

A HARVARD GRADUATE GOES WEST: ROBERT ADAMS COKER AND THE HIGHLAND SCHOOL IN THE 1830's

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Robert Adams Coker of West Newbury, Massachusetts, born March 19, 1807, was a member of the Harvard College Class of 1831, one of the lesser lights who flickered briefly and then "went out" to an early grave in March of 1833. The Class of 1831 fostered some of the greatest names in the mid-19th century, among them Thomas Gold Appleton, Francis Gardner Jr., John Hopkins Morison, John Lothrop Motley, and perhaps above all, Wendell Phillips. Robert Coker was not of their calibre; his brief life, post-Harvard, might well be termed the "short and simple annals of the poor in health". Suffering from consumption while in Harvard College, he was dead within little more than eighteen months of his graduation.

A mathematics major in college, Coker did what so many scholars were forced to do to make their way through college: he "kept school" at intervals, in accord with the agreement of the Government of Harvard College. On November 3, 1828, early in his sophomore year, Coker with many others in his class was given leave "to keep school agreeably to the regulations voted October 26th . . ."¹ Upon his graduation, he pursued his profession as a teacher of mathematics, and for a time taught in an academy in Francestown, New Hampshire, in the winter and

¹ *Harvard College: Records of the Immediate Government of Harvard College, Volume X (Sept. 1822)*. (Manuscript records, Harvard College Archives, Cambridge, Massachusetts), October 28, 1828: "Application for leave to keep school to be made on or before Monday, Nov. 3 & notice to this purpose to be given to the several classes tomorrow morning . . ."

"It was voted, that the following directions be printed, and a copy put into the hands of each student who has to keep school, viz.

"Students, who are entitled to the privilege by their diligence and good conduct, and whose circumstances are such as to require it, are allowed to keep school for a time not exceeding ten weeks, including the winter vacation.

"Those to whom this privilege is granted, are required to report themselves to the presiding officer on the day of their return to college, with a certificate, stating the time during which they were employed in the School; also to be prepared to pass an examination in all those studies, which their class shall have gone over, which are necessary to their proceeding on with them in their future studies.

"If any student shall exceed the term of ten weeks, he is required to be examined in all the studies of his class during the whole time of his absence, and if he fail to pass a satisfactory examination, his connexion with the college shall cease." Faculty Records, X, pp. 189-190.

Coker was granted leave to teach, November 3, 1828. *Ibid.*, X, 191. He "kept school" at Lexington, Massachusetts.

spring of 1831-1832,² but looked meanwhile for greener academic pastures, and greater remuneration. Apparently the chronic discontent of teachers seized upon Coker in his term at Francestown, and he thought for a moment, not of the pleasant pasture of another academy, but of the lure of the green meadows of the great West and its Pacific prospects. His classmate George Coombs was the recipient of one of his complaints, and wrote in reply:

“. . . I am sorry to find that you are a teacher with the Oregon mania. I trust that you will soon recover from it. It is a vile disaster, and ‘many a good tall fellow has laid low’. You really do not seriously think of taking up your connexion with civilized life, and transporting yourself thousands of miles into a waste howling wilderness. What will you do when you get there? What will your literature and your science avail you among the wild beasts, and savages? There are thousands of one half your sense and erudition, and would make as good perhaps better, colonists than yourself. Stay then where your knowledge and understanding may be turned to some profit. If you feel any disposition to roam, come down here to New Bedford . . .”³

But the nearer prospect of a “western” academy was already in sight. In early April, 1832, Coker had received a letter from his close friend and classmate, William Austin Jr., then teaching in Brookline,⁴ “. . . by which I learn that a gentleman by the name of Watson has written to Mr. Thayer for an instructor in Mathematics; & that Mr. Thayer has written to him in favor of me. Salary \$500 & boarded &c.”⁵ Whatever Coker’s other interests might be in this spring of 1832, and he was attracted by several other prospects, by May his future began to be apparent; it was to be cast in the mold of the Highland School,⁶ the

² Robert Adams Coker to Susan A. Coker, Francestown, N.H., November 3, 1831. Mss. letter in the possession of the author.

³ George C. Coombs to Robert Adams Coker, New Bedford, Mass., May 6, 1832. Mss. letter in the possession of the author.

⁴ William Austin to Robert A. Coker, Boston, Sep. 24th, 1831. Mss. letter in the possession of the author.

⁵ *Commentarium Comprehendens Compendia et Notationes, De Personia et Libris de Rebus &c. 16 Ka'. Jun. MDCCCXXVI.* (The Diary of Robert Adams Coker), (Two Volumes, Manuscript in the Harvard College Archives), Journal &c., 1832, Volume II, p. 91, entry for the week of April 8, 1832.

⁶ “In the evening (Wednesday) I received a letter from my chum (William Austin) by which it appears probable that I sha’ll obtain the place of Instr. in Math. in the Highland School. By this letter, also I learned of my rank at Cambridge in Mathematics. It seems that Mr. Watson, Principal of the Highland School wrote to Benj. Pierce, now Tutor in Math. at Harvard, to enquire my ‘collegiate merits’. Pierce referred to the President’s papers, & as he told Austin, I had the highest mark in the Mathematical Department. This is higher than I expect, for I was so low in the languages that I thought probable that I was placed as low as the third in Mathematics. I never enquired my rank, & was somewhat surprised at the justice of the Government.” *Diary*, II, 96, entry for the week of May 14, 1832.

"western" academy he had learned of through William Austin's letter.

Whatever his several interests might be, Robert Adams Coker's first love was mathematics, if we can accept the confessions of his own pen. "Last week I have read from the beginning of the Application of Algebra to Geometry to nearly the end of the chapter on the Ellipse, except a short chapter on the circle which I read last week. I find it very interesting. I find that I can at present take up Mathematics with relish when no other works charm—even newspapers and novels are dry and incipid (sic) when compared with these." Also, "the past week I have finished reading the Application of Alg. to Geometry. I find in it many beauties which escaped me the first time it was read."⁸ Soon that interest and talent, if such it was, was to be put to the service of young scholars in the "west", for Coker left Frances-town later in May, and was home in West Newbury about the 18th, and was soon to have confirmation from the Highland School.⁹ By June 10th the overtures to the Highland School were concluded: *alea jacta est!* "Monday . . . received a letter from Mr. Watson N.Y. in answer to mine of the 24 ult., in which I accepted his offer."¹⁰ Mr. Watson's letter is extant; it failed to give Robert Coker intimation of the many vexations that were to be his out on the banks of the Hudson across the river from West Point:

"Dear Sir, in compliance with your request, I acknowledge the receipt of your favour of the 24th inst. . . (I) presume that you distinctly understand, that besides taking charge of the Mathl. department, we shall expect your assistance in such other modes as we may desire, & as may be in your power; for the business of instruction, important as it is,

⁷ Coker's failure to concentrate upon, or find pleasure in, anything but his beloved mathematics might be explained by his concern and fear for his health. He was confiding to his Diary of his possible ill health. "May 13. Monday, raised blood all day—perhaps 4 or 5 spoonfuls in all." "The last part of last week & first part (of this?) I have raised more blood than in the same length of time previously. I cannot think I am in a consumption yet as this is the only simpton (sic), tho' it will probably terminate in one soon unless something can be done." Page 95. *Diary*, II, 93-94, entries for week of May 6, 1832.

⁸ *Diary*, II, 94, entry for the week of May 13, 1832.

⁹ *Ibid.*, II, 98, entries for the weeks of May 14, 27, 1832. Coker's *Diary* for the week of May 21, 1832, details the steps by which his commitment to John Lee Watson and the Highland School was made: ". . . Tuesday (May 22) rode to Crane-neck; & as I returned I called at the Post Office & found that a letter had come for me & been sent to my father's. When I reached home I found a double letter from my chum (William Austin) then on a visit to Groton. The letter from Austin contained one from John Lee Watson, Highland School, Near Cold Spring, Putnam Co., N.Y., offering me \$500 per annum and Board, wood, lights, & (sic) if I would take charge of the Mathematical department in the Highland School. Thursday, concluded to accept on Mr. Watson's proposal & wrote him an intimation of my acceptance: . . ." *Diary*, II, 98, West Newbury, entry for the week of May 21, 1832.

¹⁰ *Diary*, II, 99, entry for Monday, June 10, 1832.

forms but a part of our labours; & we wish to secure your aid in the performance of other duties, in which, as a resident of our family, you can participate, with, probably, little inconvenience to yourself, and much advantage to us. . . ."¹¹

In the latter part of June, Robert Coker was getting ready to go westward to the Hudson, to take up his duties at the Highland School. In Boston to shop, he bought Grind's Problems and the Economical Atlas. For the journey he also bought a black leather-covered trunk with a "plait (sic) on containing my name &c for \$5.50."¹² He was being prepared in another way, should he care to heed the advice, through a letter from his good friend Austin, possibly mirroring advice which Austin found useful in his post that past year in Brookline:

"We were talking about things to be observed on first appearance in N.Y. But we did not conclude upon anything in particular. I found, however, at Brookline the following very serviceable viz. Eyes open, ears open, mouth shut the first two or three weeks and wonder at nothing the first two or three months. This for the meridian of Brookline—may suit other parts of N. England. Don't know about N.Y. And so I am, hoping you success . . ."¹³

The adventure was about to begin! On or about the Fourth of July, Robert Coker took the Haverhill stage and started for Philipstown, New York. Intending originally to go by way of New York, news of the great cholera epidemic there altered his plans, and sent him *via* Albany.¹⁴ It was undoubtedly for the best, for Coker must have lacked the élan that seems to have characterized his classmate Simmons's attitude toward that scourge of New York city, at least as Simmons described his reaction in 1833:

"The Cholera entered New York early in July 1832. For several weeks it probably took off two hundred daily. Every death, that came to my knowledge, was clearly attributable to one or more of three occasions—pre-disposition, from ill health or fright,—intemperate exposure of some kind,—or delay in ye (sic) application of remedies. A hundred thousand people ran away in a weeke (sic); and ye half emptied streets, & shut or silent shops, presented a mere skeleton on ye late flushed & heaving metropolis. Under this reign of terror, I lived quite recklessly 'about town',—, following ye

¹¹ John Lee Watson to Robert Adams Coker, Highland School, Philipstown (New York), May 30, 1832. Mss. letter in the possession of the author.

¹² *Diary*, II, 101, entry for the week of June 24, 1832.

¹³ William Austin Jr. to Robert A. Coker, Brookline, (Mass.), June 29, 1832. Mss. letter in the possession of the author.

¹⁴ *Diary*, II, 102, entry for the week of July 8, 1832.

devices of my own heart, & resolutely defending, from nervous thrills, melancholic humors, & ye discipline of jejune regimina, my very sane and faithful body."¹⁵

Fearing, rightly the great epidemic then raging, Coker went overland by stage to Troy, and then by riverboat down the Hudson to West Point. It took three days to cross Massachusetts by stage, and a fourth to go by boat from Troy to the Point. The notation in the *Diary* concludes: "Arrived at West Point 7 P.M. Payed for landing luggage 12½ cts; for carrying to the office 6½ & for carrying from thence to the Hotell 37½ cts. As it was late & I had not found time to shave since I started from Lowell, I determind to put up at the Hotell till Monday. Bill at the Hotell \$3.00. Saw the Cadetts parade. They parade and exercise on the Sabbath. There was much company at the point. Accommodations good. Sunday took notes of my journey & Expenses from leaving West Newbury to my arrival at West Point \$12.92."¹⁶

Had Coker gone originally as planned, he would have come up the Hudson from New York city, and seen the river unfold with its sights on either side as anticipated by Vanderwater's *Pocket Manual for Travellers on the Hudson River*: "After proceeding about a mile beyond the (West Point) landing, by taking a retrospect, the traveller has a magnificent view of the *Military Academy*, and all the buildings appertaining thereto. There are nine brick buildings for the officers and professors. The view of the Point from this distance is highly imposing. Mr. Samuel Gouverneur has a beautiful residence opposite West Point. The *Highland School* is located half a mile north. It was commenced in 1830, and is now becoming very popular."¹⁷ On Monday, July 9th, Robert Coker crossed from the Point to the Highland School, where, he recounts, "I arrived about 10 or 11 A.M. Mr. Watson was at the door, & I gave him my letter of introduction, & we walked into the house."¹⁸ Coker was quickly introduced to the "family" of the Highland School, Watsons, and "Mr. Ellis, instructor in drawing & French."

¹⁵ *Harvard College . . . Records of the Class of 1831* (Mss. Class Book, 1831), Holograph Biography of William Hammatt Simmons, October, 1833, pp. 504-505.

¹⁶ *Diary*, II, 108, entry for the week of July 8, 1832 (detailing the events of the preceding week). Only in rare instances did Coker put personal thoughts or private comments on family or friends upon the pages of his *Diary*. Yet he committed voluminous detail on impersonal matters to the pages of the same volume, and left a very lengthy word-picture of his journey by stage across Western Massachusetts to Troy, and then by the river to Newburgh. *Diary*, II, 103-108.

¹⁷ R. Vanderwater: *The Tourist, or Pocket Manual for Travellers on the Hudson River, The Western Canal and Stage Road to Niagara Falls down Lake Ontario and the St. Lawrence to Montreal and Quebec . . .*, p. 23.

¹⁸ *Diary*, II, 109, entry for the week of July 15, 1832.

For a few days Coker had a chance to shake himself down before the duties of the term began. He described both the site and the school to his family in his first letter home to West Newbury:

"Well, I have found the place, and a fine situation it is. It can be seen to good advantage as you pass on the river. We are 180 feet above the river and scarcely a house in sight except those of West Point, and West Point Foundery, the latter of which is on our side of the river and about a mile from us. Our situation is as retired as any in West Newbury. Our house shows finely as you pass on the river; and also from West Point. It stands on a long narrow plain of perhaps 30 acres, notched into the side of the mountain, as you would call our hills by that name if you had them in Massachusetts. From the edge of this plain the bank descends to the shore of the river so abruptly that the tops of the large trees with which it is covered are scarcely above the level of our feet. From behind the hill rises to a very great height.

. . .

"We live among the mountains, & with the exception of the Hudson we see nothing but mountains. They are however perfectly covered with trees which gives them at this season a lovely and beautiful appearance. At this moment (a real N.E. storm) the tops of the mountains are far above the clouds. Indeed the clouds are seen almost every day rolling about the tops & sides of the hills. A few rods from the house is a brook which runs down the side of the mountain called Indian Brook, where there is a beautiful cascade, the water falling about 20 feet. As you stand at the foot of it the trees are so thick that you cannot see 10 rods in any direction except directly upward; & indeed the tops of the trees meet so nearly that the sun can scarcely visit the place at all. . . .

"As the scholars have not returned I cannot say anything of the school. Last term they had 24 scholars & may have 30 this perhaps. The school began with one scholar. They do not want more than 25. Five or six of the scholars were from Massachusetts last term. . . . Mr. W's (Watson) family appear to be a good one & we have plenty of *toasted bread*. The post office is a mile & a half off; but we have a mail from the school to the office every day, so it is the same as if the Post Office were kept in the House. We have 4 instructors to take care of the 25 or 30 boys."¹⁹

¹⁹ Robert Adams Coker to John Coker, Highland School, July 11-16, 1832. Mss. letter in the possession of the author. Paragraphing mine. The letter was mailed on the 16th; witness the *Diary*, II, 109, entry for the week of July 22, 1832: "Monday 16 our school began. . . . Walked to Cold Spring . . . Put a letter in the Office for home. . . ."

The new mathematics instructor had a week of leisure to become acquainted with the school, with the Watsons, and with the surrounding countryside.²⁰ His brief summary in the *Diary* reads thus: “. . . the . . . week has been spent in reading Mathematics, viewing the scenery, looking over Newspapers, reviews, etc.”²¹ The natural scene fascinated Coker; man’s urbanization, in this instance, repelled him. “This week I have examined a waterfall in our vicinity where the water falls, I should think, 20 feet. The banks on either side are very high and steep, being covered with tall trees which completely excluded the sun even at noonday. It is the most wild and beautiful spot I ever saw. Visited Cold Spring in company with Mr. Watson. It is a filthy and forbidding place.”²² Then the informality of the period of familiarization was over, and the routine commenced. “Monday 16 our school began. Only 12 or 14 scholars were returned. I have four classes in Mathematics and one in reading each day, one hour each and one in geography twice-a-week.” But the routine did not cut off all leisure time; Coker still found occasions for his walks and his explorations, and gained welcome relief from the classroom when he “discovered a small place of cleared land a $\frac{1}{4}$ of a mile from our house where blackberries are most abundant & I have paid a semi-diurnal visit almost every day this last week. It is entirely surrounded with woods & free from any interruption from wingless birds. I have spent a very pleasant week.”²³

In his *Diary*, Coker makes but infrequent references to his work and to his students; in those letters of his that survive, there are fewer still. His curiosity was for the countryside, and in his *Diary* and occasionally in his letters he reveals the region around West Point and Cold Spring as he saw it more than 120 years ago:

“Saturday (July 28th) went to Fort Putnam with Mr. Ellis. It is about 20 minutes walk from the Hotell at the Point. The Fort is in a very dilapidated condition; but it must have been impregnable when well manned. . . . The view from the fort is extensive and beautiful. As you look towards the east you see the Hudson before you covered with vessels and boats, which opening a way thro’ the mountains affords a prospect to the north bounded only by the horizon, while at your feet and between you and the river lies the Plain of West Point. . . . Direct your eye to the opposite banks you

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Diary*, II, 109, entry for the week of July 15, 1832, referring, of course, as was Coker’s custom, to the events of the preceding week.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Diary*, II, 109–110, entry for the week of July 22, 1832.

may see Cold Spring at the water's edge, and higher up the hills you have a fine prospect of the Highland School, which with one other seat of a gentleman, is the only house of any significance in sight on the hills . . ."²⁴

Robert Adams Coker was a sick and a lonely man in this sojourn out on the Hudson; already dying of tuberculosis, he suspected it, but knew it not for certain. In August of 1832 he began to cough blood once again, and at that point in his *Diary*, brought his medical history up to date in great detail, as if the mere expression of it could allay some of the fear involved. Anyone reading this account a century and a quarter later still experiences a catch in the throat for this sickening young man. "Saturday morning, when I first waked up & went to move in the bed I had a slight tendency to cough, which brought up a mouthful of blood. It came up extremely easy as it always has . . . I am not aware that I have raised any since I arrived here till Saturday, i.e. yesterday. I now think these three extraordinary raisings have been caused by overexertion in talking & reading aloud, & I must be more careful for the future & hope, Dei Gratia, I shall recover. Oh! Domine, adjura mihi. I have already refrained very much from long talking or earnest; but I now find that any great exercion (sic) in talking is sure to be followed by bleeding. . . ."²⁵

Against this background of personal illness, Coker "kept school". His entry for the week of August 12th, recording the events of the week preceding, runs as follows: "Monday morning, felt sick, eyesight grew dim, something passed my bowels and felt better. Took but a slight breakfast. . . . Saturday walked to Cold Spring, where I took tea and came home in a boat. This week I have slept in the Attic. A wretched way of sleeping—for we are obliged to go to bed at 9."²⁶

The following week Coker was again saddled with supervising the "evening school from 7½ to 8½". Sleeping in the Attic, of course, was doing proctor's duty on the "scholars"; so too was keeping the evening school. Coker was thus learning in detail the assumption that John Lee Watson had made in vague terms in his hiring letter; as Mr. Watson had pointed out, ". . . the business of instruction, important as it is, forms but a part of our labours; & we wish to secure your aid in the performance of

²⁴ *Ibid.*, II, 110–111, entry for the week of July 29, 1832.

²⁵ *Diary*, II, 111–116, entry for the week of August 5, 1832. This detailed account carries Coker's "medical" history from ca. 1827 down to early August of 1832.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, II, 116, entry for the week of August 12, 1832.

other duties, in which, as a resident of our family, you can participate."²⁷

As the month of August drew toward its close, the generally pleasant life of the Highland School went forward. Coker went out riding on occasion with Mr. Watson;²⁸ he still was not yet aware of the implications each time such an invitation was extended. The shattering of the illusion was soon to follow. Obviously the mathematics teacher was feeling better, physically and mentally, for he was finding pleasure and an awakened moral indignation in reading other than mathematical tracts and texts. "Finished the Memoirs of Josephine. She was a deceitful miscreant & so ambitious in pleasing everyone that she would attempt it without the least regard to principle. By her own account she married Buonaparte without liking him, yet when she found herself cast off she found it necessary to go through the usual ceremony of fainting, etc. But fortunately Buonaparte was not to be moved by any of her wiles. He knew her too well."²⁹

In this fall of 1832, Coker recorded an almost frenetic preoccupation with the longing and search for fresh fruit. Almost every weekly entry in the *Diary* records his looking for, or purchase of, some form of fruit. In mid-August he notes that he "found a great plenty of blackberries this week, & a few whortleberries."³⁰ September's first entry records the finding of a "fine plate of mush melon in my room. Oh! delicious repast. It is the first fruit I have tasted this season except berries which I picked myself."³¹ The following week offered another surprise: "Tuesday I found on my table, when I returned to my room after dinner, two peaches, &c. These being the first cultivated fruit that I have seen I literally leaped for joy after recovering from the anti-motive effects of surprise. They were sent by Mrs. E. Watson."³² The following week Robert Coker took a Saturday walk down to Cold Spring, "where I found some very ordinary sweet apples, these being the only fruit of any kind in the place I bought a couple & they tasted really good for want of something better."³³ Within two weeks the craving was again so pressing that Coker went back to Cold Spring: "Tuesday walked to

²⁷ See footnote #11, Watson to Coker, page 4.

²⁸ *Diary*, II, 117, entry for the week of August 26, 1832.

²⁹ *Ibid.* That this was probably the "golden era" of Coker's well being is attested by his somewhat non-professional reading in this period. In addition to Josephine, he was enjoying Washington Irving's *The Companion of Columbus*, *Anastasius*, Turner's *Sacred History of the World*, *The Vicar of Wakefield*, and a volume on *Animal Physiology*. *Diary*, II, 116, 117-118, 119, 122.

³⁰ *Diary*, II, 116, entry for the week of August 19, 1832.

³¹ *Ibid.*, II, 118, entry for the week of September 2, 1832.

³² *Diary*, II, 118, entry for the week of September 9, 1832.

³³ *Ibid.*, II, 119, entry for the week of September 16, 1832.

Cold Spring after school, on purpose to get some fruit. Found nothing but apples, of which I bought 14, which was as many as I could conveniently carry. Saturday walked to Cold Spring for fruit but could find none worth bringing home."³⁴ Week after week the pattern was repeated.³⁵

On one occasion this search for fruit produced an experience that Coker recorded with wit and the vividness of an etcher's delineation:

"Monday (October 14) walked to Cold Spring for fruit, but found none. Tuesday walked to a farm house 1 mile or so distant to get fruit. Saw a waggon (sic) at the door which indicated company within; however knocked at the door, and was answered by a "come in". Opened the door and found a room full of women and one man with a startling pair of green spectacles and quite ministerial in appearance. Enquired for pears or apples, and succeeded in getting a dozen very good apples. While the woman was gathering the apples, the green eyed knight began, sans ceremony, 'I observe you wear glasses, is it on account of inflammation in the eyes'? This was a real poser, but being in a good humor at the prospect of some fruit, I civilly told the man that such was not the cause of my donning specs. He, however, was not quite satisfied with this, but proceeded say (sic) that it was the cause of his wearing them; he did not know but it might be the reason why I wore them; & then made some remarks upon sight, which induced me to enter upon an optical lecture on the causes, phenomena and remedies of defective vision, which very much surprised but did not silence the knight. Soon the apples came and pay being refused I gave an urchin some money and moved, leaving them in a sad quandry, as to who 'that are' man was, whence he came, whither bound, and what he could want of so many apples."³⁶

The thrill of getting the feel of a new position, of learning the foibles and the ways of a new family, of meeting the young scholars as they drifted back to the Highland School were by mid-October giving way to a general discontent and irritation. The veneer of the school had rubbed off, and the reality of the daily routine was stultifying, even to one of so pedantic and pedestrian a nature as Robert Adams Coker. The Tolliver-like qualities of

³⁴ *Ibid.*, II, 119, entry for the week of September 30, 1832.

³⁵ *Diary*, II, 119, entry for the week of October 7th: ". . . walked to Cold Spring twice in quest of fruit but could find none worth bringing home." *Ibid.*, II, 120, entry for the week of October 14th: "Saturday walked to Cold Spring for fruit, but found none."

³⁶ *Diary*, II, 120-121, entry for the week of October 21, 1832.

Mr. Watson were all too soon apparent, and Coker soon eschewed the dubious delights of going upon invited rides with Master Watson. The curious questings to the Point, and to Fort Putnam, the eager walks to Cold Spring, even the quick withdrawals to the hidden glade were all but discontinued by mid-October. The rude awakening had come!

"Yesterday Mr. E. Watson invited me to ride, but I declined, because I find that an invitation to ride the precursor of a request to sleep in the Attic. I am willing to oblige anyone, but am not to be *fished* into the performance of drudgery (sic) by any one."³⁷ It was not alone the fact that "a policeman's lot is not a happy one", even in the Attic; the daily life in the Highland School had become one of stress and strain for the mathematics instructor. He was now one of the family, with all of the attendant inconveniences thereunto attached. As October drew toward an end, colder weather threatened, and Coker wanted the comfort of a stove. "Tuesday my stove was put up. I was obliged to make two applications before I got it. It is a little sheet iron concern such as is seen in shoemakers' shops & its longest diameter is 16½ inches. The wood is green & it is decidedly the worst that I have ever had any thing to do with."³⁸ Discontent with the stove was not a frequent reaction these late October days, for Coker was seldom enough in his room to feel the need of the stove, or even to have time enough to light it. "This week slept (sic) in the Attic—wish it to the deuce every time I sleep there."³⁹ Early November proved to be no better than late October; "the past (week) I have slept in the Attic on account of Mr. W's absence. Went to bed of course about 20 minutes past 8."⁴⁰

Coker's discontent was at this point not all externally induced. He was wearied of the Watsons, of the school, of the fare, and of the general situation. Little, it seems, could please him. He was sick, literally, unto death, but knew it not. His family had concern for him that fall, and sought from him comments on his health.⁴¹ They were probably more conscious of his danger than

³⁷ *Diary*, II, 121, entry for the week of October 21, 1832.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, entry for the week of October 28, 1832. Tuesday would have been October 22.

³⁹ *Diary*, II, 122, entry for the week of November 4, 1832.

⁴⁰ *Diary*, II, 122, entry for the week of November 11, 1832. The Messrs. Watson were undoubtedly absent to attend the burial of Mrs. E. Watson, recently deceased. It was she who had kindly given Coker the peaches.

⁴¹ When Coker first went to teach in the academy in Francetown, he wrote reassuringly to his sister Susan and the whole family: "You need not fear that I shall study too much here, for there not books (sic) nearer than Boston except two or three that I bought for studying my profession. My profession, you know, the

was Coker himself. As winter approached, he went to Cold Spring to procure a short coat, and notes that he "bought materials for a spencer."⁴² In less than three weeks he was back in town to get it, but with no joy in the acquisition. "One day this week I walked to Cold Spring & got a spencer which was made for me there. It is altogether different from what I designed & will be of little use. I set out to get a cheap garment; but I find cheap things always dearest in the end."⁴³ Even within himself was this season to prove for Coker the winter of his discontents: "Begant (sic) to write an Arithmetic. . . . This week I have made but little progress with my arithmetic. It is a great bore to write. Doubt whether I finish it without an amanuensis."⁴⁴

The combination of ill-health and irritation finally provoked Coker to make an issue of what he considered abuse of his position and disposition. The diet at the table at the Highland School was less than appealing, and Coker's frequent consumption of fresh fruit appears to have produced the inevitable result:

"This week (November 18th week) much trouble with the Dysentery. Obligated to be up once or twice for three nights. Slept in the Attic the first three nights of this week, for Mr. E. W. I have been called upon for several nights extra every week that I have slept there except the first. Wednesday finding that I was not relieved of the Attic as I was told I should be, I wrote a note to the Messrs. Watsons (sic), stating how much more I had slept there than of right belonged to me & *requesting* to be excused for the rest of the term. This note produced *immediate* relief, & in the evening I received a note of Mr. J. L. Watson, from which I extract the following: 'It gives me pleasure to take this opportunity to express our entire satisfaction with the performance of all the duties we have assigned you.' However they did not excuse me for the whole term; but as only one week of Attic sleeping, or rather waking would fall to me during the term I tho't best to say no more till the vacation when I shall make a more definite agreement if I conclude to stay."⁴⁵

Doctor says will be just the thing for me." Robert Adams Coker to Susan A. Coker, Francestown, November 3, 1831. Mss. letter in the possession of the author.

The family was anxious about Coker's health when he went to New York state, and in their first letter to him after his reaching the Highland School, they inquired particularly: "Mother wants you to send in particular about your health wether (sic) the climate agrees with you better or not as well or wether (sic) there is no difference." Catherine G. Coker to Robert A. Coker, West Newbury, July 31, 1832. Mss. Letter in the possession of the author.

⁴² *Diary*, II, 121, entry for the week of October 28, 1832.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 122, entry for the week of November 18, 1832.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 122, 123, entries for the weeks of November 11, 18, 1832.

⁴⁵ *Diary*, II, 123, entry for the week of November 25, 1832. Undoubtedly part of Coker's discontent was fostered by the worsening relations between his scholars and himself. He must have been a humorless pedant, a perfect butt for exuberant young fiends to torment. As he noted in his *Diary*, "this week all the boys with

Coker's general health improved but little by the end of November, if we can credit the *Diary*. The dysentery still bothered him, and he felt "like a stewed goose for want of proper exercise and food."⁴⁶ He was also homesick for family and for Massachusetts. Unusual for him, in the same week Coker wrote both to his family and to his dearest friend William Austin, remembering on the Thursday on which he wrote to the latter that it was then Thanksgiving Day in Massachusetts, "as I remembered when I sat down to our meagre dinner, of which I could scarcely eat 3 mouths full."⁴⁷ So angered and hungered was Coker that on the following Saturday he attempted to remedy both the want of exercise and want of food. In so doing, he left a most interesting picture in recounting his excursion to the old foundry:

"... walked to Cold Spring, eat (sic) a pie, & bought a few apples as hard as brick-bats. As I returned, called at the foundry where I saw them cast a shaft &c. &c. The iron was constantly stired (sic) in order to feed it, & from time to time liquid iron was brought from the furnace in ladles & poured in to feed the shaft. Without *feeding* the workman said the casting would be good for nothing. (I.E. not solid). I also saw a cylender (sic) for the Erie being bored. Cylen- ders (sic) are not cast solid like cannon; hollow and then are bored smooth. The workman said, it took about 12 days to bore such an one as the Erie's, as they went over them twice. The Cylander (sic) is not moved during the operation, the cutter advancing, by means of a screw, as fast as is necessary."⁴⁸

Food and foundry drew Coker again the following week. "... walked to the Foundry & stayed a few minutes. Bought some citron, which is the first I ever tasted. Was very sick of my bargain. It is not fit for civilized beings to eat. ... Yesterday walked to Cold Spring in the rain mainly to get something to eat besides bread."⁴⁹

the exception of 8 or 10 have been racking their ingenuity to show their spite against me. I have been really amused at their resentment; but have in no instance varied my conduct in the least except to draw tighter the reins. The cause is, I make them learn by *study*, whereas they wish & have been accustomed to learn Arithmetic only by being *shown*. I am also much more strict than their old Math. Instr." *Ibid.*, II, 124. Coker smugly thought he knew where the blame lay, but would have been surprised had Robert Burns' measure been used upon him. Half a century later the Rev. Dr. Morison was to apply a critical rule of evaluation to this dusty scholar, and possibly prove the boys correct in their heckling resentment of poor Coker.

⁴⁶ *Diary*, II, 124, entry for the week of December 2, 1832.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Diary*, II, 124-125, entry for the week of December 2, 1832.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, II, 125, entry for the week of December 9, 1832.

The Highland School, like citron, came for Coker to be “. . . not fit for civilized beings . . .”. As discontents mounted, fuel was added to the pyre by a difference of opinion between Coker and the Watsons as to his term of service to the school. John Lee Watson consider Coker as obligated to serve six months, whereas Coker’s understanding had been only five months. A battle of letters and conferences followed, and the Watsons’ obstinacy convinced Coker that departure alone was possible. In anger at Coker’s attitude, John Watson had finally told the mathematics instructor that he, Watson, could make Coker work all night instead of going to bed.⁵⁰ Here was the watershed in emotions and relations as concerned Robert Adams Coker and the Highland School. In spirit he was, in mid-December, through with the Watsons and their school; within three weeks he was in fact and in deed to be done with them. Nothing now could please him; all was dust in his mouth. It was more than psychosomatic, for Coker was dying, though none knew it yet. The severing of good relations between Coker and the Watsons was actually for the Watsons’ good; had Coker been persuaded to stay on at the Highland School, they might well have had a corpse rather than a mathematics tutor on their hands before the renewed contract had expired. Yet it is impossible to read the year’s end entries in the *Diary* without a feeling of intense pity for this lonely man of twenty-five, rebelling against his lot in life without knowing the true cause:

“This week have been very unwell. One or two mornings when first I got up it hurt me to breath very much, giving a violent pain in my breast, left sholder (sic) and about the left kidney, where, as near as I can judge, is the seat of the disorder. Left coffee and meat and potatos, mostly; and I think, Dei gratia, the difficulty had not increased, but perhaps rather diminished. Felt like a *stewed goose* most of the time. . . . Oh! Deus me sustine, te precor. Saturday walked to Cold Spring, and stayed all night at Longfield’s. For 2 meals, lodging, &c. payed 62½ cents. I gave Mr. L 40 cts. to bring me home.”⁵¹

Not even the keeping of Christmas could give Robert Coker a spark of affection for the school. On Christmas Day, “. . . Messrs. W gave the boys a *Dinner*. It consisted of 1st. Roast Turkey; 2nd a small piece of mince pie, miserable enough, tho’ very rich, yet spoiled in cooking; 3rd a desert (sic) of almonds, figs and very good raisins.—Drink, water.”⁵² But the Watsons’ board

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, II, 126–128, entry for the week of December 16, 1832.

⁵¹ *Diary*, II, 128–129, entry for the week of December 23, 1832.

⁵² *Diary*, II, 129, entry for the week of December 30, 1832.

stayed heavy in Robert's stomach, and the day after the feast he went off to Cold Spring once more.

“. . . stayed the night at Mr. Longfield's merely to get a change of diet for a day or two. Thursday it snowed and was wet, got Longfield to bring me home. . . . This week I have felt like a *stewed goose* of the *second degree*. I am now thoroughly disgusted with the place & if ever I get away ye will never catch me here again in this sink of filth and misery. The manner of life is enough to kill a horse either by confinement or wretched food. Today I sent for 25 cents worth of crackers and fish to help me drag along.”⁵³

Reprieve was soon in sight; the new year came! Two one-sentence entries in Coker's *Diary* record the passage of the old and the entry of the new: “Dec. 31. The recess closed and I taught my classes.” “January 1. The Kalends was observed, tho' not as it should be.”⁵⁴ Nothing was, or could be, right at this house high above the Hudson. By January 5th the moment for departure had come. Reports and recommendations had been turned in to the Messrs. Watson, and the scholars all “classed”; Robert Adams Coker was ready to shake the dust of the Highland School from his heels that Saturday afternoon in January, 1833. “At four I was ready and having bequeathed my relicts to Mr. Ellis, and taken leave of him and Messrs. Watson I stepped into the waggon (sic) and rode off without the least regret at anything except leaving a bottle of fine spring water which the servant had brought me in the forenoon.”⁵⁵ By wagon to Cold Spring, by river boat to New York, and then a brief visit: “I did not move about the City much. From the appearance of things it seems that one might get anything he wanted. I got oysters there for 8 cents apiece, and large doughnuts, of which 1 is nearly enough for my breakfast, for a cent apiece. The City Hall was the only building to which I payed attention. It is a very pretty building, situated on a plane (sic) in an elevated part of the city. Tamany (sic) Hall close by is a house, on the European plan, where you can get just what you want without being bored with what is not wanted.”⁵⁶ On Tuesday Robert Coker left New York by boat for New London, from there by stage to Norwich, where he “took a glass of hot water & some crackers and figs.” From Norwich the journey went by coach to Boston, stopping at Brookline for supper. “I eat nothing but toast. After changing

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Diary*, II, 129, 132.

⁵⁵ *Diary*, II, 133, entry for the week of New Year's Eve and the New Year, 1832-1833. These last several pages are not numbered in the original.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, II, 134.

our carriage & horses we proceeded to Thompson, where I took a cracker & a glass of wine. . . . We went thro' Mendon & reached Milford about 7, where we took breakfast. I eat little but toast."⁵⁷ At West Newbury the journey came to an end.

And so the story has been told. The brilliant mathematician of the Harvard Class of 1831 had gone but a little way West, in pursuit of his "profession". It had proved to be less the glorious realization than he had once imagined. By early January he was home again in West Newbury, home once more with his Mother, who had been so disturbed that there had been no Church near the Highland School, and who had seen the hand of God directing Robert's journey westward across Massachusetts when he went out eagerly toward Philipstown and Cold Spring:

"I think we ought to consider it as a providential thing that you did not send your trunk by water for of course you would went (sic) into the city and might have been exposed to sickness and danger in the Steam Boat, but God directed you another way. I hope you will ever remember to seek first the Kingdom of heaven and the righteousness (sic) thereof and God will ever direct you in all your lawful undertakings. for the Scriptures teach us that it is of him and through him and to him and from him are all things. I am sorry you have no good meeting on the Sab. But I hope you will remember the commandment to keep it holy and not suffer yourself in any thing unnecessary."⁵⁸

He was home again with the sisters and brothers who had waited impatiently for his letters, and who had laboriously written letters to him, detailing the events of their everyday lives in West Newbury, telling him of the fields and the orchards, the progress of the black colt, and of the visits to aunts and uncles.⁵⁹ Now this was all at an end. Robert Adams Coker had come home. He had written his first report from the Highland School six months before, and had noted that "Mr. W's family appears to be a good one and we have plenty of *toasted bread*." Now the sixmonth was gone, and so was Coker's health. How pitiful it is to read that final sentence in the *Diary* that he had methodically kept since his academy days at Exeter, beginning in 1827: "I eat little but toast." By March, 1833, Robert Adams Coker was dead. One

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, II, 135-136.

⁵⁸ Susanna Coker to Robert Adams Coker, July 31, 1832, West Newbury, Mass. Mss. letter in the possession of the author.

⁵⁹ Susanna Coker to Robert Adams Coker, West Newbury, July 27, 1832; Catherine G. Coker to Robert Adams Coker, July 31, 1832, West Newbury; same to same, West Newbury, September 5, 1832; Susan Coker to Robert Adams Coker, West Newbury, November 8, 1832; Catherine Coker to Robert Adams Coker, November 14-15, 1832. Mss. letters in the possession of the author.

of his family added the final entry in the *Diary*, not a holograph entry, but the pasted obituary from a local newspaper.⁶⁰

Forty-eight years later, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of his Harvard Class, Coker's name was called forth from the shadows of the past, and his personality conjured up for those remaining classmates celebrating in 1881. Ten members of the class were present at this anniversary, and the Rev. John Hopkins Morison read a series of very interesting sketches of deceased members of the class, with estimates of their characters and achievements. In essence the commentator captured well the teacher of the Highland School who did one job, and then went home to die:

“Robert A. Coker. Single-hearted, honest, a little affected in his profession of exclusive devotedness to mathematics,—hearty in his greetings—it was always a pleasure to meet him, and perhaps it was also a pleasure to leave him—there was so little variety in his conversation. His life was a monotone not devoid of humor, but all slightly in the minor key.”⁶¹

⁶⁰ *Diary*, II, 137. Page not numbered in the original. For an identical copy, see *Harvard Class Book, 1831*, newspaper clipping, no date, no place, p. 271.

⁶¹ *Harvard Class Book, 1831*. Account of the 50th anniversary meeting of the class, Tuesday, June 28, 1881. pp. 45-46; comment on Robert Adams Coker, in Morison's hand (pasted in the *Class Book*), p. 270.

