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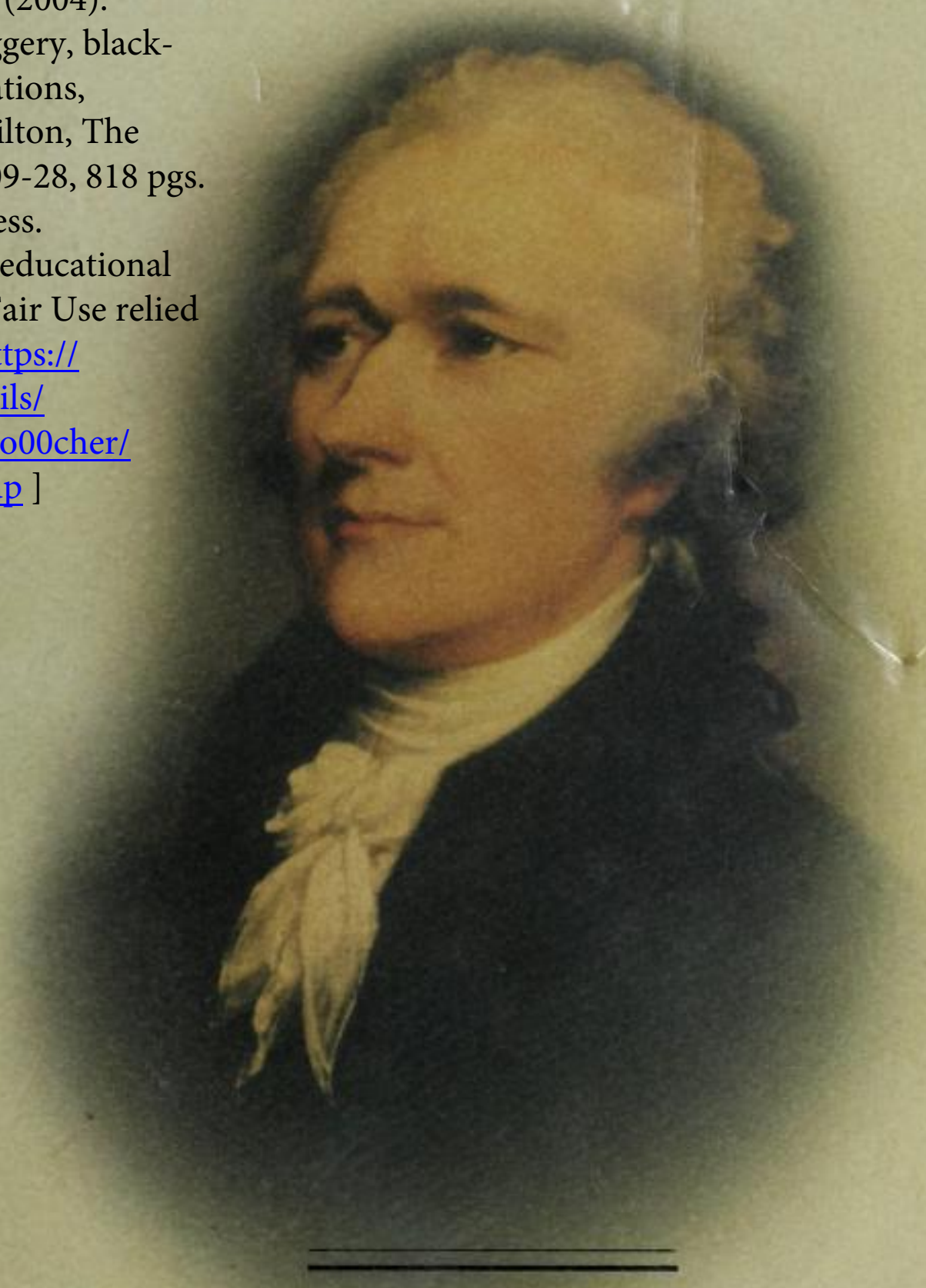
TITAN *and* THE HOUSE OF MORGAN



ALEXANDER HAMILTON

formalize their link after the birth of their second child, having lived until then as a common-law couple—an expedient adopted by Hamilton's own parents. In all, the Faucettes produced seven children, Hamilton's mother, Rachel, being the second youngest, born circa 1729.

A persistent mythology in the Caribbean asserts that Rachel was partly black, making Alexander Hamilton a quadroon or an octoroon. In this obsessively race-conscious society, however, Rachel was invariably listed among the whites on local tax rolls. Her identification as someone of mixed race has no basis in verifiable fact. (See pages 734–35.) The folklore that Hamilton was mulatto probably arose from the incontestable truth that many, if not most, illegitimate children in the West Indies bore mixed blood. At the time of Rachel's birth, the four thousand slaves on Nevis outnumbered whites by a ratio of four to one, making inequitable carnal relations between black slaves and white masters a dreadful commonplace.

Occupying a house in the southern Nevis foothills, the Faucettes owned a small sugar plantation and had at least seven slaves—pretty typical for the petite bourgeoisie. That Nevis later had a small black village named Fawcett, an anglicized version of the family name, confirms their ownership of slaves who later assumed their surname. The sugar islands were visited so regularly by epidemics of almost biblical proportions—malaria, dysentery, and yellow fever being the worst offenders—that five Faucette children perished in infancy or childhood, leaving only Rachel and her much older sister, Ann, as survivors. Even aided by slaves, small planters found it a tough existence. Skirting the volcanic cone, the Nevis hills were so steep and rocky that, even when terraced, they proved troublesome for sugar cultivation. The island steadily lost its economic eminence, especially after a mysterious plant disease, aggravated by drought, slowly crept across Nevis in 1737 and denuded it of much of its lush vegetation. This prompted a mass exodus of refugees, including Ann Faucette, who had married a well-to-do planter named James Lytton. They decamped to the Danish island of St. Croix, charting an escape route that Hamilton's parents were to follow.

Evidence indicates that the Faucette marriage was marred by perpetual squabbling, perhaps compounded by the back-to-back deaths of two of their children in 1736 and the blight that parched the island the next year. Mary Faucette was a pretty, socially ambitious woman and probably not content to dawdle on a stagnant island. Determined and resourceful, with a clear knack for cultivating powerful men, she appealed to the chancellor of the Leeward Islands for a legal separation from her husband. In the 1740 settlement, the Faucettes agreed to "live separately and apart for the rest of their lives," and Mary renounced all rights to her husband's property in exchange for an inadequate annuity of fifty-three pounds.[6] It is possible that she and Rachel traversed the narrow two-mile strait to St. Kitts, where they

may even have first encountered a young Scottish nobleman named James Hamilton. Because her mother had surrendered all claims to John Faucette's money, sixteen-year-old Rachel Faucette achieved the sudden glow of a minor heiress in 1745 when her father died and left her all his property. Since Rachel was bright, beautiful, and strong willed—traits we can deduce from subsequent events—she must have been hotly pursued in a world chronically deficient in well-heeled, educated European women.

Rachel and her mother decided to start anew on St. Croix, where James and Ann Lytton had prospered, building a substantial estate outside the capital, Christiansted, called the Grange. The Lyttons likely introduced them to another newcomer from Nevis, a Dane named Johann Michael Lavien, who had peddled household goods and now aspired to planter status. The name *Lavien* can be a Sephardic variant of *Levine*, but if he was Jewish he managed to conceal his origins. Had he presented himself as a Jew, the snobbish Mary Faucette would certainly have squelched the match in a world that frowned on religious no less than interracial marriage.

From fragmentary evidence, Lavien emerges as a man who dreamed of plucking sudden riches from the New World but stumbled, like others, into multiple disappointments. The year before he met Rachel, he squandered much of his paltry capital on a minor St. Croix sugar plantation. On this island of grand estates, a profitable operation required fifty to one hundred slaves, something beyond the reveries of the thinly capitalized Lavien. He then lowered his sights appreciably and, trying to become a planter on the cheap, acquired a 50 percent stake in a small cotton plantation. He ended up deeply in hock to the Danish West India and Guinea Company. Beyond her apparent physical allure, Rachel Faucette must have represented a fresh source of ready cash for Lavien.

For Alexander Hamilton, Johann Michael Lavien was the certified ogre of his family saga. He wrote, "A Dane, a fortune hunter of the name of *Lavine* [Hamilton's spelling], came to Nevis bedizzened with gold and paid his addresses to my mother, then a handsome young woman having a *snug* fortune." In the eighteenth century, a "snug" fortune signified one sufficient for a comparatively easy life. Partial to black silk gowns and blue vests with bright gold buttons, Lavien was a flashy dresser and must have splurged on such finery to hide his threadbare budget and palm himself off on Mary Faucette as an affluent suitor. Hamilton rued the day that his grandmother was "captivated by the glitter" of Lavien's appearance and auctioned her daughter off, as it were, to the highest bidder. "In compliance with the wishes of her mother . . . but against her own inclination," Hamilton stated, the sixteeen-year-old Rachel agreed to marry the older Lavien, her senior by at least a dozen years.[7] In Hamilton's blunt estimation, it was "a hated marriage," as the daughter of one unhappy union was rushed straight into another.[8]

In 1745, the ill-fated wedding took place at the Grange. The newlyweds set up house on their own modest plantation, which was named, with macabre irony, Contentment. The following year, the teenage bride gave birth to a son, Peter, destined to be her one legitimate child. One wonders if Rachel ever submitted to further conjugal relations with Lavien. Even if Lavien was not the "coarse man of repulsive personality" evoked by Hamilton's grandson, it seems clear that Rachel felt stifled by her older husband, finding him crude and insufferable.[9] In 1748, Lavien bought a half share in another small sugar plantation, enlarging his debt and frittering away Rachel's fast dwindling inheritance. The marriage deteriorated to the point where the headstrong wife simply abandoned the house around 1750. A vindictive Lavien ranted in a subsequent divorce decree that while Rachel had lived with him she had "committed such errors which as between husband and wife were indecent and very suspicious."[10] In his severe judgment she was "shameless, coarse, and ungodly."[11]

Enraged, his pride bruised, Lavien was determined to humiliate his unruly bride. Seizing on a Danish law that allowed a husband to jail his wife if she was twice found guilty of adultery and no longer resided with him, he had Rachel clapped into the dreaded Christiansvaern, the Christiansted fort, which did double duty as the town jail.[12] Rachel has sometimes been portrayed as a "prostitute"—one of Hamilton's journalistic nemeses branded him "the son of a camp-girl"—but such insinuations are absurd.[13] On the other hand, that Lavien broadcast his accusations against her and met no outright refutation suggests that Rachel had indeed flouted social convention and found solace in the arms of other men.

Perched on the edge of Gallows Bay, Fort Christiansvaern had cannon that could be trained on pirates or enemy ships crossing the coral reef, as well as smaller artillery that could be swiveled landward and used to suppress slave insurrections. In this ghastly place, unspeakable punishments were meted out to rebellious blacks who had committed heinous crimes: striking whites, torching cane fields, or dashing off to freedom. They could be whipped, branded, and castrated, shackled with heavy leg irons, and entombed in filthy dungeons. The remaining cells tended to be populated by town drunks, petty thieves, and the other dregs of white society. It seems that no woman other than Rachel Lavien was ever imprisoned there for adultery. Rachel spent several months in a dank, cramped cell that measured ten by thirteen feet, and she must have gone through infernal torments of fear and loneliness. Through a small, deeply inset window, she could stare across sharpened spikes that encircled the outer wall and gaze at blue-green water that sparkled in fierce tropical sunlight. She could also eavesdrop on the busy wharf, stacked with hogsheads of sugar, which her son Alexander would someday frequent as a young clerk in a trading firm. All the while, she had to choke down a nauseating diet of salted herring, codfish, and boiled yellow cornmeal mush.

As an amateur psychologist, Lavien left something to be desired, for he imagined that when Rachel was released after three to five months this broken woman would now tamely submit to his autocratic rule—that "everything would be better and that she like a true wife would have changed her ungodly mode of life and would live with him as was meet and fitting," as the divorce decree later proclaimed.[14] He had not reckoned on her invincible spirit. Solitude had only stiffened her resolve to expel Lavien from her life. As Hamilton later philosophized in another context, "Tis only to consult our own hearts to be convinced that nations like individuals revolt at the idea of being guided by external compulsion."[15] After Rachel left the fort, she spent a week with her mother, who was living with one of St. Croix's overlords, Town Captain Bertram Pieter de Nully, and supporting herself by sewing and renting out her three slaves.

Then Rachel did something brave but reckless that sealed her future status as a pariah: she fled the island, abandoning both Lavien and her sole son, Peter. In doing so, she relinquished the future benefits of a legal separation and inadvertently doomed the unborn Alexander to illegitimacy. In her proud defiance of persecution, her mental toughness, and her willingness to court controversy, it is hard not to see a startling preview of her son's passionately willful behavior.

When she left for St. Kitts in 1750, Rachel seems to have been accompanied by her mother, who announced her departure to creditors in a newspaper notice and settled her debts. Rachel must have imagined that she would never again set eyes on St. Croix and that the vengeful Lavien had inflicted his final lash. Alexander Hamilton may have been musing upon his mother's marriage to Lavien when he later observed, "'Tis a very good thing when their stars unite two people who are fit for each other, who have souls capable of relishing the sweets of friendship and sensibilities. . . . But it's a dog of [a] life when two dissonant tempers meet."[16] When the time came for choosing his own wife, he would proceed with special care.

Hamilton's other star-crossed parent, James Hamilton, had also been bedeviled by misfortune in the islands. Born around 1718, he was the fourth of eleven children (nine sons, two daughters) of Alexander Hamilton, the laird of Grange in Stevenston Parish in Ayrshire, Scotland, southwest of Glasgow. In 1711, that Alexander Hamilton, the fourteenth laird in the so-called Cambuskeith line of Hamiltons, married Elizabeth Pollock, the daughter of a baronet. As Alexander must have heard ad nauseam in his boyhood, the Cambuskeith Hamiltons possessed a coat of arms and for centuries had owned a castle near Kilmarnock called the Grange. Indeed, that lineage can be traced back to the fourteenth century in impeccable genealogical tables, and he boasted in later years that he was the scion of a blue-ribbon Scottish family: "The truth is that, on the question who my parents

were, I have better pretensions than most of those who in this country plume themselves on ancestry."[17]

In 1685, the family took possession of ivy-covered Kerelaw Castle, set prominently on windswept hills above the little seaside town of Stevenston. Today just a mound of picturesque ruins, this stately pile then featured a great hall with graceful Gothic windows and came complete with its own barony. "The castle stands on the rather steep, wooded bank of a small stream, and overlooks a beautiful glen," wrote one newspaper while the structure stood intact.[18] The castle's occupants enjoyed a fine if often fogbound view of the island of Arran across the Firth of Clyde.

Then as now, the North Ayrshire countryside consisted of gently rolling meadows that were well watered by streams and ponds; cows and horses browsed on largely treeless hillsides. At the time James Hamilton grew up in Kerelaw Castle, the family estate was so huge that it encompassed not just Stevenston but half the arable land in the parish. Aside from a cottage industry of weavers and a small band of artisans who made Jew's harps, most local residents huddled in cold hovels, subsisted on a gruesome oatmeal diet, and eked out hardscrabble lives as tenant farmers for the Hamiltons. For all his storybook upbringing in the castle and highborn pedigree, James Hamilton faced uncertain prospects. As the fourth son, he had little chance of ever inheriting the storied title of laird of Grange, and, like all younger brothers in this precarious spot, he was expected to go off and fend for himself. As his son Alexander noted, his father, as "a younger son of a numerous family," was "bred to trade."

From the sketchy information that can be gleaned about James's siblings, it seems that he was the black sheep of the family, marked for mediocrity. While James had no formal education to speak of, two older and two younger brothers attended the University of Glasgow, and most of his siblings found comfortable niches in the world. Brother John financed manufacturing and insurance ventures. Brother Alexander became a surgeon, brother Walter a doctor and apothecary, and brother William a prosperous tobacco merchant, while sister Elizabeth married the surveyor of customs for Port Glasgow. Easygoing and lackadaisical, devoid of the ambition that would propel his spirited son, James Hamilton did not seem to internalize the Glaswegian ethos of hard work and strict discipline.

One has the impression that his eldest brother, John, now laird of Grange, was no country squire riding to hounds but an active, enterprising man who was intensely involved in the banking, shipping, and textile business revolutionizing Glasgow. This cathedral and university town, rhapsodized by Daniel Defoe in the 1720s as "the most beautiful little town in Britain," already breathed a lively commercial spirit of the sort that later appealed to Alexander Hamilton.[19] After the 1707 union

with England, as Scottish trade with the North American and West Indian colonies boomed, merchant princes grew rich trafficking in sugar, tobacco, and cotton. In November 1737, John Hamilton took the affable but feckless James, then nineteen, and steered him into a four-year apprenticeship with an innovative Glasgow businessman named Richard Allan. Allan had executed a daring raid on Dutch industrial secrets (one that strikingly anticipates what Alexander Hamilton later attempted in bringing manufacturing to Paterson, New Jersey) and helped to pioneer the linen industry in Scotland with his Haarlem Linen and Dye Manufactory.

In 1741, John Hamilton teamed up with Allan and three Glasgow grandees—Archibald Ingram, John Glassford, and James Dechman—to form the Glasgow Inkle Factory, which produced linen tapes (inkles) that were used in making lace. Hamilton's partners were the commercial royalty of Glasgow, who drove about in fancy coaches, presided over landed estates, and dominated the River Clyde with their oceangoing vessels. For many years these men would tirelessly bail out the hapless James Hamilton from recurrent financial scrapes.

The onerous four-year contract that James Hamilton signed with Richard Allan in 1737 was a form of legal bondage that obligated him to work as both "an apprentice and servant."[20] John Hamilton paid Allan forty-five pounds sterling to groom his younger brother in the textile trade. In exchange, James would receive room, board, and fresh linen in the Allan household but no guaranteed holidays or free weekend time. John Hamilton must have thought that he was shepherding the wayward James into a promising new industry. In time, the linen industry indeed proved profitable, but during this start-up phase it was a dispiriting, money-draining proposition. So when the apprenticeship agreement expired in 1741, James Hamilton decided to test his luck in the West Indies.

Many young aristocrats flocked to the West Indian sugar islands, seduced by a common fantasy: they would amass a quick fortune as planters or merchants, then return to Europe, flush with cash, and snap up magnificent estates. The Glasgow countryside was studded with the country houses of winners in this sweepstakes. Great shiploads of sugar traveled from the West Indian islands to Glasgow's "boiling houses" or refineries, and its distilleries produced brandy from that sugar. Beyond the sugar trade, industrious Scots also operated stores that sold provisions to plantations and marketed their produce. One historian has noted, "Their emporiums were crammed with full lines of European and North American goods—hardware, draperies, clothing, shoes, and what not—and much resembled warehouses."[21] Of all the Caribbean islands, few enjoyed more intimate connections with Glasgow than St. Christopher in the Leeward Islands, commonly known as St. Kitts. More than half of the island's original land grants were awarded to Scots.

As the son of a Scottish laird, James Hamilton must have started out with a mod-

icum of social cachet in St. Kitts, but it was never enhanced by money or business success. Trading sugar or plantation supplies in the West Indies was hazardous to those with skimpy capital. Clients demanded credit from these middlemen, who had to carry the risk for merchandise until it was resold in Europe; meanwhile, they had to pay the sugar duties. The slightest error in calculation or payment delay could swamp a trader in catastrophic losses. Some such fate probably overtook James Hamilton, who faltered quickly and had to be rescued repeatedly by his brother John and his Glasgow friends. "In capacity of a merchant he went to St. Kitts, where from too generous and too easy a temper he failed in business and at length fell into indigent circumstances," his son Alexander wrote in tactful tones.[22] He spoke of his father in a forgiving tone, tinged with pity rather than scorn. "It was his fault to have had too much pride and too large a portion of indolence, but his character was otherwise without reproach and his manners those of a gentleman."[23] In short, Hamilton saw his father as amiable but lazily inept. He inherited his father's pride, though not his indolence, and his exceptional capacity for work was its own unspoken commentary about his father's.

James Hamilton had little notion that his protective older brother was acting as his lender of last resort, for John exhorted his brother's creditors to mask his role, cautioning one creditor in 1749, "My brother does not know I am engaged for him."[24] From John Hamilton's letters, one senses that James was distant, even estranged, from his family. "The last letter his mother had from him was some time ago, where he writes he had bills but at that time they were not due," John disclosed in one letter to a business associate.[25] Perhaps embarrassed by his perennial bungling, James seems to have concealed the scope of his financial troubles.

That James Hamilton's career likely lay in ruins before Rachel Faucette Lavien materialized is suggested by the minutes of the St. Kitts Council meeting of July 15, 1748, which reported that he had taken the oath of either a watchman or a weigh man (insects have unfortunately eaten the middle letters) for the port of Basseterre, the island's capital.[26] So if his stint in the tropics was meant to be a fleeting, money-making interlude, it had begun to turn into a permanent trap instead. Many young European fortune seekers, expecting to return home, would take a temporary black or mulatto mistress and defer marriage until safely back on native soil. That his plans had drastically miscarried would have made James Hamilton more receptive to a romantic liaison with a separated European woman, now that he knew he was not going to see Scotland again any time soon.

By the time Rachel met James Hamilton for sure in St. Kitts in the early 1750s, a certain symmetry had shaped their lives. They were both scarred by early setbacks, had suffered a vertiginous descent in social standing, and had grappled with the terrors of downward economic mobility. Each would have been excluded from the

more rarefied society of the British West Indies and tempted to choose a mate from the limited population of working whites. Their liaison was the sort of match that could easily produce a son hypersensitive about class and status and painfully conscious that social hierarchies ruled the world.

Divorce was a novelty in the eighteenth century. To obtain one in the Crown colonies was an expensive, tortuous affair, and this deprived James and Rachel of any chance to legitimize their match. Putting the best face on the embarrassing situation, Alexander sometimes pretended that his parents had married. Of Rachel's flight from St. Croix, he declared, "My mother afterwards went to St. Kitts, became acquainted with my father and a marriage between them ensued, followed by many years cohabitation and several children."[27] Since the relationship may have lasted fifteen years, it presumably took on the trappings of a marriage, enabling Alexander to maintain that his illegitimacy was a mere legal technicality and had nothing to do with negligent or profligate parents. Indeed, Hamilton's parents, though a common-law couple, presented themselves as James and Rachel Hamilton. They had two sons: James, Jr., and, two years later, Alexander. (Since Hamilton spoke of his mother's bearing "several children," other siblings may have died in childhood.)

The personalities of James and Rachel Hamilton evoked by Alexander's descendants have a slightly unreal, even sanitized, quality. Hamilton's own son John conjured up Rachel as "a woman of superior intellect, elevated sentiment, and unusual grace of person and manner. To her he was indebted for his genius."[28] Perhaps no less fanciful was the paternal portrait daubed by Hamilton's grandson Allan McLane Hamilton: "Hamilton's father does not appear to have been successful in any pursuit, but in many ways was a great deal of a dreamer, and something of a student, whose chief happiness seemed to be in the society of his beautiful and talented wife, who was in every way intellectually his superior."[29] Is this cozy domestic scene based on credible oral history or family public relations? The documentary record is, alas, mute. The one inescapable impression we have is that Hamilton received his brains and implacable willpower from his mother, not from his errant, indolent father. On the other hand, his father's Scottish ancestry enabled Alexander to daydream that he was not merely a West Indian outcast, consigned forever to a lowly status, but an aristocrat in disguise, waiting to declare his true identity and act his part on a grander stage.

Few questions bedevil Hamilton biographers more than the baffling matter of his year of birth. For a long time, historians accepted 1757, the year used by Hamilton himself and his family. Yet several cogent pieces of evidence from his Caribbean period have caused many recent historians to opt for 1755. In 1766, Hamilton affixed his signature as the witness to a legal document, a dubious honor if he was

only nine. In 1768, a probate court in St. Croix reported his age as thirteen—highly compelling evidence, since it did not rely on his testimony but came from his uncle. When Alexander published a poem in a St. Croix newspaper in 1771, the aspiring bard informed the editor, "Sir, I am a youth about seventeen"—an adolescent's way of stating that he was sixteen, which would also tally with the 1755 date. The mass of evidence from the period after Hamilton's arrival in North America does suggest 1757 as his birth year, but, preferring the integrity of contemporary over retrospective evidence, we will opt here for a birthday of January 11, 1755.

From her father, Rachel had inherited a waterfront property on the main street in Charlestown, the Nevis capital, where legend proclaims that Alexander was born and lived as a boy. If so, he would have seen off to the left the town anchorage and a bright expanse of water, crowded with slave and cargo ships; off to the right lay the rugged foothills and dim, brown mountains of St. Kitts. Appropriately enough, this boy destined to be America's foremost Anglophile entered the world as a British subject, born on a British isle, in the reign of George II. He was slight and thin shouldered and distinctly Scottish in appearance, with a florid complexion, reddish-brown hair, and sparkling violet-blue eyes. One West Indian mentor who remembered Hamilton as bookish and "rather delicate and frail" marveled that he had mustered the later energy for his strenuous American exploits.[30] Like everyone in the West Indies, Hamilton had extensive early exposure to blacks. In this highly stratified society, with its many gradations of caste and color, even poor whites owned slaves and hired them out for extra income. In 1756, one year after Hamilton was born, his grandmother, Mary Faucette, now residing on the Dutch island of St. Eustatius, made out her final will and left "my three dear slaves, Rebecca, Flora and Esther" to her daughter Rachel.[31]

Hamiliton probably did not have formal schooling on Nevis—his illegitimate birth may well have barred him from Anglican instruction—but he seems to have had individual tutoring. His son later related that "rarely as he alluded to his personal history, he mentioned with a smile his having been taught to repeat the Decalogue in Hebrew, at the school of a Jewess, when so small that he was placed standing by her side upon a table."[32] This charming vignette squares with two known facts: elderly women in the Caribbean commonly tutored children, and Nevis had a thriving population of Sephardic Jews, many of whom had escaped persecution in Brazil and entered the local sugar trade. By the 1720s, they constituted one quarter of Charlestown's white population and created a synagogue, a school, and a well-kept cemetery that survives to this day. His French Huguenot mother may also have instructed Hamilton, for he was comfortably bilingual and later was more at ease in French than Franklin, Adams, Jefferson, and other American diplomats who had spent years struggling to master the tongue in Paris.

Perhaps from this exposure at an impressionable age, Hamilton harbored a lifelong reverence for Jews. In later years, he privately jotted on a sheet of paper that the "*progress of the Jews* . . . from their earliest history to the present time has been and is entirely out of the *ordinary course* of human affairs. Is it not then a fair conclusion that the *cause* also is an *extraordinary one*—in other words that it is the effect of some great providential plan?"[33] Later on, in the heat of a renowned legal case, Hamilton challenged the opposing counsel: "Why distrust the evidence of the Jews? Discredit them and you destroy the Christian religion. . . . Were not the [Jews] witnesses of that pure and holy, happy and heaven-approved faith, converts to that faith?"[34]

For a boy with Hamilton's fertile imagination, Nevis's short history must have furnished a rich storehouse of material. He was well situated to witness the clash of European powers, with incessant skirmishes among French, Spanish, and English ships and swarms of marauding pirates and privateers. The admiralty court sat in Nevis, which meant that swaggering buccaneers in manacles were dragged into the local courthouse before proper hangings in Gallows Bay. While some pirates were just plain freebooters, many were discreetly backed by warring European nations, perhaps instructing Hamilton in the way that foreign powers can tamper with national sovereignty.

Periodically, cutthroats came ashore for duels, resorting to conventional pistols or slashing one another with heavy cutlasses—thrilling fare for any boy. Blood feuds were routine affairs in the West Indies. Plantation society was a feudal order, predicated on personal honor and dignity, making duels popular among whites who fancied themselves noblemen. As in the American south, an exaggerated sense of romantic honor may have been an unconscious way for slaveholders to flaunt their moral superiority, purge pent-up guilt, and cloak the brutish nature of their trade.

To the extent that dueling later entranced Hamilton to an unhealthy degree, this fascination may have originated in the most fabled event in Nevis in the 1750s. In 1752, John Barbot, a young Nevis lawyer, and Matthew Mills, a wealthy planter from St. Kitts, were bickering over a land deal when Mills lashed out at Barbot as "an impertinent puppy"—the sort of fighting words that prompted duels.[35] One day at dawn, elegantly clad in a silver laced hat and white coat, Barbot was rowed over to St. Kitts by a slave boy. At a dueling ground at Frigate Bay, he encountered Mills, lifted his silver-mounted pistol, and slaughtered him at close range.

At the sensational murder trial, it was alleged that Barbot had gunned down Mills before the latter even had a chance to grab his pistol from his holster. A star witness was Dr. William Hamilton (a possible relation of James Hamilton), who testified that Mills had been shot in the side and therefore must have been am-

bushed. Certain elements of this trial almost creepily foreshadow the fatal clash between Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr. Barbot, well bred yet debt ridden, sneered at the softhearted notion that he had murdered the popular Mills, claiming that he had "killed him fairly according to the notions of honour prevailing among men."[36] Barbot insisted that Mills had aimed his pistol at him even as he absorbed the fatal bullet. As was to happen with Aaron Burr, locals testified that Barbot, in ungentlemanly fashion, had taken target practice in the preceding weeks. Barbot was eventually convicted and packed off to the gallows. Nevis children such as Hamilton, who was born three years later, would have savored every gory detail of this history.

Violence was commonplace in Nevis, as in all the slave-ridden sugar islands. The eight thousand captive blacks easily dwarfed in number the one thousand whites, "a disproportion," remarked one visitor, "which necessarily converts all such white men as are not exempted by age and decrepitude into a well-regulated militia."[37] Charlestown was a compact town of narrow, crooked lanes and wooden buildings, and Hamilton would regularly have passed the slave-auction blocks at Market Shop and Crosses Alley and beheld barbarous whippings in the public square. The Caribbean sugar economy was a system of inimitable savagery, making the tobacco and cotton plantations of the American south seem almost genteel by comparison. The mortality rate of slaves hacking away at sugarcane under a pitiless tropical sun was simply staggering: three out of five died within five years of arrival, and slave owners needed to replenish their fields constantly with fresh victims. One Nevis planter, Edward Huggins, set a sinister record when he administered 365 lashes to a male slave and 292 to a female. Evidently unfazed by this sadism, a local jury acquitted him of all wrongdoing. A decorous British lady who visited St. Kitts stared aghast at naked male and female slaves being driven along dusty roads by overseers who flogged them at regular intervals, as if they needed steady reminders of their servitude: "Every ten Negroes have a driver who walks behind them, holding in his hand a short whip and a long one . . . and you constantly observe where the application has been made."[38] Another British visitor said that "if a white man kills a black, he cannot be tried for his life for the murder. . . . If a negro strikes a white man, he is punished with the loss of his hand and, if he should draw blood, with death."[39] Island life contained enough bloodcurdling scenes to darken Hamilton's vision for life, instilling an ineradicable pessimism about human nature that infused all his writing.

All of the horror was mingled incongruously with the natural beauty of turquoise waters, flaming sunsets, and languid palm fronds. In this geologically active zone, the hills bubbled with high-sulfur hot springs that later became tourist meccas. The sea teemed with lobster, snapper, grouper, and conch, while the jungles were

alive with parrots and mongooses. There were also monkeys galore, green vervets shipped from Africa earlier in the century. Many travelers prized the island as a secluded refuge, one finding it so "captivating" that he contended that if a man came there with his wife, he might linger forever in the "sweet recess" of Nevis.[40] It was all very pleasant and balmy, supremely beautiful and languid, if you were white, were rich, and turned a blind eye to the black population expiring in the canebrakes.

If Rachel thought that Johann Michael Lavien's appetite for revenge had been sated in Christiansted, she was sadly disabused of this notion in 1759. Nine years after Rachel had fled St. Croix, Lavien surfaced for one final lesson in retribution. Oppressed by debt, he had been forced to cede his most recent plantation to two Jewish moneylenders and support himself as a plantation overseer while renting out his little clutch of slaves. In the interim, he had begun living with a woman who took in washing to boost their income. It may have been Lavien's wish to marry this woman that abruptly prompted him to obtain an official divorce summons from Rachel on February 26, 1759.

In a document seething with outrage, Lavien branded Rachel a scarlet woman, given to a sinful life. Having failed to mend her ways after imprisonment, the decree stated, Rachel had "absented herself from [Lavien] for nine years and gone elsewhere, where she has begotten several illegitimate children, so that such action is believed to be more than sufficient for him to obtain a divorce from her."[41] Lavien noted bitterly that he himself "had taken care of Rachel's legitimate child from what little he has been able to earn," whereas she had "completely forgotten her duty and let husband and child alone and instead given herself up to whoring with everyone, which things the plaintiff says are so well known that her own family and friends must hate her for it."[42] After this vicious indictment, Lavien demanded that Rachel be denied all legal rights to his property. He warned that if he died before her, Rachel "as a widow would possibly seek to take possession of the estate and therefore not only acquire what she ought not to have but also take this away from his child and give it to her whore-children."[43] This was how Lavien designated Alexander and his brother: *whore-children.* He was determined to preserve his wealth for his one legitimate son, thirteen-year-old Peter.

Rachel was undoubtedly stunned by this unforeseen vendetta, this throwback to a nightmarish past. Summoned to appear in court in St. Croix, she must have feared further reprisals from Lavien and did not show up or refute the allegations. On June 25, Lavien received a divorce that permitted him to remarry, while Rachel was strictly prohibited from doing so. The Danish authorities took such decrees seriously and fined or dismissed any clergyman who married couples in defiance of such decisions. In one swiftly effective stroke, Lavien had safeguarded his son's in-

heritance and penalized Rachel, making it impossible for her two innocent sons ever to mitigate the stigma of illegitimacy. However detestable Lavien's actions, two things should be said in his defense. Rachel *had* relinquished responsibility for Peter and forced Lavien to bring the boy up alone. Also, Lavien subsequently witnessed legal documents for the Lyttons, Rachel's St. Croix in-laws, suggesting that her own family may have seen her life as less than blameless.

In view of this lacerating history, Rachel probably never imagined that she would return to St. Croix, but a confluence of events changed that. In the early 1760s, Lavien moved to Frederiksted, on the far side of St. Croix from Christiansted, and dabbled in real estate. Then, around 1764, Peter moved to South Carolina. So when James Hamilton received a business assignment in Christiansted in April 1765, he could have taken along Rachel and the two boys without fearing any untoward collisions with Lavien. James Hamilton had continued to feed off his brother's Glasgow business connections. He served as head clerk for Archibald Ingram of St. Kitts, the son of a Glasgow "tobacco lord" of the same name. The Ingrams asked James to collect a large debt due from a man named Alexander Moir, who was returning to Europe and denied owing them money; the resulting lawsuit was to drone on until January 1766. In the meantime, Rachel and the boys took up residence in Christiansted. Thrust back into the world of her former disgrace, Rachel lived blocks from the fort where she had been jailed and no longer had the liberty of posing as "Mrs. Hamilton." (On the St. Croix tax rolls, she shows up under misspelled variants of Faucette and Lavien.) Stripped of whatever cover of legitimacy had sheltered them, it would have become glaringly evident to Alexander and James, Jr., for the first time that they were "natural" children and that their mother had been a notorious woman.

James Hamilton scored an apparent victory in the Moir case, then left St. Croix and deserted his family forever. Why this sudden exit? Did Rachel's scandalous reputation cause a rift in their relationship? Did Lavien conduct a smear campaign and poison the air with innuendo? These scenarios seem unlikely given that James Hamilton never appeared on the St. Croix tax rolls, suggesting that he knew all along that he was a transient visitor. Alexander offered a forgiving but plausible reason for his father's desertion: he could no longer afford to support his family. Because James, Jr., twelve, and Alexander, ten, had attained an age where they could assist Rachel, James, Sr., may have believed that he could wash his hands of paternal duties without undue pangs of guilt. More in sorrow than malice, Alexander wrote a Scottish kinsman thirty years later, "You no doubt have understood that my father's affairs at a very early day went to wreck, so as to have rendered his situation during the greatest part of his life far from eligible. This state of things occasioned a separation between him and me, when I was very young."[44] Alexander probably

never set eyes again on his vagabond father, who stayed in the Caribbean, either lured by the indolent tropic tempo or ground down by poverty. Father and son never entirely lost touch with each other, but a curious detachment, an estrangement as much psychological as geographical, separated them. As we shall see, there is a possible reason why James Hamilton may have felt less than paternal toward his son and Alexander less than filial toward him.

For a woman once hounded from St. Croix in disgrace, Rachel exhibited remarkable resilience upon her return. As she ambled about Christiansted in a red or white skirt, her face shaded by a black silk sun hat, this "handsome," self-reliant woman seems to have been fired by some inner need to vindicate herself and silence her critics. At this, she succeeded admirably, superseding James Hamilton as the family breadwinner. Already on August 1, 1765, her wealthy brother-in-law, James Lytton, had bought her six walnut chairs with leather seats and agreed to foot the bill for her rent. Alexander later testified to the Lyttons' indispensable largesse, saying that his father's departure "threw me upon the bounty of my mother's relations, some of whom were then wealthy."[45]

Rachel's return to St. Croix had probably been premised on support from Ann and James Lytton, a hope that never quite panned out, as her in-laws were themselves besieged by successive problems. As prominent sugar planters, the Lyttons had enjoyed a leisurely life at the Grange, occupying a stone "great house" with polished wooden floors, louvered blinds, paneled shutters, and chandeliers. Like many sugar plantations, it was a world in miniature, a compound that included slave quarters, a sugar mill, and a boiling house that produced molasses and brown sugar. Then, one by one, the Lytton children were overtaken by the curse that seemed to afflict everyone around Alexander Hamilton. Several years earlier, Ann and James's second son, James Lytton, Jr., had formed a partnership with one Robert Holliday. This business venture failed so abysmally that one summer night in 1764, the bankrupt James, Jr., and his wife climbed aboard the family schooner, herded twenty-two stolen slaves on board, and cast off for the Carolinas, while the less quick-witted Holliday was captured and jailed for nearly two years. Shattered by this scandal, James and Ann Lytton sold the Grange and in late 1765 moved back to Nevis, just months after Rachel and her two boys arrived in St. Croix from there. Within one year, Ann Lytton was dead, leaving Rachel as the last surviving Faucette.

Rachel took a two-story house on 34 Company Street, fast by the Anglican church and school. Adhering to a common town pattern, she lived with her two boys in the wooden upper floor, which probably jutted over the street, while turning the lower stone floor into a shop selling foodstuffs to planters—salted fish, beef, pork, apples, butter, rice, and flour. It was uncommon in those days for a woman to

be a shopkeeper, especially one so fetching and, at thirty-six, still relatively young. One traveler to St. Croix remarked, "White women are not expected to do anything here except drink tea and coffee, eat, make calls, play cards, and at times sew a little."[46] In her enclosed yard, Rachel kept a goat, probably to provide milk for her boys. She bought some of her merchandise from her landlord, while the rest came from two young New York merchants, David Beekman and Nicholas Cruger, who had just inaugurated a trading firm that was to transform Hamilton's insecure, claustrophobic boyhood.

No less than in Nevis, slavery was all-pervasive on St. Croix—it was "the source from which every citizen obtains his daily bread and his wealth," concluded one contemporary account—with twelve blacks for every white.[47] A decade later, a census ascertained that Company Street had fifty-nine houses, with 187 whites and 427 slaves packed into breathless proximity. Since the neighborhood was zoned to incorporate free blacks and mulattoes, Alexander was exposed to a rich racial mélange. Because her mother had died, Rachel now owned five adult female slaves and supplemented her income by hiring them out. The slaves also had four children; Rachel assigned a little boy named Ajax as a house slave to Alexander and another to James. This early exposure to the humanity of the slaves may have made a lasting impression on Hamilton, who would be conspicuous among the founding fathers for his fierce abolitionism.

St. Croix had its picturesque side in its conical sugar mills, powered by windmills or mules, that crushed the sugarcane with big rollers. During harvesttime, the twilight glittered with fires from boiling houses that dotted the island. The coast around Christiansted was lined with soft, green hills and punctuated by secluded inlets and coves. Early idealized prints of the town show two distinct moods: a smart military precision down near the fort and wharf, with heaps of sugar barrels ready for export, and a slower, more sensual inland atmosphere, with black women balancing large bundles on their heads. Though house slaves donned shirts and skirts, it wasn't unusual for one or two hundred slaves to toil naked in a steaming field beneath the towering sugar stalks. By night, the whitewashed town of Christiansted, laid out in a formal grid by Danish authorities, erupted into a roaring, licentious bedlam of boisterous taverns and open brothels overflowing with rebels, sailors, and outlaws from many countries. So extensive was the sexual contact between whites and blacks that local church registers were thickly sprinkled with entries for illegitimate mulatto children.

If Alexander Hamilton was exposed to abundant savagery and depravity, he also snatched distant glimpses of an elegant way of life that might have fostered a desire to be allied with the rich. The local atmosphere was not likely to breed a flaming populist: poverty carried no dignity on a slave island. The big planters rode about

in ornate carriages and shopped for imported watches, jewelry, and other European finery. Some oases of culture survived amid the barbarism. Two dancing schools gave lessons in the minuet, while the Leeward Islands Comedians served up a surprisingly varied fare of Shakespeare and Restoration comedy. Rachel tried to give her spartan household a patina of civility. From a later inventory, we know that she had six silver spoons, seven silver teaspoons, a pair of sugar tongs, fourteen porcelain plates, two porcelain basins, and a bed covered with a feather comforter.

Of most compelling interest to our saga, the upstairs living quarters held thirty-four books—the first unmistakable sign of Hamilton's omnivorous, self-directed reading. Many people on St. Croix would have snickered at his bookish habits, making him feel freakish and contributing to an urgent need to flee the West Indies. From his first tentative forays in prose and verse, we can hazard an educated guess about the books that stocked his shelf. The poetry of Alexander Pope must have held an honored place, plus a French edition of Machiavelli's *The Prince* and Plutarch's *Lives*, rounded off by sermons and devotional tracts. If Hamilton felt something stiflingly provincial about St. Croix, literature would certainly have transported him to a more exalted realm.

The boy could be forgiven his escapist cravings. In late 1767, Rachel, thirty-eight, uprooted her family and hustled them down the block to 23 Company Street. Then, right after New Year's Day, she dragged them back to number 34 and succumbed to a raging fever. For a week, a woman named Ann McDonnell tended Rachel before summoning a Dr. Heering on February 17; by that point, Alexander, too, had contracted the unspecified disease. Dr. Heering subjected mother and child to the medieval purgatives so popular in eighteenth-century medicine. Rachel had to endure an emetic and a medicinal herb called valerian, which expelled gas from the alimentary canal; Alexander submitted to bloodletting and an enema. Mother and son must have been joined in a horrid scene of vomiting, flatulence, and defecation as they lay side by side in a feverish state in the single upstairs bed. The delirious Alexander was probably writhing inches from his mother when she expired at nine o'clock on the night of February 19. Notwithstanding the late hour, five agents from the probate court hastened to the scene and sequestered the property, sealing off one chamber, an attic, and two storage spaces in the yard.

By the day of the funeral, Hamilton had regained sufficient strength to attend with his brother. The two dazed, forlorn boys surely made a pathetic sight. In a little more than two years, they had suffered their father's disappearance and their mother's death, reducing them to orphans and throwing them upon the mercy of friends, family, and community. The town judge gave James, Jr., money to buy shoes for the funeral and bought black veils for both boys. Their landlord, Thomas Dipnall, donated white bread, eggs, and cakes for the mourners, while cousin Peter

Lytton contributed eleven yards of black material to drape the coffin. As a divorced woman with two children conceived out of wedlock, Rachel was likely denied a burial at nearby St. John's Anglican Church. This may help to explain a mystifying ambivalence that Hamilton always felt about regular church attendance, despite a pronounced religious bent. The parish clerk officiated at a graveside ceremony at the Grange, the erstwhile Lytton estate outside of Christiansted, where Rachel was laid to rest on a hillside beneath a grove of mahogany trees.

There was to be no surcease from suffering for the two castaway boys, just a cascading series of crises. Heaps of bills poured in, including for the batch of medicine that had failed to save their mother. Less than a week after Rachel died, the probate officers again trooped to the house to appraise the estate. The moralistic tone of their report shows that Johann Michael Lavien meditated further revenge against Rachel at the expense of her two illegitimate sons. The court decided that it had to consider three possible heirs: Peter Lavien, whose father had divorced Rachel "for valid reasons (according to information obtained by the court) by the highest authority," and the illegitimate James and Alexander, the "obscene children born after the deceased person's divorce."[48] The whole marital scandal was dredged up again, only now at an age when Alexander and his brother could fully fathom its meaning. At a probate hearing, Lavien brandished the 1759 divorce decree and lambasted Alexander and James as children born in "whoredom," insisting that Peter merited the entire estate, even though Peter hadn't set eyes on his mother for eighteen years. Life had not improved for the embittered Lavien, who had remained on a steep economic slide and served as janitor of a Frederiksted hospital. His second wife had died just a month before Rachel, and the couple had already lost the two children they had together.

For a year after his mother's death, Alexander was held in painful suspense by the probate court and perhaps absorbed the useful lesson that people who manipulate the law wield the real power in society. While he was awaiting settlement of the small estate—principally Rachel's slaves and a stock of business supplies—the court auctioned off her personal effects. James Lytton considerately bought back for Alexander his trove of books. In light of Rachel's unhappy history with Lavien, the final court decision seems foreordained. Alexander and James Hamilton were disinherited, and the whole estate was awarded to Peter Lavien. In November 1769, no less implacably vengeful than his father, Peter Lavien returned to St. Croix and took possession of his small inheritance—an injustice that rankled Alexander for many years. Peter had fared sufficiently well in Beaufort, South Carolina, to be named a church warden—the chief financial and administrative officer—in St. Helena's Parish the previous year, yet he couldn't spare a penny for the two destitute half brothers orphaned by his mother's death.

One sidelight of Peter Lavien's return to St. Croix deserves attention because he did something shocking and seemingly inexplicable for a twenty-three-year-old church warden: he was quietly baptized. Why had he not been baptized before? One explanation is that Johann Michael Lavien had painstakingly concealed his Jewish roots but still did not want his son baptized. Peter's furtive baptism, as if it were something shameful, suggests that he felt some extreme need for secrecy.

After Rachel died, her sons were placed under the legal guardianship of their thirty-two-year-old first cousin Peter Lytton. Already a widower, Peter had stumbled through a string of botched business dealings, including failed grocery stores in Christiansted. His brother later insisted that Peter was "insane."[49] Life as a ward of Peter Lytton proved yet another merciless education in the tawdry side of life for Alexander Hamilton. Lytton had a black mistress, Ledja, who had given birth to a mulatto boy with the impressive name of Don Alvarez de Valesco. On July 16, 1769, just when the Hamilton boys must have imagined that fate couldn't dole out more horrors, Peter Lytton was found dead in his bed, soaked in a pool of blood. According to court records, he had committed suicide and either "stabbed or shot himself to death."[50] For the Hamilton boys, the sequel was equally mortifying. Peter had drafted a will that provided for Ledja and their mulatto child but didn't bother to acknowledge Alexander or James with even a token bequest. When a crestfallen James Lytton appeared to claim his son's estate, he tried to aid the orphaned boys but was stymied by legal obstacles resulting from the suicide. On August 12, 1769, less than one month after Peter's death, the heartbroken James Lytton died as well. Five days earlier, he had drafted a new will, which also made no provision for his nephews Alexander and James, who must have felt jinxed.

Let us pause briefly to tally the grim catalog of disasters that had befallen these two boys between 1765 and 1769: their father had vanished, their mother had died, their cousin and supposed protector had committed bloody suicide, and their aunt, uncle, and grandmother had all died. James, sixteen, and Alexander, fourteen, were now left alone, largely friendless and penniless. At every step in their rootless, topsy-turvy existence, they had been surrounded by failed, broken, embittered people. Their short lives had been shadowed by a stupefying sequence of bankruptcies, marital separations, deaths, scandals, and disinheritance. Such repeated shocks must have stripped Alexander Hamilton of any sense that life was fair, that he existed in a benign universe, or that he could ever count on help from anyone. That this abominable childhood produced such a strong, productive, self-reliant human being—that this fatherless adolescent could have ended up a founding father of a country he had not yet even seen—seems little short of miraculous. Because he maintained perfect silence about his unspeakable past, never exploiting it to puff

his later success, it was impossible for his contemporaries to comprehend the exceptional nature of his personal triumph. What we know of Hamilton's childhood has been learned almost entirely during the past century.

Peter Lytton's death marked a fork in the road for Alexander and James, who henceforth branched off on separate paths. The latter was apprenticed to an aging Christiansted carpenter, Thomas McNobeny, which tells us much about his limited abilities. Most whites shied away from crafts such as carpentry, where they had to compete with mulattoes or even skilled slave labor. Had James shown any real promise or head for business, it is doubtful that he would have been relegated to manual work. By contrast, even before Peter Lytton's death, Alexander had begun to clerk for the mercantile house of Beekman and Cruger, the New York traders who had supplied his mother with provisions. It was the first of countless times in Hamilton's life when his superior intelligence was spotted and rewarded by older, more experienced men.

Before considering his first commercial experience, we must ponder another startling enigma in Hamilton's boyhood. While James went off to train with the elderly carpenter, Hamilton, in a dreamlike transition worthy of a Dickens novel, was whisked off to the King Street home of Thomas Stevens, a well-respected merchant, and his wife, Ann. Of the five Stevens children, Edward, born a year before Alexander, became his closest friend, "an intimate acquaintance begun in early youth," as Hamilton described their relationship.[51] As they matured, they often seemed to display parallel personalities. Both were exceedingly quick and clever, disciplined and persevering, fluent in French, versed in classical history, outraged by slavery, and mesmerized by medicine. In future years, Edward Stevens was wont to remind Hamilton of "those vows of eternal friendship, which we have so often mutually exchanged," and he often fretted about Hamilton's delicate health.[52]

If their personalities exhibited unusual compatibility, their physical resemblance bordered on the uncanny, often stopping people cold. Thirty years later, when Hamilton's close friend Timothy Pickering, then secretary of state, first set eyes on Edward Stevens, he was bowled over by the likeness. "At the first glance," recalled Pickering, "I was struck with the extraordinary similitude of his and General Hamilton's faces—I thought they must be *brothers.*" When Pickering confided his amazement to Stevens's brother-in-law, James Yard of St. Croix, the latter "informed me that the remark had been made a thousand times."[53] This mystery began to obsess the inquisitive Pickering, who finally concluded that Hamilton and Stevens *were* brothers. In notes assembled for a projected biography of Hamilton, Pickering wrote that "it was generally understood that Hamilton was an illegitimate son of a gentleman of [the] name" of Stevens.[54] This scuttlebutt resonated through

the nineteenth century, so that in 1882 Henry Cabot Lodge could write that "every student of the period [is] familiar with the story, which oral tradition had handed down, that Hamilton was the illegitimate son of a rich West Indian planter or merchant, generally supposed to have been Mr. Stevens, the father of Hamilton's early friend and school-fellow."[55]

What to make of this extraordinary speculation? No extant picture of Edward Stevens enables us to probe any family resemblance. Nevertheless, in the absence of direct proof, the notion that Alexander was the biological son of Thomas Stevens instead of James Hamilton would clarify many oddities in Hamilton's biography. It might identify one of the adulterous lovers who had so appalled Lavien that he had hurled Rachel into prison. It would also explain why Thomas Stevens sheltered Hamilton soon after Rachel's death but made no comparable gesture to his brother, James. (In the eighteenth century, illegitimate children frequently masqueraded as orphaned relatives of the lord or lady of the house—a polite fiction understood and accepted by visitors.) This parentage would also explain why Hamilton formed an infinitely more enduring bond with Edward Stevens than with his own brother. It might suggest why James Hamilton, Sr., left his family behind, assumed no further responsibility for them, and took no evident delight in Alexander's later career. Most of all, it would account for the peculiar distance that later held Hamilton apart from both his father and his brother. As will be seen, Alexander Hamilton was an intensely loyal person, endowed with a deep streak of family responsibility. There is something telltale about the way that he, his father, and his brother let relations abruptly lapse, as if the three of them were in headlong flight from some harrowing shared secret.

TWO

HURRICANE

Even in the languorous tropics, Hamilton, while clerking at Beekman and Cruger, was schooled in a fast-paced modern world of trading ships and fluctuating markets. Whatever his frustrations, he did not operate in an obscure corner of the world, and his first job afforded him valuable insights into global commerce and the maneuvers of imperial powers. Working on an island first developed by a trading company, he was exposed early on to the mercantilist policies that governed European economies.

Beekman and Cruger engaged in an export-import business that provided an excellent training ground for Hamilton, who had to monitor a bewildering inventory of goods. The firm dealt in every conceivable commodity required by planters: timber, bread, flour, rice, lard, pork, beef, fish, black-eyed peas, corn, porter, cider, pine, oak, hoops, shingles, iron, lime, rope, lampblack, bricks, mules, and cattle. "Amid his various engagements in later years," John C. Hamilton said of his father, "he adverted to [this time] as the most useful part of his education."[1] He learned to write in a beautiful, clear, flowing hand. He had to mind money, chart courses for ships, keep track of freight, and compute prices in an exotic blend of currencies, including Portuguese coins, Spanish pieces of eight, British pounds, Danish ducats, and Dutch stivers. If Hamilton seemed very knowing about business as a young adult, it can partly be traced to these formative years.

Located above the harbor at the elevated intersection of King and King's Cross Streets, Beekman and Cruger ran a shop and an adjoining warehouse. A pleasant stroll down the sloping main street would have brought Hamilton, freshened by sea breezes, to the hectic wharf area, where the firm maintained its own dock and ship. While the clerk inspected incoming merchandise, some of it contraband, the air

was thick with the sweet fragrances of sugar, rum, and molasses, hauled in barrels by horse-drawn wagons and ready for shipment to North America in exchange for grain, flour, timber, and sundry other staples. The neutral Danish island served as a transit point to the French West Indies, converting Hamilton's ease in French into a critical business asset. As a rule, the merchants of St. Croix were natives of the British Isles, so that English, not Danish, functioned as the island's lingua franca.

Beekman and Cruger furnished Hamilton with a direct link to his future home in New York, which carried on extensive trade with St. Croix. Many Manhattan trading firms dispatched young family members to the islands as local agents, and Nicholas Cruger was a prime example. He came from one of colonial New York's most distinguished families. His father, Henry, was a wealthy merchant, shipowner, and member of His Majesty's Royal Council for the province. His uncle, John Cruger, had been a long-standing mayor and a member of the Stamp Act Congress. While this blue-blooded clan had distinct Anglophile tendencies, time was to expose a split. Nicholas's brother, also Henry, based in Britain, was elected a member of Parliament from Bristol beside no less august a personage than Edmund Burke. Nicholas himself was to side with the rebel colonists and revere George Washington. One wonders whether he functioned as Hamilton's first political tutor. He also exposed Hamilton to a prosperous, civic-minded breed of New York businessmen, who stood as models for the elite brand of Federalism he later espoused.

From the outset, the young Hamilton had phenomenal stamina for sustained work: ambitious, orphaned boys do not enjoy the option of idleness. Even before starting work, he must have developed unusual autonomy for a thirteen-year-old, and Beekman and Cruger would only have toughened his moral fiber. Hamilton exuded an air of crisp efficiency and cool self-command. While his peers squandered their time on frivolities, Hamilton led a much more strenuous, urgent life that was to liberate him from St. Croix. He was a proud and sensitive boy, caught in the lower reaches of a rigid class society with small chance for social mobility. His friend Nathaniel Pendleton later said of his clerkship that Hamilton "conceived so strong an aversion to it as to be induced to abandon altogether the pursuits of commerce."[2] On November 11, 1769, in his earliest surviving letter, the fourteen-year-old Hamilton vented the blackest pent-up despair. Written in elegant penmanship, the letter shows that the young clerk felt demeaned by his lowly social station and chafed with excess energy. Already he sought psychic relief in extravagant fantasies of fame and faraway glory. The recipient was his dear friend and lookalike Edward Stevens, who had recently begun his studies at King's College in New York:

> To confess my weakness, Ned, my ambition is [so] prevalent that I contemn the grovelling and conditions of a clerk or the like to which my fortune &c.

> condemns me and would willingly risk my life, tho' not my character, to exalt my station. I'm confident, Ned, that my youth excludes me from any hopes of immediate preferment, nor do I desire it, but I mean to prepare the way for futurity. I'm no philosopher, you see, and may be jus[t]ly said to build castles in the air. My folly makes me ashamed and beg you'll conceal it, yet Neddy we have seen such schemes successful when the projector is constant. I shall conclude [by] saying I wish there was a war. Alex. Hamilton.[3]

What prophetic aspirations Hamilton telescoped into this short letter! The boy hankering for heroism and martial glory was to find his war soon enough. He betrayed a stinging sense of shame that the adult Hamilton would studiously cloak behind an air of bravado. Of special interest are his intuitive fear that his outsized ambition might corrupt him and his insistence that he would never endanger his ethics to conquer the world. Despite some awkwardness in the writing, he appears surprisingly mature for fourteen and springs full-blown into the historical record.

He had ample opportunities to exercise his many talents. In 1769, David Beekman quit the business and was replaced by Cornelius Kortright—another New Yorker with another prestigious name—and the firm was reconstituted as Kortright and Cruger. In October 1771, for medical reasons, Nicholas Cruger returned to New York for a five-month stint and left his precocious clerk in charge.

A sheaf of revealing business letters drafted by Hamilton shows him, for the first time, in the take-charge mode that was to characterize his tumultuous career. With peculiar zeal, he collected money owed to the firm. "Believe me Sir," he assured the absent Cruger, "I dun as hard as is proper."[4] The bulk of the correspondence concerns a sloop called the *Thunderbolt*, partly owned by the Crugers, that carried several dozen miserable mules through churning seas in early 1772. Hamilton had to direct this cargo safely along the Spanish Main (South America's northwestern coast), then brimming with hostile vessels. Hamilton did not hesitate to advise his bosses that they should arm the ship with four guns. He said flatly to Tileman Cruger, who oversaw family operations in Curaçao, "It would be undoubtedly a great pity that such a vessel should be lost for the want of them."[5] When the ship docked with forty-one skeletal, drooping mules, Hamilton lectured the vessel's skipper in a peremptory tone that someday would be familiar to legions of respectful subordinates: "Reflect continually on the unfortunate voyage you have just made and endeavour to make up for the considerable loss therefrom accruing to your owners."[6] The adolescent clerk had a capacity for quick decisions and showed no qualms about giving a tongue-lashing to a veteran sea captain. So proficient and eager to lead was he that he must have been slightly deflated when Nicholas Cruger returned to St. Croix in March 1772.

Hamilton's apprenticeship provided many benefits. He developed an intimate knowledge of traders and smugglers that later aided his establishment of the U.S. Coast Guard and Customs Service. He saw that business was often obstructed by scarce cash or credit and learned the value of a uniform currency in stimulating trade. Finally, he was forced to ponder the paradox that the West Indian islands, with all their fertile soil, traded at a disadvantage with the rest of the world because of their reliance on only the sugar crop—a conundrum to which he was to return in his celebrated "Report on Manufactures." It may be that Hamilton's preference for a diversified economy of manufacturing and agriculture originated in his youthful reflections on the avoidable poverty he had witnessed in the Caribbean.

While Kortright and Cruger mostly brokered foodstuffs and dry goods, at least once a year the firm handled a large shipment of far more perishable cargo: slaves. On the slave ships, hundreds of Africans were chained and stuffed in fetid holds, where many suffocated. So vile were the conditions on these noisome ships that people onshore could smell their foul effluvia even miles away. On January 23, 1771, during Hamilton's tenure, his firm ran a notice atop the front page of the local bilingual paper, the *Royal Danish American Gazette:* "Just imported from the Windward Coast of Africa, and to be sold on Monday next, by Messrs. Kortright & Cruger, At said Cruger's yard, Three Hundred Prime SLAVES."[7] The following year, Nicholas Cruger imported 250 more slaves from Africa's Gold Coast and complained that they were "very indifferent indeed, sickly and thin."[8] One can only imagine the inhuman scenes that Hamilton observed as he helped to inspect, house, groom, and price the slaves about to be auctioned. To enhance their appearance, their bodies were shaved and rubbed with palm oil until their muscles glistened in the sunlight. Some buyers came armed with branding irons to imprint their initials on their newly purchased property. From the frequency with which Nicholas Cruger placed newspaper notices to catch runaway slaves, it seems clear that the traffic in human beings formed a substantial portion of his business.

By the time Hamilton arrived on St. Croix, the burgeoning slave population had doubled in just a decade, and the planters banded together to guard against uprisings or mass escapes to nearby Puerto Rico, where slaves could secure their freedom under Spanish rule. In this fearful environment, no white enjoyed the luxury of being a neutral spectator: either he was an accomplice of the slave system or he left the island. To remove any ambiguity in the matter, the government in Copenhagen issued a booklet, "The St. Croixian Pocket Companion," which spelled out the duties of every white on the island—duties that would have applied to Hamilton starting in 1771. Every male over sixteen was obligated to serve in the militia and attend monthly drills with his arms and ammunition at the ready. If the fort fired its guns twice in a row, all white males had to grab their muskets and flock there instantly.

On days when renegade slaves were executed at Christiansvaern, the white men formed a ring around the fort to prevent other slaves from interfering. Any slave who attacked a white person faced certain death by hanging or decapitation—death that probably came as a blessed relief after first being prodded with red-hot pokers and castrated. Punishments were designed to be hellish so as to terrorize the rest of the captive population into submission. If a slave lifted a hand in resistance, it would promptly be chopped off. Any runaway who returned within a three-month period would have one foot lopped off. If he then ran away a second time, the other foot was amputated. Recidivists might also have their necks fitted with grisly iron collars of sharp, inward-pointing spikes that made it impossible to crawl away through the dense underbrush without slashing their own throats in the effort.

It is hard to grasp Hamilton's later politics without contemplating the raw cruelty that he witnessed as a boy and that later deprived him of the hopefulness so contagious in the American milieu. On the most obvious level, the slave trade of St. Croix generated a permanent detestation of the system and resulted in his later abolitionist efforts. But something deeper may have seeped into his consciousness. In this hierarchical world, skittish planters lived in constant dread of slave revolts and fortified their garrison state to avert them. Even when he left for America, Hamilton carried a heavy dread of anarchy and disorder that always struggled with his no less active love of liberty. Perhaps the true legacy of his boyhood was an equivocal one: he came to detest the tyranny embodied by the planters and their authoritarian rule, while also fearing the potential uprisings of the disaffected slaves. The twin specters of despotism and anarchy were to haunt him for the rest of his life.

Like Ben Franklin, Hamilton was mostly self-taught and probably snatched every spare moment to read. The young clerk aimed to be a man of letters. He may already have had a premonition that his facility with words would someday free him from his humble berth and place him on a par with the most powerful men of his age. The West Indies boasted few stores that sold books, which had to be ordered by special subscription. For that reason, it must have been a godsend to the culture-starved Hamilton when the *Royal Danish American Gazette* launched publication in 1770. The paper had a pronounced Anglophile slant, reflecting the fact that King Christian VII of Denmark was both first cousin and brother-in-law to King George III of England. Each issue carried reverential excerpts from parliamentary debates in London, showcasing William Pitt the Elder and other distinguished orators, and retailed gossipy, fawning snippets about the royal household.

Having a potential place to publish, Hamilton began to scribble poetry. Once his verbal fountain began to flow, it became a geyser that never ceased. The refined wit

and pithy maxims of Alexander Pope mesmerized the young clerk, and just as Pope wrote youthful imitations of the classical poets so Hamilton penned imitations of Pope. On April 6, 1771, he published a pair of poems in the *Gazette* that he introduced with a diffident note to the editor: "Sir, I am a youth about seventeen, and consequently such an attempt as this must be presumptuous; but if, upon perusal, you think the following piece worthy of a place in your paper, by inserting it you'll much oblige Your obedient servant, A. H." The two amorous poems that follow are schizophrenic in their contrasting visions of love. In the first, the dreamy poet steals upon his virgin love, who is reclining by a brook as "lambkins" gambol around her. He kneels and awakens her with an ecstatic kiss before sweeping her up in his arms and carrying her off to marital bliss, intoning, "Believe me love is doubly sweet / In wedlock's holy bands."[9] In the next poem, Hamilton has suddenly metamorphosed into a jaded rake, who begins with a shocking, Swiftian opening line: "Celia's an artful little slut." This launches a portrait of a manipulative, feline woman that concludes:

So, stroking puss's velvet paws,
How well the jade conceals her claws
And purrs; but if at last
You hap to squeeze her somewhat hard
She spits—her back up—prenez garde;
Good faith she has you fast.

The first poem seems to have been composed by a sheltered adolescent with an idealized view of women and the second by a world-weary young philanderer who has already tasted many amorous sweets and shed any illusions about female virtue. In fact, this apparent attraction to two opposite types of women—the pure and angelic versus the earthy and flirtatious—ran straight through Hamilton's life, a contradiction he never resolved and that was to lead to scandalous consequences.

The next year, Hamilton published two more poems in the paper, now recreating himself as a somber religious poet. The change in heart can almost certainly be attributed to the advent in St. Croix of a Presbyterian minister named Hugh Knox. Born in northern Ireland of Scottish ancestry, the handsome young Knox migrated to America and became a schoolteacher in Delaware. As a raffish young man, he exhibited a lukewarm piety until a strange incident transformed his life. One Saturday at a local tavern where he was a regular, Knox amused his tipsy companions with a mocking imitation of a sermon delivered by his patron, the Reverend John Rodgers. Afterward, Knox sat down, shaken by his own impiety but

also moved by the sermon that still reverberated in his mind. He decided to study divinity at the College of New Jersey (later Princeton) under its president, Aaron Burr, an eminent divine and father of the man who became Hamilton's nemesis. It was almost certainly from Knox's lips that Alexander Hamilton first heard the name of Aaron Burr.

Ordained by Burr in 1755, Knox decided to propagate the gospel and was sent to Saba in the Dutch West Indies. This tiny island near Nevis measured five square miles, had no beaches, and was solitary enough to try the fortitude of the most determined missionary. Rough seas girded Saba's rocky shores, making it hazardous for ships to land there. As the sole clergyman, Knox resided in a settlement known as the Bottom, sunk in the elevated crater of an extinct volcano; it could be reached only by climbing up a stony path. Knox left a bleak picture of the heedless sinners he was assigned to save. "Young fellows and married men, not only without any symptoms of serious religion . . . but keepers of negro wenches . . . rakes, night rioters, drunkards, gamesters, Sabbath breakers, church neglecters, common swearers, unjust dealers etc."[10] An erudite man with a classical education, Knox was starved for both intellectual companionship and money. In 1771, he visited St. Croix and was received warmly by the local Presbyterians, who enticed him to move there. In May 1772, he became pastor at the Scotch Presbyterian church at a salary considerably beyond what he had earned inside his old crater.

After the lonely years in Saba, the forty-five-year-old Knox felt rejuvenated in St. Croix. Humane and tolerant, politically liberal (he was to fervently support American independence), opposed to slavery (though he owned some slaves), and later author of several volumes of sermons, he held a number of views that would have attracted Hamilton. In his earliest surviving letter, he defended his confirmed belief that illegitimate children should be baptized and argued that clergymen should rescue them from their parents instead of rejecting them. He departed from a strict Calvinist belief in predestination. Instead of a darkly punitive God, Knox favored a sunny, fair-minded one. He also saw human nature as insatiably curious and reserved his highest praise for minds that created "*schemes* or *systems* of truth."[11]

Then an illegitimate young clerk with an uncommon knack for systematic thinking stepped into his life. Knox must have marveled at his tremendous luck in discovering Hamilton. We do not know exactly how they met, but Knox threw open his library to this prodigious youth, encouraged him to write verse, and prodded him toward scholarship. An avuncular man with a droll wit, Knox worried that Hamilton was too driven and prone to overwork, too eager to compensate for lost time—a failing, if it was one, that he never outgrew. In later years, Knox liked to remind Hamilton that he had been "rather delicate & frail," with an "ambition to ex-

cel," and had tended to "strain every nerve" to be the very best at what he was doing.[12] Knox had an accurate intuition that this exceptional adolescent was fated to accomplish great deeds, although he later confessed that Alexander Hamilton had outstripped even his loftiest expectations.

Among his other gifts, the versatile Hugh Knox was a self-taught doctor and apothecary and a part-time journalist who occasionally filled in for the editor of the *Royal Danish American Gazette.* It may have been at the newspaper office, not at the church, that he first ran into Hamilton. That Knox moonlighted as a journalist proved highly consequential for Hamilton when a massive hurricane tore through St. Croix on the night of August 31, 1772, and carved a wide swath of destruction through nearby islands.

By all accounts, the storm struck with unprecedented fury, the *Gazette* reporting that it was the "most dreadful hurricane known in the memory of man." Starting at sundown, the gales blew "like great guns, for about six hours, save for half an hour's intermission. . . . The face of this once beautiful island is now so calamitous and disfigured, as it would beggar all description."[13] The tremendous winds uprooted tall trees, smashed homes to splinters, and swept up boats in foaming billows and flung them far inland. Detailed reports of the storm in Nevis, where the destruction was comparable—huge sugar barrels were tossed four hundred yards, furniture landed two miles away—confirm its terrifying power. Nevis had also been struck by a severe earthquake that afternoon, and it seems probable that Nevis, St. Kitts, St. Croix, and neighboring islands were deluged by a tidal wave up to fifteen feet high. The devastation was so widespread that an appeal for food was launched in the North American colonies to avert an anticipated famine.

On September 6, Hugh Knox gathered the jittery faithful at his church and delivered a consoling sermon that was published in pamphlet form some weeks later. Hamilton must have attended and been inspired by Knox's homily, for he went home and composed a long, feverish letter to his father, trying to convey the hurricane's horror. (It is noteworthy that Hamilton was still in touch with his father more than six years after the latter's departure from St. Croix. That James Hamilton resided outside the storm area suggests that he was in the southern Caribbean, possibly Grenada or Tobago.) In his melodramatic description of the hurricane, one sees the young Hamilton glorying in his verbal powers. He must have shown the letter to Knox, who persuaded him to publish it in the *Royal Danish American Gazette,* where it appeared on October 3. The prefatory note to the piece, presumably written by Knox, explained: "The following letter was written the week after the late hurricane, by a youth of this island, to his father; the copy of it fell by accident into the hands of a gentleman, who, being pleased with it himself, showed it to

others to whom it gave equal satisfaction, and who all agreed that it might not prove unentertaining to the public." Lest anyone suspect that an unfeeling Hamilton was capitalizing on mass misfortune, Knox noted that the anonymous author had at first declined to publish it—perhaps the last time in Alexander Hamilton's life that he would prove bashful or hesitant about publication.

Hamilton's famous letter about the storm astounds the reader for two reasons. For all its bombastic excesses, it does seem wondrous that a seventeen-year-old self-educated clerk could write with such verve and gusto. Clearly, Hamilton was highly literate and already had a considerable fund of verbal riches: "It seemed as if a total dissolution of nature was taking place. The roaring of the sea and wind, fiery meteors flying about it [*sic*] in the air, the prodigious glare of almost perpetual lightning, the crash of the falling houses, and the ear-piercing shrieks of the distressed, were sufficient to strike astonishment into angels."

But the description was also notable for the way Hamilton viewed the hurricane as a divine rebuke to human vanity and pomposity. In what sounded like a cross between a tragic soliloquy and a fire-and-brimstone sermon, he exhorted his fellow mortals:

> Where now, oh! vile worm, is all thy boasted fortitude and resolution? What is become of thine arrogance and self sufficiency? . . . Death comes rushing on in triumph, veiled in a mantle of tenfold darkness. His unrelenting scythe, pointed and ready for the stroke . . . See thy wretched helpless state and learn to know thyself. . . . Despise thyself and adore thy God. . . . O ye who revel in affluence see the afflictions of humanity and bestow your superfluity to ease them. . . . Succour the miserable and lay up a treasure in heaven.[14]

Gloomy thoughts for a teenage boy, even in the aftermath of a lethal hurricane. The dark spirit of the storm that he summons up, his apocalyptic sense of universal tumult and disorder, bespeak a somber view of the cosmos. He also shows a strain of youthful idealism as he admonishes the rich to share their wealth.

Hamilton did not know it, but he had just written his way out of poverty. This natural calamity was to prove his salvation. His hurricane letter generated such a sensation—even the island's governor inquired after the young author's identity—that a subscription fund was taken up by local businessmen to send this promising youth to North America to be educated. This generosity was all the more remarkable given the island's dismal state. The hurricane had flattened dwellings, shredded sugarcane, destroyed refineries, and threatened St. Croix with prolonged economic hardship. It would take many months, maybe years, for the island to recover.

The chief sponsor of the subscription fund was likely the good-hearted Hugh

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