

PART II

5

My Downfall

*It does good to no woman to be flattered by her superior,
who cannot possibly intend to marry her; and it is madness
in all women to let a secret love kindle within them, which,
if unreturned and unknown, must devour the life that feeds it;
and if discovered and responded to, must lead, ignis-fatuuus-
like, into miry wilds whence there is no extrication.*

—Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*

*But one day the devil, in the form of a man,
Came smiling towards me; said he "You can
Know more, if you'll take them,
Of joy and pleasures," I heard him say,
"Than e'er you have dreamed of; I'll show you the way."*

—Hilda Blake, 'My Downfall'

There may have been another equally important reason for Hilda Blake's despondency. Despite the obstacles intended to keep domestics from marriage, many did marry. Why not Blake? The answer may be found in the circumstance that, ministers of the gospel notwithstanding, a domestic's most constant male contact was her employer. Whereas the domestic could not invite courting men to her room without loss of character, she was often alone in the house with her employer. In many cases and, so the evidence suggests, in Blake's case, the employer made the domestic his sexual partner, an entanglement also likely to discourage 'exogamy'. According to