

From Marriner's "Little Talks" #278, November 6, 1955

No one now living remembers the sensation caused by a young lady at Kents Hill Seminary 90 years ago, but while it lasted, the Mary Louise Greene case was a cause celebre through out Maine. On a hill in Auburn there still stands a granite monument with this inscription: "M. Louise Greene, age 22 years, daughter of Jonas and L. M. Greene of Peru, Maine. A student five years at Kents Hill, a member of the graduating class of 1866, who perished here in May, within two weeks of graduation. A martyr to the prejudice and caprice of man."

The story of Mary Louise Greene involved the reputation of a celebrated school and the honor of its principal, the love of a father for his daughter and his hatred of that school principal because the girl had quite correctly been disciplined for a confessed offense. Today, 90 years afterwards, our information about the case comes chiefly from the files of the Lewiston Journal. On May 29, 1866 the Journal noted in a short paragraph the fact that a young, unnamed woman was missing. On June 2 appeared an editorial headed "Missing; A Sad Case", naming the young woman as Mary Louise Greene, a senior at Kents Hill. On June 9 the paper informed its readers that the authorities had learned of the purchase of poison by the missing girl. Daily from June 10 to 13 the Journal recorded continued search for the missing student. On the 14th it announced that the search had been abandoned. Perhaps no one would ever know what happened to Louise Greene.

Four months later, on October 13, a body, identified as that of the missing Louise Greene, was found in Auburn, at the spot where the monument now stands.

The next spring The girl's father, Jonas Greene, published a pamphlet entitled "The Crown Won but not Worn". Here in the words of that pamphlet is the father's own account of that tragedy: "On May 23, 1866 Mary Louise Greene, a student at The Female College at Kents Hill left that institution in a wretched state of mind, traveled to Lewiston, was seen weeping in Auburn, purchased poison, and mysteriously disappeared. Her father, for many anxious weeks, searched in and around Lewiston for his lost child. He employed detectives, circulated handbills and photographs all over the state. The kind people of Lewiston, Auburn and Lisbon generously assisted him in searching the woods, the canals and the river — all to no purpose. Finally her bleached remains were accidentally discovered in a lonely spot in the forest in Auburn, the following October."

You will note that Father Greene said that Louise left Kents Hill in a wretched state of mind. What had caused that wretched state? Louise had entered the school in 1861. After a preparatory course of two years, she entered what was then called The Female College Department, where she continued until May, 1866. During the last year of her stay she had frequently broken the rule requiring no student to leave the Hill without permission.

In April, 1866 Principal Torsey had a serious talk with the girl concerning her attitude toward the school's regulations. On the evening of May 21st Dr. Torsey was informed that Louise Greene

had taken articles of clothing and money belonging to other students. Two days later the girl confessed to the principal that she did take the clothes and the money. As a result of that interview, Miss Greene agreed to leave the school.

Louise Greene was no child. Already 22 years old, she was fully responsible for her actions. She told Dr. Torsey she would go to her uncle's home in Lewiston and would write her father from there. Dr. Torsey told her he could not consent to such a course, that she was of age and could go to her uncle's if that was her decision, but that she could not do so with Dr. Torsey's approval. Finally Louise agreed to go to her own home in Peru, and it was arranged for her to leave Kents Hill early that afternoon.

About two o'clock on that May 23rd, Dr. Torsey learned that the girl had indeed left the Hill, but for Lewiston, not for Peru. He immediately sent a student with Miss Greene's sister to her parents' home in Peru, instructing the sister, who was also a Kents Hill student, to tell her father the whole story.

Louise Greene's wretched state of mind on May 23, 1866 was therefore that she was charged with theft by the school authorities, that she confessed to the theft, that she was of age, agreed of her own accord to leave the school, and now had to face her father. Rather than face him, she started for Lewiston.

On the train from Readfield to Lewiston the girl wrote a letter to her younger sister, the girl whom Principal Torsey had directed to tell the story at home. In that letter Louise said: "Dr. Torsey informed me this morning that I had better leave today; 'not expulsion', he said, 'we won't call it that ... but you had better go home'. My bitterest agony is for the dear ones at home, on whom must fall some share in this disgrace. Satan, or some evil spirit, must have led me into this. I can feel myself really guilty of but one crime, taking five dollars from Miss Church. I had no intention of stealing the clothes. For every article I took I had lost one in the wash. My lost ones were unmarked. Was it strange that I should take others, also unmarked, in their stead?"

On the same train Louise wrote another letter, addressed jointly to all her schoolmates at Kents Hill. It said about the same as the letter to her sister, attempting to explain the possession of another's clothes, but confessing to taking the five dollars.

When Jonas Greene learned of his daughter's departure from the Hill, he naturally bent every effort to find her. He eventually got into a bitter controversy with Dr. Torsey, whom he charged with cruelty and with responsibility for the girl's death. Public opinion, as usual, took sides, and the trustees of Kents Hill finally felt obliged to make public answer to Greene's charges.

Greene had published a pamphlet. Now the trustees brought out one of their own. It took up each of Greene's complaints and made candid answer to all of them. It showed conclusively that Louise had confessed to theft, had left the school by her own decision, had agreed to go home to Peru, but had gone to Lewiston instead, and that she was of legal age to make her own decisions.

The bitterness of the Greene family toward Dr. Torsey is revealed in a note written to the principal on the day after the girl's body was found. This note was written, not by the angry father, but by the usually more even tempered mother. There is no evenness of temper in her words to Dr. Torsey. She wrote: "Sir: The victim of your vengeance, persecution and tyranny was found dead in Auburn yesterday. Our opinion of you is that you are a base scoundrel and a black-hearted murderer." Just a year later the mother wrote to Dr. Torsey again: "One year ago today, Louise received her death-blow from you, fleeing from your presence as from a tiger. We still think you a black-hearted murderer. Nothing but the influence of a rich, powerful and corrupt Methodist denomination could save you, in this inhuman tragedy, from universal condemnation."

Nearly a century has passed since the scandal at Kents Hill. We can now look back upon it objectively and say what a pity that this tragic young woman's mistake and misfortune had to be dragged for months through the public press because of her father's unfounded attacks on the head of her school. All those attacks accomplished was to make what was already shameful for the family much more than it need have been.

Time is the great healer. The participants have all been long in their graves, and the whole sad affair is forgotten, save for the words on the Auburn monument, "A martyr to the prejudice and caprice of man."

Background

Ernest Marriner's "Little Talks on Common Things" is a unique radio series, distinguished as the radio show with the most consecutive broadcasts and being the longest running radio show in the nation with the same sponsor (Keyes Fiber, Waterville). The show began in 1948 when the owner of the WTVL radio station asked Ernest Marriner, Colby professor and later college historian, to do a 15-minute radio show in the time period between two popular talk shows on Sunday evenings. Marriner's "Little Talks" about Maine history, famous citizens, events and culture acquired such a following that the show continued its run twice every Sunday until June of 1982, a total well exceeding 1,000 broadcasts. The shows grew in popularity so that listeners from all over New England began sending him diaries, newspaper clippings, and documents about Maine life and history as a means of participation.

As a radio personality, Marriner had a unique style, comforting yet authoritative. His immense pride in State of Maine and its people is evident in his "Little Talks." This unique style is a central factor in understanding Marriner's "Little Talks" as important cultural artifacts.

Ernest Marriner is also significant as a prominent historical figure in Waterville and the Kennebec Valley. His expertise as a historian is renowned. Marriner was affiliated with Colby for over 40 years. Graduating from Colby in 1913, he acted as librarian and professor of bibliography for six years and then taught English for 31 years. He was Dean of Men from 1929

to 1946, Dean of Faculty from 1946 to 1957, and college historian. Marriner was highly involved in the educational field beyond Colby as well, serving 25 on the Board of Education of the State of Maine, eight years as President of the New England College Admissions Board and 15 years as Chairman of the Board at Thomas College in Waterville.

The above was excerpted from Colby College's Special Collections, <http://web.colby.edu/specialcollections/marriners-little-talks/>