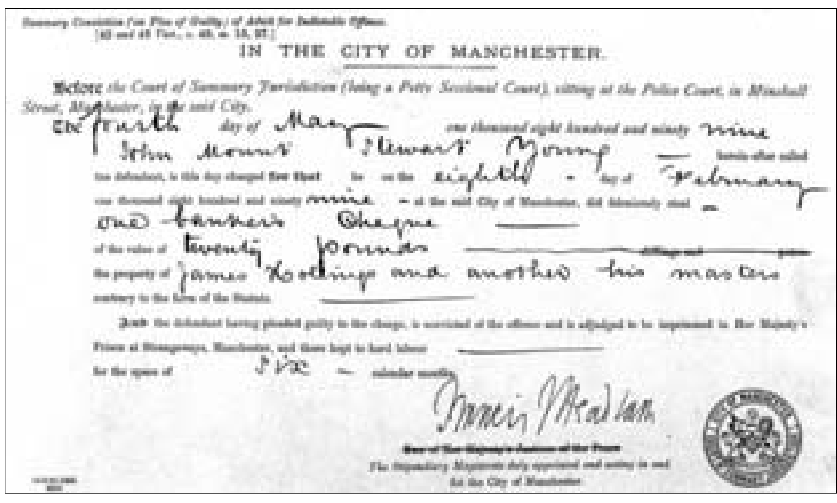
1 ⥊ Forging Ahead

The Secret Gentleman of Ardwick Green

On 4 May 1899, a shamefaced eighteen-year-old stood before the City of Manchester Petty Sessional Court. "John Mount Stewart Young," as he then called himself (also "John Mountstewart Young"), pleaded guilty to the charge of theft by forgery and was sentenced to six months with hard labor at Strangeways Prison (see fig. 1). Irrefutable evidence of his theft of a banker's check worth £20 was presented to court, but he confessed to banking a further £180 in recent months by illicitly opening envelopes, forging his employer's signature on the back of checks, and sending receipts to clients in the name of his master, the mantle manufacturer James Hollings.[1] Immediately after the sentence was passed, John Pultney Young, an imposing, red-whiskered railway worker, forced his way to the front of court and rained loud and public insults on his son for bringing the family name into disrepute.[2] Four days later, in a state of abjection, the young invoice clerk with his billycock hat, large amethyst ring, flowing tie, and velvet jacket was taken down to Strangeways with a batch of shabby, unshaven men. There he was stripped of his fashionable clothing and forced to change into prison garments.[3]

Lengthy sentences were passed by the Petty Sessional Court in Manchester for far less serious crimes than those committed by Stuart-Young. For instance, a man named John Rogers was sentenced to two months' imprisonment with hard labor for the theft of twenty-five packets of cigarettes in January 1899; another man, George Harrison, received one month's imprisonment with hard labor in April 1897 for the theft of six currant cakes valued at threepence in total; the theft of thirteen umbrellas by Harry Young in September 1897 carried a sentence of three months' imprisonment with hard labor.[4] In this



IN THE CITY OF MANCHESTER.

John Mount Stewart Young

one bankers cheque

twenty pounds

James [illegible] and another his masters

Fig. 1. Conviction of "John Mount Stewart Young" at the City of Manchester Court of Summary Jurisdiction, 8 February 1899. *(By permission of Manchester Library and Information Service: Manchester Archives and Local Studies.)*

context, given the large quantities of money involved, Stuart-Young's prison sentence was relatively lenient. Perhaps the judge showed clemency because this was the youth's first appearance in court and he was obviously contrite once caught, having tried to repay a portion of the stolen money.[5] Perhaps the magistrate—on a salary of several thousand pounds per annum[6]—also felt some sympathy toward this low-paid white-collar worker who earned just a few shillings per week, the bulk of which went to his mother to help maintain their "one-up, one-down" rented home in Ardwick.

The senior policeman who oversaw the investigation into Stuart-Young's forgeries, Chief Detective Inspector George Hargreaves, had, the month before, received a "special report of meritorious conduct" from the Manchester City Police Force to add to an already impressive record of successful investigations.[7] Given the relatively petty nature of Stuart-Young's crime, Hargreaves would have made a special request to undertake this case, probably attracted by its lucrative potential for the cash rewards that were often given for the arrest and successful prosecution of criminals in the financial or white-collar sector.[8] Additionally, the officer may have been curious about the individual involved, for the young invoice clerk was also a dilettante journalist and author who had established a minor local reputation for himself with occasional articles, poems, and reviews for provincial and national journals. Stuart-Young's reputation as an aspiring writer was, however, about to be shattered by the combination of mirth and derision that his case aroused.

Hargreaves's investigation was made easy by the fact that many people came forward to give evidence against the young man. Stuart-Young had few friends, and nobody spoke out in court in favor of his character. Indeed, it soon emerged that "the prisoner had been at several situations in the city and at each place had been dismissed for embezzlement."[9] The case itself proved simple to investigate. When cornered and confronted, Stuart-Young burst into tears and confessed to habitual forgeries and embezzlements in previous months. By the time he was caught, he could forge the boss's signature with such skill that the original name could barely be distinguished from the imitation. Caught red-handed in February 1899, the young man had already paid approximately £200 into his own bank account, using it to fund a secret double life in the center of town.

In the four days between Stuart-Young's first and final appearances in court, Inspector Hargreaves made, in the words of the *Manchester Courier*, "discoveries which point to the fact that Young is, and has been for some time past, a very mysterious youth."[10] It emerged that for several months the young man had been secretly renting a house in Nelson Street, in an affluent part of town, at a cost of £18 per year. Without telling a soul, he paid for this house to be "fitted up luxuriously" with his own choice of furniture.[11] When finished, it looked splendidly middle class, "fitted out like a drawing room" from top to bottom.[12] It is possible that the extra barrels crept into the young man's name at this time, helping transform the social stature and self-image of "John James Young."

One large room in the Nelson Street property was called the "Christian Spiritual Hall." Here Stuart-Young set up a spirit-rapping table at which visitors could commune with their loved ones through his mediumship. This work of spiritual "hosting" meshed perfectly with Stuart-Young's expertise in forging others' letters and signatures. Here was a youth whose body was radically open to the entry of others, whose identity was unfixed in name, in voice, and in social class: he "queerly" lacked a stable identity.[13]

The Christian Spiritual Hall was one of many such venues to spring up throughout Britain in the doctrinally experimental spiritualist 1890s.[14] As with other late-nineteenth-century sects, the Christian Spiritual Hall challenged clerics and Christian hierarchies by its very existence, but it did not necessarily reject, nor seek to compete with, the tenets of mainstream churches, especially the Nonconformist denominations that proliferated around Manchester at the turn of the century. The motto of Stuart-Young's establishment, which was read out in court, was not in the least anti-Christian, for the sign on his door read: "The Fatherhood of God, the living intercession of Christ, the help of the Angel world, the brotherhood of man, and the eternal progress and development of the soul."[15]

Stuart-Young must have possessed enormous reserves of self-confidence and religious energy to set up this establishment without the knowledge of his family or colleagues, especially at the tender age of eighteen. Operating as a young and attractive spirit-medium, he offered positive proof of the afterlife to clients; he followed the paths of angels, creating personalized connections between mortals and the other world, reinforcing clients' faith in the existence of an afterlife. This was to be a lifelong interest.

Beneath his spirit-rapping table Stuart-Young fixed "a small trap and a cord, which was worked by the person who acted as the medium (Laughter [in court], in which the prisoner joined)."[16] To "renewed laughter," the process of cord-pulling in a darkened room was also described in court, although it is likely that by this stage in proceedings the prisoner's laughter had taken on a rather more embarrassed timbre than that of his spectators.[17] Indeed, in spite of his mirth, it is unlikely that the spirit-rapping scheme was simply a ruse designed to defraud gullible bereaved individuals of their money. The pretense was more creative than that, more integral to Stuart-Young's queer sense of self. The youth—a man of independent means now with his regular income of embezzled checks—did not charge people for his spiritual services. Having set himself up as a middle-class gentleman in well-furnished surroundings, the last thing he desired was for clients to "cross his palm with silver" after a séance. Instead, his reward was other people's connection, through himself, with the souls of their loved ones. Relying on Stuart-Young as their medium, visitors to the Hall provided public affirmation of the young man's "special" inner qualities, reinforcing his perception of himself as a child prodigy situated in a separate class from others of his birth.

At the spirit-rapping table, as in other areas of his life, Stuart-Young expressed his creative inspiration through the artful forgery of communications.[18] With or without the material props that were exposed in court, it is necessary to see him as a sincere performer, or a "sincere forger," for throughout his life he believed himself to be in contact with the other world, to be gifted with an intensely passionate soul and a heightened sensitivity to beauty, ugliness, death, and the divine. Even at this tender age, he was open and receptive, acting as a bodily host to the ghostly presence of other selves.

As the mystery of Nelson Street unfolded in court, the public learned about the contents of a second room, located above the spirit-rapping room, where Stuart-Young had installed an organ. In a class-divided world in which one sign of upward social mobility was the acquisition of a piano for the parlor, Stuart-Young's music room furnishes further evidence of his desire to participate in the culture and values of the English middle class. The young man set up this music room—a peaceful, creative space—to compose and perform

lyrics, and it is possible that some of his compositions found publication in the many books of verse released after his decision to leave for West Africa. In particular, *Minor Melodies* (1904) and *The After-Life: A Poetic Service of Song* (1905) contain numerous sentimental lyrics offered to the public to be set to music.

The third, perhaps most remarkable, room in Stuart-Young's secret house confirmed this identification with middle-class values, for it contained the young man's large personal library of approximately 600 books, "including the 'Encyclopaedia Britannica' and a large number of novels."[19] From this private library, using notepaper especially printed with an ornate, personalized address, Stuart-Young wrote letters of admiration and friendship to his favorite authors and intellectuals, including Oscar Wilde, Rudyard Kipling, Edward Carpenter, and many other well-known writers. Masquerading as a gentleman proved easy once the youth had obtained good-quality stationery and mastered an appropriate writing style. Such creative, persuasive forgery must have astounded members of the court and confounded his parents. In order to cover his absences from home outside office hours, Stuart-Young told his parents, with whom he lived, that he was working for the Remington Typewriter Company, rapping out letters of a more mundane nature than the communications he received and dispatched from Nelson Street.[20]

In Nelson Street, Stuart-Young's transformation was complete. With the emergence of each detail in court, the levels of shocked laughter increased at the audacity of this social upstart. In between teaching himself French, translating the works of Jules Verne, and reading Baudelaire's poetry, he also studied elocution in an effort to purge himself of his working-class Mancunian accent.[21] The house at Nelson Street exemplified Stuart-Young's desire to flee from his roots and escape from the cultural activities with which his class was associated. Ensconced in his beautiful rooms, composing lyrics and letters, the young autodidact had, through careful and creative forgery, found a way to *become* a middle-class intellectual, surrounded by opportunities and in correspondence with a community of well-educated fellows. By the time he was arrested, the "false" identity was the one he was forced to assume at home in Back Kay Street, his place of birth and the place that, according to the edicts of late-Victorian Britain, determined his education and his income and fixed his opportunities for advancement as a clerk.[22]

Nevertheless, nobody in court, or in the newspapers at the time, could fathom the motivation behind the Nelson Street enterprise.[23] Stuart-Young's use of the stolen money seemed immoral, for he had invested the wealth in neither productive nor ethical ends. While young Johnny Jones, hero of his final two novels many years later, embezzles money to pay for his dying sister's

medication and cover the rent on a Manchester missionary station, Stuart-Young could offer no moral justification for his own thefts.[24] He had a clean home to go to each night after work, and his parents were, to all outward appearances, honest, hard-working people, described in court by Inspector Hargreaves as "respectably connected" members of the upper working class.[25] Indeed, John Pultney Young possessed such a strong sense of his family's proletarian respectability and his own good character that he alerted his son's first employer to an embezzlement of funds, leading to the first in Stuart-Young's long chain of dismissals.[26]

Stuart-Young's secret life inverts the late-nineteenth-century pattern whereby wealthy middle-class gentlemen and women such as Charles Booth and Beatrice Webb—alongside numerous less well-to-do missionaries, novelists, and reporters—descended into the "abyss" of the slums to record what they witnessed in "darkest England."[27] Assisted by metaphors from Dante's *Inferno* and Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, as well as by popular accounts of "primitive" Africa, middle-class sociologists and Christian moralists recorded the horror of England's "darkest" and most "savage" places. Their best-selling publications provided windows through which the educated classes could look out over the region known as slumland, described by William Booth as "the Great Slough of Despond of our time."[28]

Moral tracts such as William Booth's *In Darkest England* (1880) and sociological studies such as Charles Booth's *Life and Labour of the People in London* (1889) and *The Heart of the Empire* by C. F. G. Masterman et al. (1901) captivated British readers at the turn of the century, allowing them to participate in the ongoing "rediscovery of poverty" in their cities.[29] In vivid detail these books revealed layer upon layer of personal stories of unemployment, marital breakup, alcoholism, domestic violence, disease, and desperation, constituting a full human tragedy set in London and the major industrial cities of Britain. They also provided detailed systems of classification whereby degrees of poverty and wealth could be charted. With his small regular wage as a railway worker and assurance of a meager pension, for example, Stuart-Young's father would have been positioned in "Class E" of Charles Booth's eight-point scale of social class, approaching the upper working class but living in a "vile spot" in a two-room dwelling with a wife who was obliged by the family's hardship to take in washing. According to the same scale, Stuart-Young had graduated from his parents' class, having been employed as a clerk in a position that would, ideally, allow the family to evolve out of poverty in coming generations.[30]

A plethora of sensational novels, newspaper articles, and tracts added to the works of these early sociologists, including books such as *The Bitter Cry of*

Outcast London, *Ten Years in the Slums*, *Children of the Jago*, and *People of the Abyss*.[31] Written in grippingly realistic prose, this slum writing entered "respectable" households, crossing the threshold that kept poverty and dirt at bay. To readers more familiar with the moral geography of colonial exploration narratives, in which the abject soul was to be found in a far-off country, the moral shock of British slum writing arose from the repeated insistence by authors that the "lowest" ranks of the British working classes lived "the life of savages."[32] With no culture or homes of their own and certainly no sign of soap, it seemed as if these degenerate Europeans bore more in common with the peoples of Africa, where "human beings dwarfed into pygmies and brutalised into cannibals lurk and live and die."[33] Similarly, the white tribe of slum-dwellers owned no possessions and were "living in dirt, fond of drink, alike shiftless, shifty, and shifting."[34]

Comparisons with the racially other African drove this fin-de-siècle writing on British poverty. In an age of popular imperialism—an ideology predicated on the work ethic and the widespread belief that people with "English blood" possessed a superior civilization[35]—many British people were found to be no better than the savage, whose abject condition was also regarded as "hereditary in character."[36] The realization that Caucasians were "toiling like galley slaves" with "appallingly few . . . rescued" fascinated and appalled late-nineteenth-century readers, for whom politicians and liberal historians had served up a very different narrative in which the British were responsible for the emancipation of Africans and the abolition of slavery in favor of "legitimate commerce."[37] Now it emerged that, as with the degraded natives described in the writings of nineteenth-century travelers and traders, many people in British cities "create no wealth [and] . . . degrade whatever they touch, and as individuals are perhaps incapable of improvement."[38]

The general fascination for poverty and slum life in the late nineteenth century must be acknowledged if we are to appreciate Stuart-Young's decision to invest his embezzled money in fine furniture and books, icons of middle-class gentility. The young clerk flowed against the tide of those bourgeois authors and readers whose attentions were focused on "low" society. Enclosed in the opulent surroundings of Nelson Street, cut off from the industrial city, he made the subversive discovery that social class was not a fixed, innate identity. Even as he reinforced class boundaries with his desire to erase his plebeian roots, Stuart-Young's Nelson Street lifestyle demonstrated that any person might become middle class if the occasion arose: through forgery and embezzlement he discovered that social class was an unstable process, a cultural and economic achievement made possible by the availability of opportunities. While newspaper reports on the court case represented him as a charlatan, or

a thief of others' original identities, we can regard the eighteen-year-old's speedy transformation into a literary gentleman as a challenge to the dominant social Darwinist model of class (or race). Stuart-Young's self-reinvention demonstrated that class was not a natural condition produced by social evolution spreading through the generations to create distinct types with few immediate prospects of transformation for the better.[39] While his arrest frustrated his project to leave slumland behind, his new lifestyle revealed that a "guttersnipe" could become a "gentleman" through degrees of forgery ranging from counterfeit signatures to more creative types of forgery, including the adoption of gentlemanly manners, names, clothing, accent, environment, and reading matter. Just as the original name could not be differentiated from the forgery on the checks that Stuart-Young stole, so too his class subversion exposed how easy it was to make copies and demonstrated the fluid "nature" of social class.[40]

The bemused spectators in court could not appreciate in 1899 that Stuart-Young was positioned at an important ideological junction, facing both ways at a time of social change, for here was a clerk from a working-class family who spent long hours in a monotonous, poorly paid job but was separated from his father's world by virtue of his minimal secondary education, office work, and ambitions for financial self-betterment. Lower middle rather than upper working class, Stuart-Young was one of many thousands of men from laboring families to benefit from the combined effects of mass education and the growth of clerical jobs in the banking and commercial sectors.[41]

As a clerk in the 1890s, Stuart-Young would have been expected to look as gentlemanly as his meager salary allowed, to dress smartly in a suit, to behave with decorum and display "good character" in all aspects of his life.[42] "Character" was a crucial category in late Victorian moral discourse, signifying a set of stern requirements, including self-discipline, abstinence from (or moderate use of) alcohol, honesty, personal and domestic hygiene, and the ability to save money for the future.[43] "Bad characters," by contrast, were incapable of an honest day's work and were usually to be found in, or en route to, prison.[44] Congenitally programmed by their "drunken and disreputable" parents into lives of crime, the sole hope for this degenerate criminal class was their "destruction" and "demolition."[45]

With the rise of the new consumer in the late nineteenth century, an additional sign of the bad character emerged: failure to own things. "The existing type of what has been termed 'western' civilization," commented Charles Booth in a rare moment of cultural relativism, "requires a great deal of . . . things, and its advance is based on their increase."[46] "Good character" and goods were closely connected in this fin-de-siècle discourse. A person's degree of "western civilization" was reflected in the number, and condition, of objects

possessed by a household, and bad characters could be materially distinguished from others by their ownership of "a few miserable sticks" and occupation of a "single room in which they have to sleep, and breed, and die."[47]

Slum writing is characterized by this interest in others' possessions, as authors take stock of the newness, value, and cleanliness of the things in their subjects' households. Studies of poverty in the late nineteenth century refer repeatedly to objects in rooms and their value and to the lack of commodities that characterizes the poorest households: "Their room was almost destitute," writes Charles Booth of two women sharing lodgings in London, for "all it contained would not fetch two shillings—and dirty to the last degree."[48] "The room here was full of rubbish," he comments of another slum; "all in all it would not fetch ten shillings; the dirty walls covered with little pictures never taken down; vermin abounded and the stench was awful."[49] Booth's study of London contributes to the construction of a new consumer mentality in the 1890s, for he assesses people's physical and moral state according to the state and value of their possessions and, in the process, turns them into commodities—textual commodities—for the consumption of readers.

Underpaid clerks from working-class homes, of "good character" but in possession of few material goods, were trapped in a web of contradictions. Expected by their employers and colleagues to distance themselves from rowdy cultural venues such as public houses, music halls, fairs, and the streets, Victorian clerks were, nevertheless, excluded from the "proper" middle class by virtue of their salaries and living quarters.[50] Such men—and clerking was almost exclusively male until the 1920s[51]—were, of necessity, first-class forgers, for they had to simulate the gentleman's behavior and appear to be that which their salaries prohibited. Maintaining appearances required a great deal of the forger's creative ingenuity, especially when it required the simultaneous concealment of poverty and the desperate need for more money.

Recruits to the lower middle classes experienced many anxieties, especially the fear of being thrust "backward" into the working class and losing hold of their fragile new status.[52] In the words of Geoffrey Crossick, "a basic problem of lower middle-class status was that of maintaining it, even progressing beyond it."[53] Clerical workers often lived with their parents in rented accommodation, unable to afford new shirts and suits for work, let alone leave home. They had to maintain their polish against all the odds while their more affluent employers lived comfortable lives in the suburbs.[54] As the young John Holt declared to his father before abandoning his clerical position in the early 1860s and traveling to West Africa, where he made his fortune as a trader, "What am I to do? If I stay where I am I have the prospect of a £60 salary, which to my ambitious nature is beggary. No! It is money I want and money I must have if

I go through fire and water for it."[55] This future palm oil magnate and Liverpool entrepreneur added, in justification, that his craving was not for "the gold, but the independence it brings and the cares it drives away."[56] One of Stuart-Young's fictional creations in the 1920s, Johnny Jones, echoes this sentiment in his rather more tearful plea for permission to emigrate to South Africa: "It is not fair that favoured people in society should have so much and that I—we—should want for so little and yet be denied our absolute necessaries!" he tells his father, and begs: "Let me go to wider fields. . . . There I shall be able to earn enough to hold my own in the world. I don't believe I was born to be poor—poor in that grinding hideous sense that I remember so well."[57]

Given the contradictions of their class position and the lack of opportunities for all but the most assertive individuals, it seems inevitable that forgery and embezzlement were endemic crimes among low-paid British clerks in offices and banks. Far from being the passive victims of middle-class exploitation, from the 1870s onward, increasing numbers of clerks engaged in white-collar crime as an expression of their entitlement to a better lifestyle. One of the few ways for a clerk to display the material signs of his own class progression was to become a "skidder" and succumb to the temptation to pilfer money from the workplace.[58]

In Manchester in the late nineteenth century, the ambiguous class position of many local clerks was attested to by the voluminous lists of embezzlers, forgers, and fraudsters who were declared "wanted" by police.[59] The police obtained photographs of errant clerks from their families and circulated copies around the region. Unlike the lower-class criminals, whose burglaries and muggings led them to be imprisoned as "incorrigible rogues," what is striking about these portraits is the impeccable appearance of the "wanted" men, who pose in their Sunday best in the mock drawing rooms set up in the photographer's studio (see fig. 2).[60] These were the unlucky individuals, for embezzlement was ubiquitous in the white-collar workplace, far more extensive than the number of names appearing on "wanted" lists. Those who were caught simply signified human "failure at the bottom of an unequal society."[61]

Stuart-Young's court case was to be the young man's last appearance in the British limelight before he traveled to tropical West Africa in 1901. His arrest and imprisonment marked the failure of his attempt to supersede social class and to realize, in material form, the lifestyle about which most clerks dared only to dream. While Stuart-Young did not seem to have suffered unduly from moral qualms about his embezzlements, believing himself deserving of a pay raise,[62] the conviction left him, like other guilty clerks, "without references and with a reputation in ruins."[63] It also caused lasting damage to his family's

Fig. 2. Photograph of Stuart-Young taken in the year of his conviction (from *Osrac, the Self-Sufficient and Other Poems with a Memoir of the Late Oscar Wilde* [London: Hermes Press, 1905]). *(By permission of the Board of Trinity College Dublin.)*

reputation as members of the "respectable" working class. Shattered by the publicity the case attracted locally, Stuart-Young's father disowned the boy and drank heavily during 1899. His mother, meanwhile, remained in a state of tearful collapse for the duration of the case.[64]

Upon release from Strangeways, Stuart-Young was taunted as a "jailbird" by his neighbors in Ardwick, some of whom seemed to revel in the fall of this fashion-conscious social upstart.[65] He was more cut off than ever from his

roots when he returned home to his crowded working-class neighborhood in November 1899. Hidden away in the downstairs room of Back Kay Street with paper and pens, writing poems on the subject of beauty and journalistic articles about prison life, he waited impatiently for an opportunity to leave the country. In 1900, a clerical position in the tropics arose with Miller Brothers of Manchester, and in 1901 Stuart-Young left "darkest England" behind him for Liberia.

In setting up his well-furnished library and trying to actualize a middle-class ideal, Stuart-Young exposed many of the contradictions and dilemmas inherent in the lifestyles of his fellows, which revolved around the masking of poverty and the denial of material lack. Additionally, his Nelson Street lifestyle made a statement about the difficulties of becoming a "working-class intellectual" in the late nineteenth century and the need some educated lower-class youths felt to avoid the perceived constraints of their class and culture by emulating the intelligentsia. Failing to recognize the intellectual culture of laborers, Stuart-Young used his stolen money to propel himself, like a human cannonball, as far away from his class of birth as funds would allow. Like the hero of his "Johnny Jones" novels discussed in chapter 7, he seemed "determined, willy-nilly, to rise from the class into which he had been born."[66] Like many others of his rank, he was insistent on his entitlement to "rise," and in the wake of his failed bid to achieve gentlemanly status in Manchester, the young man departed for Africa at the first opportunity, exchanging his class inferiority for what he hoped would be a privileged place in the racial hierarchy of the colonies.