confession, or to stand for unimaginable stretches of time before the stations of the cross, reciting in rhythmic repetition, just under their breath, the Lord's Prayer, the Hail Mary, and the Glory Be—the three centerpieces of the Holy Rosary. On occasion, Ruth slipped unnoticed into the church; where she must have been delighted by its dimly lit interior and the hushed, respectful whispers of its visitors. The women's prayers would have been just barely audible to one who had slipped quietly into a pew, lending a balletic warmth to the forbidding tableaux before which they murmured their meditations.³⁹

Not all of the Catholics were so daily observant, of course. Most would have come only on Sunday, and judging from the pleas Father Coyle injected into the *Catholic Monthly*, the parish's newspaper, others not even that. But enough of them came often enough to give young Ruth the chance to try to reconcile the reverential faces of St. Paul's parishioners with her parents' vilifications, and what she saw in those faces did not frighten her at all. Ruth later insisted that it had been her ability to see folks coming in and out of St. Paul's Church from her home on Third Avenue that first aroused her curiosity about Catholicism, and being a girl given to independent thinking, she arrived at her own conclusions about them.

So if her parents had given it more thought, they might simply have chosen another avenue on which to set up house and home, and saved themselves a lot of trouble. For in Birmingham, Alabama, there was an unwritten code known to all good people of strong conviction: the firm and universal understanding that familiarity breeds not contempt but *converts*. Who in Birmingham did not know how important it was to keep one's loved ones segregated from the forces that threatened their physical and spiritual well-being?

But Mary and Edwin Stephenson could not conceive of the possibility that their daughter had come to admire the Catholic Church on her own. The persuasion had to have come from an external source. The only explanation was that the Catholics had deliberately seduced their daughter, they thought, for what else could have planted such ideas in her head and poisoned her against her true and noble Protestant roots? After all, everyone knew that that was what Catholics did best.⁴⁰

When nothing of significance changed in the Stephenson household on August 29, 1920, the day Ruth turned eighteen, some part of the teenager must have been devastated. Who could have blamed the girl for seeing something magical in the number? An expectation that the age would confer some additional liberty, some leeway not enjoyed before? The signs of change must have seemed all around her; she was living in an age flush with change. Just eleven days before, the country had ratified the Nineteenth Amendment, giving women the right to vote. Unlike generations of women before her, once she turned twenty-one (the voting age for everyone at the time), Ruth Stephenson would not be denied that fundamental right of citizenship. From the vantage point of a young woman of the 1920s, the world might easily have appeared full of opportunities, regardless of gender. It is therefore entirely possible that Ruth did not fully appreciate how poorly her family would regard her independent spirit, especially when that spirit bumped too hard against the norms they and their kinspeople held most dear. As

feminist scholars would later have been able to show Ruth, women in the 1920s might have been enfranchised, but they were hardly liberated.

So if Ruth Stephenson had been tempted to think of the age of eighteen as holding a great number of advantages not previously enjoyed, her disappointment must have been great. In truth, she was anything but emancipated. She was still living in the home of Edwin and Mary Stephenson, and her parents' ideas about the matter over which she wished most to exercise control had not changed from the time she was twelve. If anything, their fears had only deepened with the passage of those years. In their view, the case against the Catholics had actually worsened, a fact they no doubt had hoped that their impressionable daughter would grasp for herself as she matured. For pity's sake, a person needed only to read the *New Menace* (the successor to the *Menace*, based in Branson, Missouri, after the printing plant for its predecessor in Aurora was destroyed by an accidental fire) or the detailed response Dr. O. T. Dozier had published after Father Coyle had challenged the critics of his religion to offer some proof of the charges routinely made against the Catholics. The proof was everywhere one looked, Ruth Stephenson's parents thought. The girl had simply to open her eyes.

The battle for Ruth's soul thus raged more or less quietly inside the Stephenson household for another eight months after her eighteenth birthday, until Ruth decided she would wait no longer. As Easter approached, she found her way to the Convent of Mercy to speak with the sisters about her desire to convert. She had reached the age when the law said she could decide for herself, she told them. *Are you sure you know what you are doing?* they asked her. She was certain, Ruth assured them. So over the next couple of weeks, the nuns provided Ruth with instruction about the Catholic baptism and way of life, and on April 10, 1921, she slipped away from her home and made her way to a small church on Birmingham's south side, a "beautiful red brick building trimmed with white stone"—Our Lady of Sorrows, which had served the needs of the city's German-speaking Catholics since its dedication in 1905; and from whose name the girl might have taken a warning, had she been any less determined about her course.⁴¹

When Ruth arrived, Aileen Cronan and Mr. Fred Bender were waiting for her. Aileen Cronan and Ruth both worked at the time as sales clerks for Loveman, Joseph & Loeb, the popular downtown department store where Ruth's parents had permitted her to take a job the previous fall. During breaks or quieter moments, the two young women sometimes had the chance to talk, and occasionally their conversations turned to Catholicism, Cronan's religion. Fred Bender was the owner of a furniture store very close to the Stephensons' home on Third Avenue. Ruth had asked Cronan and Bender

to witness her conversion and to serve as her godmother and godfather, and they had agreed. So on the appointed day, Ruth stood with her two witnesses before Father John O'Kelly and was baptized a Catholic.⁴²

Ruth might have been willing to defy her parent's wishes, but she was not foolish enough to think they would condone her conversion. So she shared her secret with some friends, but otherwise kept the news to herself. The date for her first communion was set for May 10, and in the lead-up to that important event it appears that she practiced her Catholicism in the shadows, out of sight of her parents. In this state of secrecy, it is unclear how often she managed to fulfill the Catholic Church's expectation that she attend weekly mass, or even whether she was able to attend Easter Sunday services on May 1, 1921, at the close of Holy Week. After Ruth had turned fourteen, in an effort to keep her out of the grip of the Catholics, Ruth's parents had agreed to let her join one of the Baptist churches in Birmingham. So they might not have been accustomed to escorting her to church on Sundays. But given her history of defiance, it seems unlikely that Mary and Edwin would have waved their daughter off to the Baptist parish house without somehow verifying that she had actually gotten to where she said she was going.

As May and the date of her First Communion approached, Ruth's day of reckoning could no longer easily be avoided, and in her excitement or worry, she must have shared the news of her conversion with someone less circumspect about the need for secrecy, for somehow her parents got word that their daughter had been baptized a Catholic. They were livid, a friend warned Ruth; her father was threatening "to kill her" when he caught up with her. By age eighteen, Ruth knew better than to take the threat lightly. Her father might wear the garb of the clergy, but he was "no model of Christian forgiveness." He "came from the old school of strictness," one relative of the family told a prominent writer some years later; "the very old school."⁴³

Too frightened to face her parents, Ruth caught the bus to Fred Bender's two-story home on Milner Heights Road. Bender had not yet gotten home from work, but his wife, Anna, was there. She invited Ruth to have supper with them and phoned her husband at his downtown store. Miss Ruth Stephenson had stopped over, Anna told him. The news must have come as a surprise; Ruth had never paid a social visit to his home before. Weeks earlier, Bender had witnessed Ruth's baptism and agreed to be her godfather, but the duties of the position were usually nominal when the person baptized was above the age of eighteen, and although he had known Ruth and her family from the neighborhood where he ran his business since she was a young girl, mostly they traveled in different circles. Bender assured his wife he would be home shortly.⁴⁴

The Benders' sense of trepidation must have grown as they listened over dinner to Ruth's fears about returning home. After considering her plight, they urged her to call home and let her parents know she was there. *They will be worried about you*, they told her. And although Fred Bender may not have said so out loud, he must have felt a little knot of anxiety beginning to form on the question of his new goddaughter. With all of the accusations whirling around Birmingham about Catholics kidnapping Protestant children, it would not do for Edwin and Mary Stephenson to think their daughter had been whisked away by some imagined child robber.

It could not have been easy, but after dinner Ruth took the Benders' advice and telephoned home, and when her father got on the line, she told him she knew that he and her mother had learned that she had been baptized a Catholic. She knew they were not happy about it, she said, but she wanted to come home, if he would just promise not to punish her when she got there. It is hard to know what Ruth expected her father to say. Perhaps it was more a hope than an expectation; the hope that he and her mother would accept her decision once they understood the deed was done. But if Ruth entertained such a hope, her father's response quickly disabused her: "I'll fix you when you get home," he vowed through the telephone line. She would get no other promises from him than that.

It is not precisely clear how many days passed before Ruth got up her nerve to return home after that call. Not more than two, according to her recollection; and then she stayed at home, she said, until she could bear things no longer.

It was not long after the girl's departure from their home that Fred Bender began to worry out loud to his wife that Edwin Stephenson was harboring a grudge against him over the incident. It might have been his imagination, but when Fred Bender passed Stephenson on the street a day or so after Ruth returned home, he was sure that Stephenson had refused to meet his eye. Bender told his wife that they had best take care with Edwin Stephenson and his daughter. His agreement to stand up for the girl at her conversion had become messy, even dangerous. Bender wanted nothing more than to put the whole episode behind them.⁴⁵

He had no way of knowing that the trouble over his goddaughter had only just begun. Ruth showed up at the Benders' doorstep again a week or so later.

Birmingham's chief of police, Thomas J. Shirley, first learned about Edwin Stephenson's problems with his daughter, he said, sometime in 1920, when Stephenson came to his office at City Hall looking for his help. Ruth had run off, Stephenson told him. She was already eighteen, but unless she married, Alabama law made Edwin and Mary Stephenson her guardians until she turned twenty-one, and her father wanted her back. Somehow, Edwin