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The Beecher-Tilton adultery scandal : family, religion, and politics in Brooklyn, 1865-1875.

Altina L. Waller
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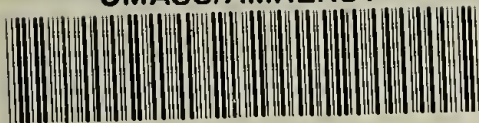
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THE BEECHER-TILTON ADULTERY SCANDAL:
FAMILY, RELIGION, AND POLITICS
IN BROOKLYN, 1865-1875

A Dissertation Presented

By

ALTINA LAURA WALLER

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

February 1980

History

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1980

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FAMILY, RELIGION, AND POLITICS

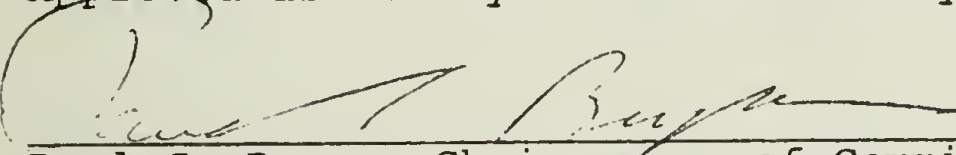
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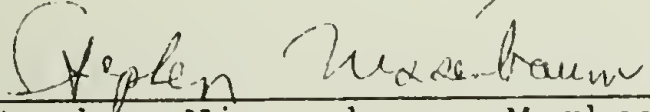
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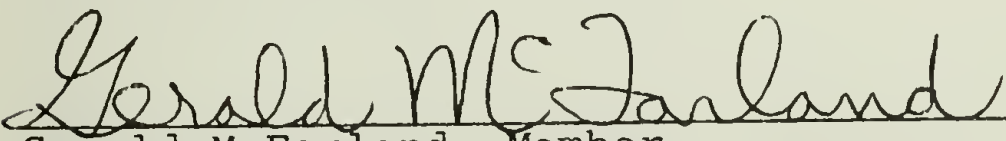
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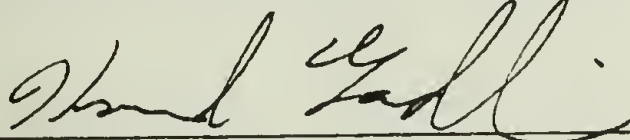
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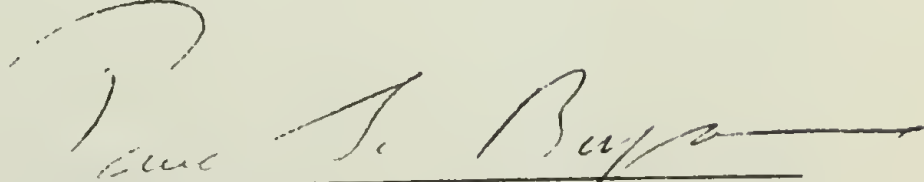
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For Laura and Andrew

P R E F A C E

Beginning as early as 1873, when Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner published the novel whose title, The Gilded Age, gave a name to their generation, attempts to understand American life in the late nineteenth century have been hampered by the dominance of powerful and usually negative stereotyped images. In the popular mind--and among many historians as well--the post-Civil War generation was perceived as somehow fatally flawed--by crass materialism and greed, by political corruption and scandal, and--worst of all--by cloying sentimentality and hypocritical moral pretentiousness.

Significantly, the most extensive and probing studies of the political, social, and cultural history of the Gilded Age have focused on the minority who stood outside the mainstream or resisted its dominant currents: critics and skeptics like Mark Twain, Walt Whitman, and Henry Adams; quixotic political reformers like E. L. Godkin; isolated creative figures like Albert Pinkham Ryder and Kate Chopin; humanitarians like Jane Addams and Jacob Riis; or--at the other end of the scale--the anonymous immigrant masses who struggled for survival and a decent existence against heavy odds. In short, historians have tried to "salvage" the Gilded Age for us by focusing on its redeeming qualities and its leavening minority.

The fact is that twentieth-century perceptions of what makes important and worthwhile history have dulled our sensitivity to the issues that arrested the attention and concern of Americans living in the Gilded Age. Historians have chosen to study economic development and political reform because these things seemed the most significant to the scholars who were writing about them. And, of course, these issues did capture the attention of some segments of late nineteenth-century American society. These matters certainly deserve careful historical investigation, but our exclusive concentration on them has left us with a lopsided picture of the era. When it comes to the social and cultural contours of the life of the majority of this era, we have studied the fringes, the atypical, the nay-sayers, but we have somehow not yet penetrated to the core.

This dissertation is an effort to redress the balance somewhat: to explore--on their own terms and through the medium of a single, traumatic event--some of the central concerns of a segment of the American middle class in the 1870s. Specifically, I propose to examine the most sensational and highly publicized social scandal of the era: the 1875 adultery trial of the most popular American Protestant preacher of the day, Henry Ward Beecher.

Almost as soon as it was over, this event was relegated to the attic of the American consciousness. Everyone knew about it, but few--certainly few historians--considered it worthy of serious historical attention. For a period of several years while awareness of the scandal was at its height, no other event was more written or talked about. Some reacted with amusement, some with outrage; others were convinced it presaged the downfall of Christianity or heralded a social revolution--but everyone knew about it, and everyone had something to say on the subject. I have proceeded on the assumption that no event, however melodramatic, which so engaged the national attention can be without historical interest or significance. A careful consideration of the circumstances, personalities, and ramifications of this famous scandal, I believe, can help us understand some of the fundamental issues confronting middle-class Americans in the mid-Victorian era.

I have approached the Beecher-Tilton scandal not as narrative history, but as a study of institutional changes and their personal psychological ramifications as they were manifested in a single traumatic event. This means that I often touch only briefly on or neglect entirely the details of complicated events and trial testimony so that I can explore fully what I perceive to be the underlying

patterns. Conversely, this also means dealing with a few important events from several different perspectives. To avoid possible confusion which might arise from this sometimes non-chronological organization, I have included in Chapter I a brief synopsis of the main events in the scandal and in Appendix I, a chronology. I hope that these two will help reduce confusion concerning the factual sequence.

Further, I have not been overly preoccupied with the question of Beecher's guilt or innocence. Appendix II consists of a discussion focused directly on this issue, but the dissertation itself does not attempt to argue the point. It will soon be clear to the reader what my conclusions are, but, nevertheless, I would be willing to argue that whether the scandal is true or not, it unveils the same fundamental social concerns. The intense social conflict it engendered in Brooklyn and the national fascination with the affair are testimony to that.

The scandal was first suggested to me by Professor Stephen Nissenbaum, not as a dissertation topic, but as a possible teaching unit in a course at the University of Massachusetts known as New Approaches to History. After having successfully taught units such as Salem Witchcraft, Shay's Rebellion, and Lizzie Borden, the staff was looking for a new topic amenable to the

research-oriented methodology of the course. To facilitate the search, Professor Nissenbaum offered a graduate seminar designed to consider potential topics, finishing the semester by making a definite choice. Personally convinced that this particular unit would not be successful, I opposed its selection but was outvoted by the class. Ironically, I was the only graduate student enrolled in the seminar who was also on the staff of the New Approaches course and therefore was "volunteered" to develop the Beecher-Tilton scandal topic into a viable course. In doing this, however, I had the good fortune of collaborating with Professor Gerald McFarland, who, in the beginning, at least, saw more potential for it as a teaching unit than I did.

Eventually, I was to teach the course three different times--from fall of 1975 through spring 1977--discovering on each occasion that undergraduates could indeed become involved in the many complex issues raised by the scandal. Indeed, the first semester Professor McFarland and I taught the course, there was a grassroots movement to organize a trip to Brooklyn and Plymouth Church. This determined group of students--with myself and Professor McFarland--met one Sunday morning at five a.m. to make the five-hour trip to Brooklyn in time for the church service. Our dedication was rewarded

for Brooklyn Heights and Plymouth Church today still look much the same as they did in the 1870s. And the minister, Rev. Harry Kruener, and church secretary, Miss Beatrice Lennecke, proved gracious hosts who extended a warm welcome to our group. To them, I am also most grateful for their hospitality and assistance in the weeks I spent at the church doing research, not only for the course, but for this dissertation.

Indeed, the teaching of this topic and its evolution into a dissertation have proceeded hand in hand. My students shared my own excitement and commitment to unearthing increasing amounts of data. Each semester, more of the long list of church members were "fleshed out" as students uncovered long-buried data in local histories, newspapers, directories, and census records. But to the students in the final Beecher semester--fall 1977--I owe my greatest debt. It was this group which systematically searched the census for a random sample of Plymouth as well as Church of the Pilgrims members. It is largely the results of their diligent perusal of the 1870 census schedules which appear in Chapter VII.

The fact is that this dissertation is the result of the assistance and encouragement offered to me by many people at various stages. My students were only the first to contribute their enthusiasm as well as concrete help.

An even more committed research assistant was my daughter Laura Wilson, who, at the ages of 13 and 14, accompanied me to Plymouth Church to collect data on church members. Her careful work, dedication to the task, and unfailing good humor imbued the weeks spent among the dusty church records with extremely pleasant memories. To Leonard Lewis, also, who devoted significant amounts of time and energy to the collection of data at Plymouth Church and to discussing its interpretation, this study is indebted.

Success in locating, borrowing, or acquiring the sources for the Beecher-Tilton course and this dissertation was due primarily to the American bibliographer at the University of Massachusetts Library, John Kendall. I can never begin to thank him enough, not only for his actual help in getting materials, but for his genuine interest and encouragement.

Others, whose involvement has not been quite so direct, have endured my long periods of discouragement and inability to progress. For their patience, understanding, and faith, I am grateful to my partner David Stamps, my son Andrew Wilson, and my dear friends Liz Lewis and Pamella Weeks. And since I have been in West Virginia, the vital support has been constantly forthcoming from Peter and Laura Gottlieb, Barbara Rowe and Bob Withers,

and my colleague in the history department, John A. Maxwell.

Finally, I want to thank the two people who, other than myself, have had the longest and closest association with this dissertation, Professors Stephen Nissenbaum and Paul S. Boyer. Professor Nissenbaum's ideas and fresh insights have repeatedly infused new life into the project while Professor Boyer's thoughtful suggestions and untiring patience with draft after draft of the manuscript convinced me that it was worth finishing.

To all these students, friends, and colleagues belongs the credit for whatever is worthwhile in this dissertation. But for its many failings, I wish to apologize to them.

Altina Waller
Morgantown, West Virginia
October 20, 1979

ABSTRACT

The Beecher-Tilton Adultery Scandal:

Family, Religion, and Politics

in Brooklyn, 1865-1875

(February 1980)

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Directed by: Paul S. Boyer

The Beecher-Tilton scandal was precipitated in 1872 when Victoria Woodhull accused Henry Ward Beecher--the most popular Protestant minister in America--of adultery with his best friend's wife. Woodhull was considered a disreputable radical who represented such causes as women's rights, spiritualism, communism, and Free Love. She said she only wanted to expose Beecher's hypocrisy to the public and enlist his help to bring about a social revolution. When Beecher denied the charges, most Americans tended to believe him rather than Woodhull. However, when Theodore Tilton, the aggrieved husband revealed in June 1874 that Woodhull's story was true, a scandal of national proportions erupted. The public clamored for the truth and hung on every word as the case was tried, first in Beecher's church, then in Brooklyn City Court.

This thesis explores the origins--both personal and social--of the scandal as well as its consequences for the millions of middle-class Americans who were followers of Beecher. It demonstrates that the adultery was not some uniquely bizarre melodrama which caught public attention because of its anomalous nature, but that it was, in fact, deeply rooted in changing institutional and cultural values. As a stable agrarian society gave way to industrial capitalism, traditional institutions were eroded or transformed by the increasingly fluid character of the social order. Henry Ward Beecher and his "Gospel of Love" contributed significantly to the attempt to justify and rationalize the weakening of family, church, and political party as authoritative institutions. He argued that in the future these should be based on affection and love--or as he put it "affinity," rather than obligation and duty.

As Beecher became popular, preaching a view which appealed to mobile, aspiring New Englanders in Brooklyn and New York, opposition to this approach arose. Before anything was known of his adultery, a group belonging to a church which was also located in Brooklyn Heights became frightened that Beecherism would completely break down social order. They correctly identified Beecher and members of Plymouth Church with the secularization of

religion and with corrupt "machine politics." Thus, when this group led by Richard Salter Storrs heard of the adultery scandal, they publicized it as a further example of Beecher's socially disruptive doctrine. But there was more to their opposition than ideology: statistical analysis shows that social background and economic status played a large role in determining attitudes toward Beecher. Plymouthites were lower-middle-class tradesmen and white-collar workers. Their espousal of the Gospel of Love rationalized their rejection of a socially and economically limiting background and justified their ambition. Storrs' parishioners, on the other hand, had acquired their status in traditional institutions and wanted to preserve them. Beecher's scorn of such institutions and his followers' rapid rise to social prominence in Brooklyn threatened the social standing of Storrs' group.

Meanwhile, the transformation of one such institution--marriage--actually caused the adultery which was to lead to scandal. Convinced by her husband and minister that romantic love rather than a legal contract should form the basis of a personal relationship and determine its sexual aspect, Elizabeth Tilton was seduced by Beecher. In the confusion which followed--her husband's anger and jealousy, and Beecher's blame of her

for the whole imbroglio, Elizabeth was persuaded that her essential nature was not social, nor spiritual, but sexual! She retreated to a conservative idea of marriage as the only method of containing and regulating such a dangerous force. In this, Elizabeth was typical of the Victorian woman who attempted to deny her sexuality at the precise moment when she became convinced that it lay at the very root of her identity.

In a similar way, Plymouth Church members like Tilton, denied their obsession with the acquisition of money and status at a point when those things had become the primary driving forces in their lives. What the scandal seemed to demonstrate was that Beecher's doctrine had allowed sexuality and status-seeking to emerge so close to the surface as to threaten the social order. The eventual rejection of Beecher by middle-class Americans was, then, also a rejection of the social and personal freedom which was implicit in the Gospel of Love.

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I propose to make a story which shall turn, not so much on outward action (though I hope to have enough to carry the story handsomely) as on certain mental or inward questions. I propose to delineate a high and noble man, trained to New England theology, but brought to excessive distress by speculations and new views. . . . The heroine is to be large of soul, a child of nature, and, although a Christian, yet in childlike sympathy with the truths of God in the autumn world, instead of books. These two, the man of philosophy and theology and the woman of nature and simple truth, are to act upon each other, and she is to triumph.

Henry Ward Beecher
January 3, 1866

C H A P T E R I

THE BOMBSHELL

It was during the last week of October, 1872, that the Beecher-Tilton scandal first came to widespread public attention. Victoria Woodhull, editor of Woodhull & Claflin's Weekly, a radical newspaper devoted to women's rights and spiritualism, accused the most respected minister of the age, Henry Ward Beecher, of adultery. The purpose of the article, Woodhull said, was not to condemn Beecher's behavior, but to expose his hypocrisy to the world. The minister, she claimed, shared her own belief that marriage was a false institution which should be abolished. Indeed, he himself had told her that "marriage is the grave of love." Why then didn't Beecher proclaim his beliefs publicly? Woodhull was sure it was simply expedience--such an admission would ruin his career. But now Woodhull declared her intention of forcing upon the reluctant Beecher a leadership role in the coming social revolution. This, she hoped, would give courage to the many so-called respectable Americans who, like Beecher, were actually practicing the precepts of "free love" while professing conformity to conventional moral codes. The revelation of Beecher's sexual commerce with his

parishioner would, Woodhull prophesied, "burst upon the ranks of the moralistic camp like a bombshell."¹

The flamboyant Woodhull had not underestimated public response. It was indeed a bombshell. "Free Lover" was close to the worst, if not the worst, epithet one could attach to a respectable citizen in the post-Civil War era--something like an accusation of communism in the 1950s. Indeed, one contemporary writer railed that Free Lovers were "anxious to bring their vile principles into favor . . . to degrade society to their own level . . . destroying all morality . . . their avowed programme--first, to destroy the institution of marriage; second, to abolish the Christian religion; and third, to inaugurate a reign of lust."² In short, more than sexual behavior was at stake--Free Lovers were out to subvert the very foundations of society.

Yet this widespread fear over the influence of Free Love was relatively new to the post-Civil War period. Although some Americans in the ante-bellum era had worried about John Humphrey Noyes and the Free Love practiced at the Oneida Community, most people had not taken it seriously. Since the Civil War, however, increased

¹Woodhull & Claflin's Weekly, 2 November 1872.

²John B. Ellis, Free Love and Its Votaries (New York 1870), p. 442.

support for women's rights threatened to add impetus to the Free Love movement. Clearly the days when most Americans regarded Free Love ideas as a "harmless vagary" were over. In 1870 one fearful observer declared:

The evil principle of Free Love has spread with marvelous rapidity, until it has manifested itself in almost every class of society . . . it has . . . lowered the moral tone of society to an extent which is truly alarming. We see its workings in the looseness of public sentiment on questions of morality; in the infamous facilities for divorce which are increasing in our land; in the light esteem in which the marriage tie is held; and in the efforts to abolish the marriage relation. The evil has spread to such an alarming extent, that it is time some measures were taken to check it.³

Free Love was by now no longer laughable, but was, indeed, a challenge to the most fundamental and sacred of social institutions--the family. It was in this setting of increasing and widespread apprehension that an avowed Free Lover--Victoria Woodhull--accused Henry Ward Beecher of secretly believing in and practicing this "evil" doctrine. It seemed to many just as serious a threat to the national character as the problems of slavery and reconstruction had been.

³Ibid., pp. 9-10.

For Henry Ward Beecher was more than a popular preacher: he was an American institution. If you want to observe a peculiarly American phenomenon, declared a contemporary journalist, attend Plymouth Church in Brooklyn Heights where every Sunday Beecher preached to three thousand people.⁴ Each Sabbath morning the ferries from New York--these were the days before the Brooklyn Bridge--were so crowded with people bound for Plymouth Church they became known as "Beecher boats." Beecher was, in fact, a well known New York tourist attraction. In an era when public oratory seemed to be declining, he could still hold an audience spellbound. At the end of the Civil War, it was only natural that Henry Ward Beecher was Abraham Lincoln's choice to speak as the flag was raised victoriously over Fort Sumter. Beecher's sermons were recorded stenographically and published each week in newspapers throughout the country, and his articles in religious weeklies were read by thousands more. A book he wrote--not a very good book--became one of the top four best sellers in 1868. Beecher was an institution because he represented more than his own denomination of Congregationalism, or even Protestantism; he embodied the very essence of American purity and

⁴James Parton, Famous Men of Recent Times (Boston 1893), p. 349.

virtue. Indeed, many non-churchgoers were personal followers of Beecher. Therefore it is not surprising that Victoria Woodhull's revelation was a bombshell, or as another journalist expressed it--a thunderbolt.⁵

And yet, precisely because Henry Ward Beecher had stepped beyond the traditional role of a minister--had, indeed, secularized religion--many people were convinced there might be some truth in the accusations. They reasoned that his "inconsistent" and sometimes eccentric ideas could easily lead to moral decay. They accused Beecher of the pursuit of popularity and wealth to the detriment of orthodoxy and morality. When Woodhull claimed that anyone reading the minister's sermons might discover for themselves that Free Love and social freedom were Beecher's hidden message, his followers rose indignantly to defend him. His enemies, however, as we shall see, hastened to point out that the logical outcome of Beecher's secularization of religion over the years was the weakening of moral standards. We told you so, they said: the scandal, in their eyes, was the inevitable

⁵For studies of Beecher's influence and popularity, see: Lyman Abbott, ed., Henry Ward Beecher: A Sketch of His Career (Boston 1883); Joseph Howard, Jr., The Life of Henry Ward Beecher (Philadelphia 1887); John R. Howard, Henry Ward Beecher: A Study of His Personality, Career, and Influence in Public Affairs (New York 1891); Thomas W. Knox, The Life and Works of Henry Ward Beecher (Philadelphia 1887); John Henry Barrows, Henry Ward Beecher: The Shakespeare of the Pulpit (New York 1893).

result of Beecher's "Gospel of Love" which, they insisted, was dangerously close to Free Love.

After Woodhull's exposure of the scandal, Beecher called her a "malign external influence"; indeed, it must have seemed that she had been sent by the devil to torment him. Her career blazed like a meteor upon the horizon--she edited her radical paper with the backing of Commodore Cornelius Vanderbilt, gained and lost the support of the women's rights movement, ran for President, lectured on communism, spiritualism, and free love, and brought scandal down upon the holiest symbol of American virtue--all in the space of seven years! Before 1870, Woodhull was a little known spiritualist and faith healer--after 1876 she retired to a country estate in England, the wife of a wealthy nobleman, where she repudiated her previous views on sexual freedom. Her infamous career coincided exactly with Henry Ward Beecher's terrible ordeal. No wonder news reporters who referred to Victoria Woodhull as the "Terrible Siren" and "Mrs. Satan" had the wholehearted endorsement of Henry Ward Beecher.⁶

⁶For the career of Victoria Woodhull, see: Johanna Johnston, Mrs. Satan: The Incredible Saga of Victoria C. Woodhull (New York 1967); Emania Sachs, "The Terrible Siren," Victoria Woodhull 1838-1927 (New York 1928); M. M. Marberry, Vicky: A Biography of Victoria C. Woodhull (New York 1967); and for a sympathetic contemporary view--Theodore Tilton, "Victoria C. Woodhull: A Biographical Sketch," Golden Age Tract No. 3 (New York 1871).

In the "bombshell" article, Woodhull, after asserting that Beecher was a believer in the "most advanced doctrines of free-love and the abolition of Christian marriage," went on to supply the sordid details of the scandal. She had learned them, she said, from the husband of the woman involved. Theodore and Elizabeth Tilton were both members of Beecher's church, indeed, had been married by him. In addition to being a noted writer, reformer, and lecturer, Theodore Tilton was the editor of the most popular religious weekly in the country, the Independent. An eminent and respected figure in his own right, he and Beecher had been close friends for over ten years, associated in religion, business, and reform movements. Tilton's wife, thirty-nine-year-old Elizabeth, had a reputation for the piety of her character and the "blind idolatry" in which she held her husband. She was the last woman one might suspect of adultery.

Nevertheless, the exposé article claimed that Theodore Tilton first learned the "tale of iniquitous horror" from his twelve-year-old daughter. But when confronted by her husband with this evidence, Mrs. Tilton did not attempt any "palliation." Crazed with jealousy, Tilton, who now concluded that her unborn child was not his, "stripped the wedding-ring from her finger," and "tore the picture of Mr. Beecher from the wall and stamped it in pieces." Within a few months, however, the

child was miscarried and a frantic Tilton could be found "walking to and from that grave, in a state bordering on distraction."⁷

Woodhull's tale was worthy of a Victorian novel--it surpassed the almost pathological sensationalism of the popular fiction of the day. Truth, it seemed, was not so different from fiction after all. However, as Beecher's defenders quickly pointed out, Woodhull was prone to exaggeration and lying--she had a reputation for attempting to blackmail prominent figures by threatening to expose their relations with prostitutes. Beecher responded to Woodhull's story with what he called a "policy of silence." He insisted on treating the charges with a condescending silence. After a brief flurry in the press, this strategy proved effective--the scandal faded from public attention for the moment. But it was not dead, only dormant, as its sporadic reappearance in the press demonstrated. Finally, during the "scandal summer" of 1874, the whole affair came to light and dominated the national press.⁸ Although the facts were somewhat less

⁷Woodhull & Claflin's Weekly, 2 November 1872.

⁸The source of the newspaper accounts was primarily the verbatim reports of the Plymouth Church Investigation which continued for most of July and August 1874. The testimony was originally supposed to be secret but was routinely "leaked" to the press. Immediately after this Church trial, many sensationalized books and pamphlets on the scandal were hurried to press in order to cash in on

lurid than Woodhull's portrayal, they still gripped the attention of a fascinated public.

Theodore Tilton and Henry Ward Beecher had first become friends when they worked together on the popular religious journal, the Independent. Indeed, the minister, along with others in Plymouth Church, had been instrumental in obtaining a position for Tilton on the paper, later promoting him to editor. Tilton, twenty-two years younger than Beecher, revered the minister as a father. He was so anxious that Beecher's friendship extend to his wife and children that he repeatedly urged the preacher to visit his home. These invitations were ignored until 1866 when

public fascination with the affair. Most of these contain identical documents, testimonies, and letters which had been lifted from newspapers. Any of them can be used as a basic sourcebook--but the one I found valuable and readily available was Charles F. Marshall, The True History of the Brooklyn Scandal (Philadelphia 1874). This book contains Victoria Woodhull's original statement, brief biographies of the principal characters, public statements of Henry Ward Beecher, Theodore Tilton, Elizabeth Tilton, and Francis Moulton, their cross-examinations before the church committee, the final report of the committee, and numerous lengthy quotes from newspaper articles and editorials. Indeed, in some ways, the church investigation of 1874 revealed more than the later civil trial, for Elizabeth Tilton testified here as she never did in the civil case. The only extensive body of information not included in Marshall is Elizabeth's and Theodore's letters to each other which were first published in the Chicago Tribune on August 13, 1874. The following summary of the scandal is taken mostly from statements and testimony before the Plymouth Church Investigating Committee (PCIC) and the Tilton letters--many of which were published later in the trial transcript.

Tilton began a series of lecture tours which kept him away from home three or four months out of every year.

On occasions when her husband was away, Beecher called on Mrs. Tilton almost every week--indeed, became almost a part of the household, reading the children stories and putting them to bed. Elizabeth Tilton, flattered by this attention from her famous pastor, wrote to her husband detailed descriptions of these visits. Despite her openness, Tilton's suspicions were aroused. He vacillated, however, between feeling flattered and, increasingly, jealous. Significantly, Tilton was not alone in his suspicions, for many Plymouth Church parishioners, who were neighbors of the Tiltons, had noticed the frequent calls on Mrs. Tilton. Beecher had a reputation as a non-visiting minister; he made no secret of his aversion to this particular pastoral duty. Consequently, Mrs. Tilton was a notable exception.

Whatever rumors may have circulated, nothing was said openly for four years after the visits began. From 1866 on, however, it was clear that the Tiltons experienced marital difficulties, while the discord between Henry Ward and his wife Eunice was common knowledge. There were even rumors that Beecher had sought sympathy and sexual solace from other female members of his congregation. But despite this gossip, the Tiltons continued their friendship with the minister. Elizabeth

Tilton even suggested to her husband that the two of them--with "pure" friendship--might cure Beecher of some "delusions" he had about himself.⁹

Apparently the Tiltons were more deluded than Beecher, for on October 10, 1868, the pastor probably succeeded in seducing Elizabeth.¹⁰ Beecher had been attempting for over a year, she later told her husband, to accomplish this object--succeeding only after "long moral resistance . . . and . . . repeated assaults . . . upon her mind with overmastering arguments."¹¹ She had weakened only because of her "tender state of mind" and her need for consolation following the death of her infant child. Beecher's arguments that "pure affection and a high religious love" justified their sexual union were indeed "overmastering." They convinced Elizabeth that, despite the affair, she remained "spotless and chaste."¹²

⁹Elizabeth Tilton (hereafter ET) to Theodore Tilton (hereafter TT), 25 January 1867, in Theodore Tilton vs. Henry Ward Beecher, Action for Crim. Con., 3 vols. (New York 1875) (hereafter Trial), vol. I, p. 499.

¹⁰For a discussion of Beecher's actual guilt or innocence, see Appendix II.

¹¹TT, "Sworn Statement," 20 July 1874, Plymouth Church Investigating Committee (hereafter PCIC), in Marshall, p. 116.

¹²Ibid., p. 115.

But her contention that "pure" love should be honest and open, and that she should therefore inform her husband of their relationship, was vehemently resisted by Beecher. He insisted, she said, that the vulgar world would not understand such purity; they must practice "nest-hiding."¹³ Keeping their love a secret was necessary to preserve its religious sanctity.

The affair continued in secret until the spring of 1870, when for some unknown reason it came to an end. It may have been Theodore's suspicion--by this time he angrily accused Elizabeth of just such an affair--or it may have been Beecher's loss of interest. Perhaps both these caused Elizabeth, on July 3, 1870, to confess the adultery to her husband. Clearly, however, she intended the confession only for Theodore--it was not a public statement. The later publication of the scandal was largely Theodore's doing and caused nothing but anguish for Elizabeth. Indeed, at the time of her confession, she was careful to extract a promise from her husband that he would tell no one.

Despite intentions of secrecy, however, the scandal almost became public the following December, when Tilton quarreled with his employer and fellow Plymouth Church member, Henry C. Bowen. Bowen was insisting that Tilton

¹³ Ibid.

support the corrupt Grant administration in the Brooklyn Union, the newspaper of which Tilton had become editor in 1870, but Tilton refused. In the heat of the dispute, Tilton revealed to Bowen his wife's infidelity with Beecher. The impact of this information on Bowen was startling. He already harbored numerous grievances against the minister, one--possibly--for the seduction of his own wife Lucy eight years before. Indeed, Bowen had been the source of the earlier rumors about Beecher. This evidence of another Beecher adultery offered Bowen the opportunity for revenge. He urged that Tilton demand the minister's resignation from Plymouth Church. Startled by this turn of events, Tilton wrote the letter but then confided to his longtime friend Frank Moulton what had occurred. Moulton, suspicious of Bowen's motives, urged Tilton not to send the letter--but it was too late, the letter had been delivered to Beecher by Bowen. Moulton then took it upon himself to act as an arbitrator between Tilton and Beecher. With Beecher's acceptance of this offer in January 1871 began a four-year attempt to "cover up" the scandal. Moulton as the "mutual friend" advised, counseled, and manipulated the two men in cover-up strategy. Indeed, he suddenly became an important figure in their lives--both men visiting his home three or four times a week.

It was Moulton, in fact, who, on the stormy night in December 1870--after Tilton's letter was delivered to Beecher--accompanied the preacher on a visit to Elizabeth Tilton. It was the first time they had seen each other since Beecher's discovery of her confession. During that encounter, the minister persuaded Elizabeth--who was recovering from a miscarriage--to write a retraction of the confession; he even dictated its contents. Tilton, upon discovering this maneuver on Beecher's part, insisted that his wife write yet another letter, this time denying her retraction and indicating that Beecher had dictated it. She abjectly agreed to this as well.

Then, in one of the more dramatic episodes of the case, Moulton called on Beecher, took a pistol from his coat, and chided the minister for obtaining from Mrs. Tilton a letter which he "knew to be a lie."¹⁴ Some accounts claimed that it was common for those who had business along Brooklyn's waterfront to carry pistols while others insisted that Moulton was deliberately threatening Beecher. Significantly, the preacher surrendered the retraction to Moulton amidst "great sorrow and weeping" and protestations that the "sexual

¹⁴ "Mr. Moulton's Last Statement," New York Daily Graphic, 11 September 1874, in Marshall, p. 479.

expression" of his love for Elizabeth Tilton was as natural as its "verbal expression."¹⁵

For a time, Moulton's effectiveness in concealing the scandal and persuading Tilton and Beecher to resume their friendship was impressive. Because Henry Bowen had fired Tilton, Moulton and his business partners, with financial help from Beecher, backed a new weekly paper, The Golden Age, with Tilton as editor. Moulton also sent off to boarding school a young girl who had been living with the Tiltons and who knew of Beecher's affair with Mrs. Tilton. He even persuaded Beecher to pay the girl's expenses. Indeed, Moulton might have congratulated himself on his astute handling of the scandal if Woodhull, through her connections with Susan Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, had not heard rumors of the affair. In the spring of 1871 came the first hints that she knew of the scandal--causing Moulton, Beecher, and Tilton to begin frantically and somewhat comically, conspiring to keep her quiet. The result was that Tilton was delegated to placate Woodhull by putting her under "social obligation" to them. He accomplished this by flattering her and offering to compose an admiring biography.¹⁶ (Woodhull later claimed that he had also become her lover for more than

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Theodore Tilton, "Victoria C. Woodhull: A Biographical Sketch," Golden Age Tract No. 3 (New York 1871).

six months.) The appeasement policy succeeded for a year, until 1872, when Woodhull, angered by the attacks upon her by Beecher's sisters, Catherine and Harriet, published the scandal.

This time, despite Moulton's frantic schemes to avoid it, the scandal erupted. One after another of the incriminating letters and documents was published in the papers--but it was still a full year and a half before any formal action was taken. Curiously, it was Tilton who was first attacked for his part in the scandal. In 1873 Plymouth Church dismissed him from membership, citing his "slander" of the minister and association with Woodhull! Even then, however, Tilton's commitment to silence was unshaken. Had it not been for a Brooklyn Congregational Council's demands for an investigation, the scandal might have once again faded from public notice. The Council had no real power, but it inspired a series of articles in the Independent by a Yale divinity professor--a friend of Beecher's--who referred to Tilton as a "knave" and a "dog."¹⁷ Tilton could not stand this public degradation; in June 1874 he responded with a long reply, which he sent to the major New York and Brooklyn newspapers, stating his

¹⁷"Dr. Bacon's Speech," 2 April 1874, in Marshall, pp. 40-42.

version of the case and voicing his refusal "to sacrifice my good name for the sake of his."¹⁸

By July 1874 public outcry was so great that Beecher abandoned the policy of silence. Taking the offensive, he appointed a Church Investigating Committee (which consisted of six of his warmest friends) to hear the charges. All during August the Committee took testimony which the newspapers published verbatim. A fascinated public hung on every word. Elizabeth Tilton, determined to defend Beecher, appeared the day after leaving her husband, revealing with touching pathos, a sad tale of "domestic unhappiness," but denying the adultery.¹⁹ Tilton, now joined by Moulton, in an effort to expose Beecher, presented a mass of documentation--including Beecher's own letters--which constituted almost irrefutable evidence. But, not surprisingly, the Committee issued a report completely exonerating Beecher. "The evidence," stated the Investigating Committee, established "to the perfect satisfaction of his church" Beecher's "entire innocence and absolute personal integrity." Because of their pastor's "unmerited sufferings," the Committee members reiterated that they now felt a "sympathy more tender and a trust more unbounded" than ever

¹⁸TT to Dr. Leonard Bacon, 21 June 1874, in Marshall, pp. 42-63.

¹⁹ET testimony, 31 July 1874, PCIC, Marshall, p. 197.

before. When Moulton protested the report at a full church meeting, he was threatened with violence and the police were called to "escort" him from the hall.²⁰

Tilton, angered by Beecher's private system of justice and smarting under the sharp, insulting rebuke of the Committee, filed criminal charges against the minister. The ensuing trial was the greatest national spectacle of the 1870s. For six months--from January to June 1875--the most renowned lawyers in the country dedicated their talents to the case. Opening and closing statements alone took two months; opera glasses were sold in the courtroom and bouquets of flowers were showered on Beecher and Tilton. The trial became known as the "flower war." In the end, the jury could not agree and Beecher was acquitted. His congregation staged a huge celebration, voting to raise his salary by \$100,000 in order to pay the lawyers. It was all a magnificent vote of confidence in Beecher which demonstrated the overwhelming devotion of his congregation.

The result of the trial was equivocal, however, and Plymouth Church sought to make the verdict conclusive by calling, in 1876, a second church council. In that council, Henry C. Bowen, for the first time, came forward, testifying that he knew Beecher to be a "libertine and a

²⁰"Report of the Committee of Investigation," 28 August 1874, Marshall, pp. 405-433.

seducer."²¹ Nevertheless, the Council--which consisted of churches carefully chosen because of their sympathy with Plymouth Church--followed the lead of Plymouth in completely exonerating Beecher. Bowen, Emma Moulton, and others who had testified against the minister were promptly excommunicated. The purge was completed in the spring of 1878 when Elizabeth Tilton, in a startling reversal of the stand she had taken all through the trial, made a public confession of the adultery and was also excommunicated.

The members of Plymouth Church were both numerous and powerful in Brooklyn and New York and their revenge against the Tiltons was complete. Ostracized by Plymouth Church, Elizabeth Tilton died in 1897, lonely and blind, at the home of her daughter in Brooklyn. The influence of Beecher's wealthy parishioners in journalistic circles prevented Theodore Tilton from earning a livelihood and he fled to Paris where he lived in poverty, writing poetry and playing chess.

Beecher, despite his continued popularity in Plymouth Church and as a lecturer, did suffer from the scandal. The religious newspaper he edited, the Christian Union, lost a significant number of subscribers and the

²¹Henry C. Bowen to the Examining Committee of Plymouth Church, 4 February 1876, in the Independent, 10 February 1876, p. 3.

publishing firm which depended for most of its profit on the sale of Beecher books went bankrupt. Though respected and popular until his death in 1887, Beecher was never again treated with quite the same universal reverence in which he was held before the scandal.²²

Until recently, most historians have treated Henry Ward Beecher as one of the worst examples of hypocritical moralism in the Gilded Age. Though lauded for his promotion of anti-slavery and women's suffrage, his involvement in the scandal and his later reactionary political and social views have precluded serious study of his career by liberal historians. The one exception, Paxton Hibben, a progressive journalist, writing in the 1920s used Beecher's biography as a vehicle to debunk the motives of great men--attempting to prove that the pursuit of wealth, power, and selfish pleasure were common failings among "great men." Hibben's bias led him to portray Beecher as the sole culprit in the whole affair--he seduced a simple-minded and devoted female parishioner, the wife of a hard-working and long-suffering friend; then proceeded to make false and shameless accusations against them in a brazen attempt to cover up his own guilt. Beecher's

²²Paxton Hibben, Henry Ward Beecher: An American Portrait (New York 1927), p. 284.

selfishness and hypocrisy were, to Hibben, a perfectly satisfactory explanation for the whole imbroglio.²³

Victoria Woodhull's biographers, as well, accepted this version of the scandal. Emanie Sachs, writing in 1928, although somewhat embarrassed by her subject's views on free love, defended Woodhull's courageous exposure of Beecher's hypocritical philandering.²⁴ Thus by the 1930s Beecher had become a stereotyped whipping boy for American historians and an embarrassment to American religion. His niche in nineteenth-century social history--purveyor of a watered-down Protestantism to a self-satisfied middle class and symbol of Victorian moral hypocrisy--seemed permanently fixed, and few historians were moved to subject his career to further scrutiny. Those who did venture to study the phases of his life devoted to anti-slavery dismissed as "trivia" his involvement in the scandal. Beecher appeared in school books as the abolitionist who sent Sharps Rifles, or "Beecher Bibles," to aid in the bloody struggle for Kansas, and as the brother of Harriet Beecher Stowe of Uncle Tom's Cabin fame. There his case rested until 1954.

In the early 1950s, Robert Shaplen, a writer for the New Yorker, who resided in Brooklyn, became interested

²³Hibben is still the most thorough and accurate biography of Beecher.

²⁴Sachs, p. 90.

in the scandal as a piece of local color. After publishing a two-part article in the New Yorker in June 1954, he expanded the article into a book, Free Love and Heavenly Sinners. The book itself is as astute as its title, for Shaplen delved more thoroughly into the origins and progress of the scandal than any previous writer. Not intended to be a work of historical scholarship, it is a popular and dramatic, yet accurate presentation of the people and events of the scandal. It is the best single work on the scandal. Shaplen, too, however, was led astray by his assumption of Beecher's sole culpability; he, too, fails to read carefully enough certain evidence which might have led to a somewhat more complex interpretation of the motivations and social patterns involved. Still, his work is an invaluable study.²⁵

More recently, several scholars have begun to stress Beecher as an illuminating figure in the development of Victorian culture. Clifford E. Clark, in a 1971 article on Beecher's famous Lectures to Young Men, demonstrates Beecher's important role in secularizing Protestantism in the nineteenth century.²⁶ William G.

²⁵ Robert Shaplen, Free Love and Heavenly Sinners (New York 1954).

²⁶ Clifford E. Clark, "The Changing Nature of Protestantism in Mid-Nineteenth Century America: Henry Ward Beecher's Seven Lectures to Young Men," Journal of American History, v. LVII, no. 4 (March 1971), pp. 832-846.

McLoughlin, at about the same time, published The Meaning of Henry Ward Beecher, in which he resurrects Beecher as one of the most important representative figures of the entire century. With McLoughlin's opening statement, Beecher was restored to a place of serious consideration in American history:

Henry Ward Beecher is treated as something of a joke by most Americans and many history books. He is the classic example of a pompous ass who got caught off base. . . . This book is not an attempt to make Beecher appear a neglected hero of American history. But it does attempt to explain how and why such a man achieved such fame, popularity, and fortune in the half-century after 1840. . . . What is significant is what he said, why he said it, why so many people believed it, what it meant to them, and therefore why Beecher seemed to most middle-class, church-going Americans of his day a very important man.²⁷

This book probes Beecher's articulation of "the shifting values of mid-Victorian America," primarily through an analysis of his only novel, Norwood (1868). McLoughlin argues that here Beecher laid out his ideas in "orderly fashion" and the novel constitutes "whatever claim Beecher has to historical importance."²⁸ Thus

²⁷ William G. McLoughlin, The Meaning of Henry Ward Beecher (New York 1970), pp. ix, x.

²⁸ Ibid., p. xii.

McLoughlin sees Beecher's significance in his genius for articulating the values and thoughts of middle-class Americans in the mid-nineteenth century. He does not deal with the scandal, but his work is extremely helpful in illuminating Beecher's thought.

Paul Carter is the first historian to investigate in a serious way the fascination exhibited by millions of Americans with Beecher and the Brooklyn scandal. In his single chapter in The Spiritual Crisis of the Gilded Age (1971), Carter suggests the ways in which freedom threatened most morality-conscious Americans; their major concern, he says, was not with Beecher's pompous hypocrisy but with the obvious characteristics of his personality--the warm heartiness and vigor with which he enjoyed life. He was a man who enjoyed life with enthusiasm and passion. This freedom was far too frightening to Americans concerned about social and personal discipline in an emerging industrial society. They found titillating yet frightening, Beecher's indulgence in such socially destructive antics.²⁹

Carter's approach, however, is an intellectual one; Beecher and the scandal are treated symbolically. It may be useful to take such an approach, but not before the

²⁹Paul A. Carter, "God and Man in Brooklyn: The Reputation of Henry Ward Beecher," The Spiritual Crisis of the Gilded Age (DeKalb, Illinois 1971), pp. 109-132.

scandal and the people involved in it have been presented in all their unique complexity. This, then, is the intention of this study.

Historical Change in Personal Perspective:

The Tilton Marriage

Much has been written in recent years about the historical changes in the role and structure of the family. The old idea that actual family structure was transformed from extended to nuclear in the nineteenth century has been discredited by research showing the pervasiveness of the nuclear family before as well as during the colonial period. Beyond this structural similarity, however, it is undeniable that the internal dynamics of family relationships and ideals about family life changed radically during the nineteenth century. Earlier concepts of duty and responsibility were replaced by a spiritualized romantic love which was supposed to act as a defense against the debilitating intrusions of the outside world.³⁰

³⁰ Works on family history: Philippe Aries, Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life (New York 1962); John Demos, A Little Commonwealth: Family Life in Plymouth Colony (New York 1970); Michael Gordon, The American Family: Past, Present, and Future (New York 1978); Kirk Jeffrey, "The Family as Utopian Retreat from the City," Soundings, vol. 55 (1972), pp. 21-41; Peter Laslett, ed., Household and Family in Past Time (Cambridge, England, 1972); Edward Shorter, The Making of the

The radical shift from the function of the family as a "Little Commonwealth" which should extend and enforce the values of the larger community to a "haven" which protected its members from the temptations of an urban, competitive world has been well documented in sermons, novels, and private letters. Historians have successfully shown that this change in the role the family played in society did happen.³¹ What has been less often demonstrated is the process, on a personal level, of how and why it occurred. These are startling changes, after all, even on an aggregate social level; how much more startling, and confusing, must they have seemed to individuals caught up in what we can now see as a sweeping historical trend. How did these changes manifest themselves in the lives of people growing to maturity and marrying at mid-nineteenth century? What specific events and problems did they have to face and solve in new and unfamiliar ways? These are areas which need exploring before the larger, more abstract patterns may be fully understood.

The Tilton marriage offers a compelling case study not simply because ordinary marital difficulties brought

Modern Family (New York 1975); Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood 1820-1860," American Quarterly, vol. 18 (Summer 1966), pp. 151-174.

³¹Ibid.

about a national scandal, but because these rapidly changing family ideals led explicitly and directly, if unwittingly, to the scandal. Elizabeth and Theodore Tilton were intelligent, articulate, and often perceptive individuals. They formulated and expressed to each other their evolving ideas and anxieties about the tension between their "old" assumptions about marriage versus their "new" values. As we shall see, they explored fully what this meant for themselves, their parents, children, and friends. In discussing love, sex, and fidelity, they focused on the problems of involuntary return to old patterns they had explicitly rejected. They might be compared to modern couples who reject the traditional sex roles in marriage but continue, unwillingly, to act them out. Thus to understand the Tilttons is to understand changing cultural values through a set of unique personal problems. The dissolution of this marriage through adultery and the resultant notoriety do not negate the lessons to be learned. Indeed, the scandal enhances the value of the study for it brings into bolder relief the confusion in attitudes probably felt by many couples who were never called upon to articulate their feelings. The Tilttons' testimony at the trial and the testimony of friends, neighbors, and servants add a depth and color to the usually sketchy outline the historian has to work with when dealing with family and personal history. On the

shadowed stage of Victorian family history, the Beecher trial shines a bright spotlight on one family--thereby illuminating the very contours of nineteenth-century family dynamics.

Religious and Political Conflict
in the Scandal

Another aspect of the scandal which has been universally ignored in the literature is the religious and political conflict in which it was rooted and which it exacerbated. Paxton Hibben's biography of Henry Ward Beecher intriguingly suggested that political divisions existed in the trial of 1875--but then drops any further discussion of the nature of those divisions.³² Robert Shaplen assumes that Beecher was the spokesman for the wealthy, complacent, respectable residents of fashionable Brooklyn Heights.³³ Spurred on by these hints that the scandal represented more than conflicting values in the minds of all middle-class Americans, I wanted to determine if the patterns which emerged in the conflict over Beecher's guilt or innocence reflected more than personal whim or circumstance. The results suggest that the

³²Hibben, p. 276.

³³Shaplen, p. 38.

scandal and its response, indeed, reveal more than a lurid exposé of Victorian sexual hypocrisy.

The most obvious division between Beecher's supporters and opponents was religious ideology. Though Beecher was minister of a large Congregational church in Brooklyn Heights, his parishioners had long been proud of the non-sectarian character of his preaching. The minister scorned such fine dogmatic arguments as the method of baptism--he would baptize anybody any way they desired. "All denominations can claim him," enthused one contemporary, "for he is broad enough in his sympathies, and comprehensive enough in his sweep of the truth to afford a support for all."³⁴ Beecher was the most prominent spokesman in nineteenth-century America for liberal Christianity; any indictment of him threatened the validity of the liberal approach to Protestantism.

Beecher's parishioners perceived the charges against their pastor as charges against Plymouth Church, for they responded as though attacked--any dissension in the congregation over Beecher's possible doctrinal looseness disappeared as they closed ranks in almost unanimous support. This support could hardly have been due to personal friendship with the minister since there were about

³³A. McElroy Wylie, "Mr. Beecher as a Social Force," Scribner's Monthly (October 1872).

3,000 members of the church. Beecher himself admitted he barely knew or could even recognize most of the members.

By contrast, Beecher's opponents displayed an implacable hostility. The two orthodox Congregational churches in Brooklyn which persisted in demanding an investigation were unrelenting in their attempts to discredit Beecher. One of the ministers, Richard Salter Storrs, even threatened to change the denomination of his church to Presbyterian if Beecher and Plymouth Church were not expelled from the Congregational Association. Thus, Brooklynites perceived the scandal as more than a single instance of immorality; they considered it a threat to the institutional life of their community as well.

The second striking ideological division was in the arena of politics. Hibben's guess that political conflict shaped the trial was a shrewd one. Since the late 1860s there had been a reshuffling of political alignments in Brooklyn politics; older, simpler divisions between Republicans and Democrats had broken down into a scramble for power among factions. Reform wings of both parties had recently rebelled against the "bossism" rampant in the structures of both regular party "machines." The struggle for power between these factions had been

causing confusion, election fraud, and bitter confrontations in Brooklyn.

These patterns were reflected in the adultery trial. Theodore Tilton as well as his lawyers had been actively involved in the movement for political reform; Beecher's lawyers, on the contrary, were committed "regular" party politicians. Moreover, both local and national newspapers tended to reflect these political divisions in their editorial comments on the scandal. The scandal, then, was a crucial event in the political rivalry already raging in Brooklyn.

How can these striking religious and political divisions which emerged in the controversy over the scandal be explained? Why did reform politicians and orthodox Christians strive to have Beecher exposed and convicted of adultery, while regular politicians and liberal Christians insisted, just as tenaciously, on his acquittal? Why did it matter so much? In this study I will attempt to answer some of these questions by documenting some hitherto untold aspects of the scandal and demonstrating a link between it and social class and cultural conflict in the city of Brooklyn.

P A R T I

THE PERSONAL ROOTS OF SCANDAL:

A HUNGER FOR LOVE

C H A P T E R I I

THEODORE TILTON:

MAKING IT IN THE GILDED AGE

On October 2, 1855, Theodore Tilton and Elizabeth Richards were married by Henry Ward Beecher in Plymouth Church. At that time the minister was acquainted with the young couple in only the most cursory way. Theodore had joined the church two years before and had been active in the Sunday School while Elizabeth had been a schoolmate of Beecher's daughter. Not that Beecher had any reason to take particular note of the two young people; they were typical of the over 700 members of this rapidly growing church on Brooklyn Heights.

In eight years as minister of Plymouth Church, Beecher had established a reputation for attracting young people of unsophisticated rural backgrounds--and the Tiltons were no exception. Although both Theodore and Elizabeth had been born in New York City, their parents had migrated there from rural New Jersey. Both of their fathers were lower-middle-class artisans, Theodore's a shoemaker and Elizabeth's a jeweler. Both, however, had educational levels above that of their parents--Theodore had attended the Free Academy of New York and Elizabeth the Brooklyn Female Seminary. Although in 1855, he was

only an obscure reporter on the New York Observer, Tilton hoped to "make a name for himself and rise before the world."¹ Although his career may have proved unusually successful, Tilton's goals and attitudes as shaped by Plymouth Church and its pastor were to plant the seeds of marital unhappiness and eventually scandal. A step-by-step examination of his career is therefore essential.

At first glance Theodore Tilton's life, like many others in Plymouth Church, bears a striking resemblance to the Horatio Alger stories which became so popular in the late nineteenth century. Like Ragged Dick in one of the first Alger novels, Tilton seems to appear from nowhere, find a benefactor, join a Bible class, and begin a steady climb to success. However, as we shall see, Tilton's success was only the beginning, rather than the end, of his story.

On October 2, 1835, two years after his father Silas Tilton first appears in a New York City directory, Theodore Tilton was born. The family--of New England origins--had come from Monmouth County in New Jersey and

¹ET testimony, PCIC, Marshall, pp. 191-192. On the character of Plymouth Church see: Griswold, p. 28; and Noyes L. Thompson, The History of Plymouth Church (Henry Ward Beecher) 1847-1872 (New York 1873).

"was considered an old one."² Apparently Silas Tilton's shoemaking business proved profitable; many years later he retired to comfortable respectability in his native Monmouth County. His five brothers (Theodore's uncles) were not so fortunate; they remained itinerant artisans--blacksmiths, carpenters, and shoemakers--who wandered about doing odd jobs. According to a hostile account in the Brooklyn Eagle, they all had a reputation for drunkenness as well.³

During Tilton's boyhood, his father was converted from the Methodist Episcopal Church to the Baptist Church, of which he became a devoted and active member. With this background, it is unclear why Tilton attended an orthodox Presbyterian church. "I was brought up from childhood," he later testified, "in the Old School Presbyterian Church . . . my earliest religious bent was toward extreme Calvinism."⁴ Whatever the reason for the difference in churches, however, it is obvious that Tilton was as serious as his father in his religious attitudes, later referring to his youthful beliefs as "extreme and rigid."⁵

²New York City Directories, 1830-1840; "Solved--Is Insanity the Key to the Beecher Scandal?", Brooklyn Eagle, 1 August 1874, p. 1.

³Ibid.

⁴TT testimony, Trial, vol. I, pp. 456-457.

⁵Ibid.

I was accustomed to take, those dread and majestic views of life and of the future, the magnificence of God's greatness, the perfection of His purity, in comparison with which any human character was dwarfed and shriveled. All the early years of my life I spent very much--I was going to say--like a monk in a monastery. I was a religious ascetic. . . . I was brought up to the conviction that all men were miserable sinners.⁶

In expressing these views Tilton was representative of other parishioners at Plymouth Church, who invariably described their religious upbringing as "gloomy," "rigid," or "harsh." What people like this found so appealing in Henry Ward Beecher was his assurance that religion could be joyous, forgiving, and flexible. His "Gospel of Love" translated the nature of God's love from the judgmental love of a stern father to the unconditional love of a self-sacrificing mother.⁷ "Christ only can save you," Beecher cried, "because you are a sinner, not because you aren't one!"⁸ Tilton once said of the religious changes he experienced under Beecher's preaching, "I gave up a

⁶Ibid.

⁷For an analysis of the "Gospel of Love" see McLoughlin.

⁸Henry Ward Beecher (hereafter HWB), "Man's Accountability to God," 16 May 1847, in Thompson, pp. 29-57.

doctrine [Calvinism] that I could not understand."⁹

Whatever Calvinism had been at the time of its origin in Europe, two centuries in New England had shaped it into a set of doctrines which reflected the relatively static, agricultural society which flourished there. Predestination, original sin, election, all emphasized and reaffirmed the social ideals of stability, harmony, and deference to authority. But by the time Tilton's generation was growing up, the static social order reflected in Calvinism was being rapidly transformed by the Industrial Revolution into a fragmented, competitive society. The unprecedented religious ferment of the early nineteenth century was in part a reflection of the search for a set of religious beliefs which would explain and mitigate social and economic insecurity. Tilton, like others in Plymouth Church, was experiencing confusion over the discrepancy between the values of the past and the realities of the present. The strength of the Gospel of Love was its emphasis on observable realities rather than enshrined tradition.¹⁰

Tilton's introduction to Plymouth Church, which did so much to "soften" his early religious views, apparently

⁹TT testimony, Trial, vol. I, pp. 456-457.

¹⁰Clark, "The Changing Nature of Protestantism," Journal of American History, v. LVII, no. 4 (March 1971), pp. 832-846.

came about because of Elizabeth Richards, his future wife. At the age of ten he was introduced to her by a schoolmate. Elizabeth was a small, dark-eyed brunette, whose seriousness and piety matched Theodore's and they quickly became inseparable. When in 1850, Elizabeth's widowed mother moved the family across the river to New York's newest suburb, Brooklyn, Tilton became a frequent visitor. The same year--1851--that Elizabeth and Theodore became engaged, the Richards family officially joined Plymouth Church. Undoubtedly, Tilton's visits across the river had included Sunday services at Elizabeth's church, for by 1853, he himself became a member. Church records indicate that both young people were active and enthusiastic members of the church; they taught Sunday School and served on several committees.¹¹

Sometime during his youth, Tilton committed himself to the anti-slavery crusade. Just how or why he became interested in this cause remains a mystery, but it unquestionably was the major focus of his early life. In fact, Tilton was more than an anti-slavery man, he was among the small minority of abolitionists. Association with Plymouth Church intensified this commitment to

¹¹Plymouth Church, Brooklyn, Book #21, Minutes, Baptisms, Admissions, May 8, 1847 to December 8, 1865.

abolitionism while at the same time encouraging a rejection of traditional orthodox Christianity.

These views [anti-slavery] were taught us in Plymouth Church. . . . We all despised the slaveholding Christianity of that day; we were all of one mind concerning it. Mr. Beecher preached against it.¹²

Tilton's association with Plymouth Church, however, did far more for him than simply provide philosophical and social support for his liberalizing religious ideas and anti-slavery principles. It was of direct economic benefit as well. Shortly after Tilton joined the church in November 1853, he was forced, probably by economic necessity, to leave the Free Academy of New York. It was only a short time until his graduation in the spring of 1854 but apparently his father could no longer support him. He took a job working for a religious newspaper, the New York Observer, where his major assignment was to report stenographically the sermons of Henry Ward Beecher.¹³

Soon after Tilton was married, however, several members of the church appear to have been instrumental in locating him in a position which led directly to his

¹²TT testimony, Trial, vol. I, pp. 458-459.

¹³Marshall, pp. 93-100.

later success as editor of the leading religious journal in the country, the Independent.¹⁴ This initial influence, however, did not come from Beecher. The size of Plymouth Church was already such that most of its members were not personally acquainted with their minister. Though Tilton admired Beecher the two men did not become friends until 1861.¹⁵ This earlier influence on Tilton's behalf probably came from Joseph Richards, Elizabeth's brother, who was the publisher of the Independent, or from Daniel Burgess, another church member. Perhaps both men persuaded Henry Bowen, the owner of the paper, to give Tilton a chance. Thus, Tilton owed his opportunity to work as a clerk on the Independent to his wife's family and to Plymouth Church.

Here again, Tilton's experience was typical. In many cases Plymouth Church functioned as a medium for business and social contacts. Beecher recognized the need for his members, most of whom were newcomers to the city, to establish relationships which would help them secure jobs as well as find friends.¹⁶ He emphasized social gatherings to a greater degree than most other ministers

¹⁴For a history of the Independent, see: Frank Luther Mott, A History of American Magazines, 3 vols. (New York 1938), vol. 2, pp. 367-379.

¹⁵HWB testimony, Trial, vol. II, p. 735.

¹⁶Griswold, p. 21.

in Brooklyn. These parishioners found in Plymouth Church a social environment, as well as a religious orientation, which enabled them to deal with the practical difficulties of getting ahead in the city.

It was not long, however, before Theodore Tilton proved his capabilities to Henry Bowen. As a colleague on the paper later observed, he soon became a favorite of Bowen, with his "epigrammatic and yet somewhat poetical style."¹⁷ Moreover, it was obvious to Bowen that Elizabeth's assessment of her husband as a "pretty hard worker" was true; Tilton worked day and night at the office.¹⁸ At this point in his life, Tilton's ambition and intense devotion to anti-slavery were highly compatible. The fervor and sincerity which he displayed in religious and anti-slavery articles enhanced his vivid literary style and brought recognition from Bowen.

As yet, however, he had no public recognition since he was not important enough to write signed articles or editorials. When his articles were signed, it was with the name of someone else--the name, in fact, of Henry Ward Beecher. Beecher, unlike the hard-working Tilton, was notorious for the slowness and inefficiency with which he

¹⁷William Hayes Ward, "Sixty Years of the Independent," Independent, LXV, no. 3132 (December 10, 1908), p. 1347.

¹⁸ET testimony, PCIC, Marshall, p. 190.

worked. Writing was especially difficult for him and articles which he had promised to contribute were often never delivered. Because many people bought the paper to read Beecher pieces, these lapses were a constant source of friction between Bowen and Beecher. But the owner did find a way to remedy the situation. Discovering Tilton's knack for imitating Beecher's style, he contracted with Tilton to "ghost-write" the popular Beecher articles. Between 1856 and 1860, Tilton authored at least thirty Beecher columns.¹⁹

Tilton's real break came in 1861. In that year the Independent went through a crisis which threatened its very survival. Because the owner's other business--a dry goods firm--went bankrupt, the paper was also placed in grave financial danger. The crisis engendered disputes between the three editors and Bowen, resulting in the resignations of all three.²⁰ Bowen hoped to save the paper by making Henry Ward Beecher the editor; the minister's name alone could be counted upon to increase the circulation. But Bowen also knew that Beecher, notwithstanding his promises, would not devote enough time and attention to the paper. His solution was a shrewd one. He invited Beecher to be the editor, but assured him that

¹⁹TT to Henry C. Bowen, 5 January 1860, Beecher Collection, Box 1, Library of Congress.

²⁰Ward, pp. 1347-1348.

Theodore Tilton would do all the work.²¹ This arrangement pleased everyone. Bowen's paper not only survived but prospered, Beecher had the rewards but not the work, and Tilton was promoted to assistant editor.

Although this promotion did not raise Tilton's salary significantly, there were other rewards. As assistant editor he had to work closely with Beecher, a man he had admired and emulated for a great many years, and with whom he now developed something like a father-son relationship. Tilton later was to say that he had been "dazzled" by Beecher whom he came to love "as he had no other man."²² Besides their work together, the two spent hours in intimate conversation, on long walks, and visits to shops and galleries.²³ Tilton had every reason to be proud; at the age of twenty-six he was the assistant editor of a nationally circulated religious newspaper and the closest friend of the greatest minister in the country. Further, he had the opportunity to meet and correspond with established reformers and intellectuals. William Lloyd Garrison, Charles Sumner, Lydia Maria Child, Salmon P. Chase, and Anna Dickinson were suddenly part of

²¹HWB testimony, Trial, vol. II, p. 735.

²²TT to ET, 2 December 1866, Trial, vol. I, p. 503.

²³HWB testimony, PCIC, Marshall, p. 256.

his circle, visiting his home whenever they were in Brooklyn. Trips to Washington and Philadelphia, where he delivered political addresses, were frequent. His influence grew rapidly.

In 1864 Beecher resigned as editor of the Independent with the stipulation that his friend would become the chief editor. Finally, the young editor would have the recognition of the public as well as the inner circle. Bowen was only too happy to comply with Beecher's parting request since Tilton's colorful, sometimes vitriolic prose had steadily increased circulation.

Suddenly, all kinds of possibilities opened up for Tilton. Although his salary as editor increased only moderately, his fame and visibility would allow him to make additional income by embarking on the flourishing lecture circuit. Between 1864 and 1872 Tilton spent three or four months a year on tour. His fame at times approached Beecher's and his growing confidence in his own powers was demonstrated in August 1866 when Beecher issued a statement--the Cleveland letter--taking a moderate stand on Reconstruction and supporting the unpopular Andrew Johnson. In an editorial, Tilton attacked Beecher and challenged his authority to speak for the Independent or the Republican Party. Castigated, Beecher backed down and

apologized for his statement; Tilton had won his point and proven his influence.²⁴

Tilton made the Independent into one of the leading organs of the radical Reconstructionists and according to his biographer, was the first "important" abolitionist to call for the impeachment of Andrew Johnson.²⁵ His extremely effective political writing so impressed Henry Bowen that he asked Tilton to become editor of another Bowen-owned paper, the Brooklyn Union. At the same time, Tilton, who had been involved in the women's rights movement since 1866, became president of a suffrage group. As a colleague at the Independent put it, Tilton "was in the heyday of his fame," and possessed "a large knowledge of men and things, and absolute confidence in himself."²⁶ There seemed no limit to what Theodore Tilton could accomplish.

²⁴For Theodore Tilton's public career, see: Ward, pp. 1345-1351; Eugene Benson, "New York Journalists: Theodore Tilton," Galaxy (September 1869), pp. 355-359; L. P. Brockett, Men of Our Day (New York 1868), pp. 612-618; Edwin Terry, "Theodore Tilton as Social Reformer, Radical Republican, Newspaper Editor, 1863-1872" (Ph.D. dissertation, St. John's University, 1971); Sharon Ann Carroll, "Elitism and Reform: Some Anti-Slavery Opinion-Makers in the Era of Civil War and Reconstruction" (Ph.D. dissertation, Cornell, 1970).

²⁵Terry, p. 73.

²⁶Ward, p. 1347.

In the Alger novels, the attainment of success and respectability is always accompanied by a steadiness and peace of mind, a kind of ordering and integration of the young man's life which had been absent previously. For Theodore Tilton, however (and, one suspects, for many of the rising young men of Brooklyn and New York), this dramatic rise to fame did not have such a result. For during the same years that Tilton was enjoying his greatest popularity, anxiety and depression grievously undermined that part of his life hidden from the public--his marriage. It is in Tilton's treatment of Elizabeth which reveals most vividly the personal cost exacted by the urban competitive world.

For Tilton, as well as other young men, climbing the ladder not only implied involvement with a new social set, but it was often coupled with the need to reject past friendships and family ties. One of Tilton's homesick fellow parishioners--a man from Burlington, Vermont--for example, urged his father to visit Brooklyn, only to experience acute distress at his father's unsophisticated and crude manners when they attended the opera.²⁷

This parishioner and others with similar experiences must have been comforted by Henry Ward Beecher's

²⁷ Robert D. Benedict to Stephen Hitchcock, 4 December 1850, William Page Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

assurances that it was "natural" to feel embarrassed in such a situation. There was no need to feel guilty, according to Beecher. After all, the ties of blood do not always represent the "highest" human relationships, Beecher insisted; these, in fact, should be based on what he termed "moral affinity." "Jesus," he claimed, "felt instantly that there were affinities and relationships far higher and wider than those constituted by the earthly necessities of family life."²⁸ To Beecher, institutions such as the family were only "physical" or "mechanical" and were of a much lower order than relationships formed by "like natures in a high moral sphere."²⁹ The family, according to this view, represented the very lowest kind of "mechanical" coercion; "we cannot choose who shall be our companions in the cradle . . . whether they are suitable or not, they are our brothers, they are our sisters."³⁰ As we shall see, Beecher had good reason in his experience to reject his own father as unsuitable, but the important point is that this concept completely reversed the older social values of Calvinist theology

²⁸HWB, "Moral Affinity the Ground of True Unity," 6 December 1868, The Plymouth Pulpit: Sermons Preached in Plymouth Church, Brooklyn, New York, 19 vols. (New York 1894), vol. 1, p. 285.

²⁹Ibid., p. 289.

³⁰Ibid., p. 286.

which stressed the loyalty and duty owed to family, church, and community.

For people like Tilton, Beecher's doctrine of moral affinity could be used to rationalize the social and economic mobility they were experiencing. Individuals striving to improve their status could reject their original social bonds as of the "lower mechanical" order, rooted in "mere contiguity" and "bare juxtaposition."³¹ Rather than simply admit that they aspired to enter a higher social class, they could argue that their natural "affinity" lay with people of that class instead of with their original group. Indeed, this was really the essence of the Gospel of Love, for this inexplicable and mysterious "affinity" was the basis for the love that Beecher thought should govern all types of human relationships.

But when one attempted to replace duty and responsibility with "affinity," psychological tensions could easily be created, and once again, Theodore Tilton is a remarkable example of the difficulties encountered in such a situation. For Tilton, in fact, the seeds of marital discord were planted when he began to perceive that his "affinities" lay with a different intellectual and social class from that of his wife and her family. His own parents remained in New York City and he did not have to

³¹Ibid., p. 285.

see them often or introduce his friends to them. But as a youth he had been more often in the Richards household than his own--and after he and Elizabeth were married, they boarded with Elizabeth's mother. The boardinghouse was located on Harrison Avenue in the Sixth Ward of Brooklyn--not a part of the more fashionable Brooklyn Heights (see map on page 229). The other boarders and neighbors were similar to the parents of Theodore and Elizabeth--small merchants, clerks, carpenters, stonecutters. Many of the members of Plymouth Church lived close by and the couple's social life centered around this group. Elizabeth later recalled that for the first five years of their marriage, she and her husband shared all their activities and friends in common.³²

Elizabeth's family, in fact, had done much for their son-in-law; they had accepted him into their household, encouraged his ambition, and helped him get a better job. However, when Tilton began to fulfill his ambition to "make a name for himself" and in the process acquire friends and colleagues of higher social standing--Elizabeth called them "public" men and women--he was caught in a dilemma. He was embarrassed to bring his new friends to the boardinghouse to meet his unsophisticated

³²ET testimony, PCIC, Marshall, p. 191.

family--country folk who in appearance and language had not acquired the urbanity of city life. Not interested in the great issues of the day--such as anti-slavery and other reform movements--they concentrated on making a living and, as Theodore put it, "chattering" endlessly about the petty details of their lives. Contrasted with the likes of Charles Sumner and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Tilton suddenly found his family "boring" and "distressing."³³ In Beecher's terms, Theodore's true affinity lay not with his family but with his new colleagues.

Withdrawing from Elizabeth's family and his former social activities at Plymouth Church, Tilton built himself a new social and intellectual framework focused around the issues of abolition and Reconstruction.³⁴ When in Boston, Washington, or Philadelphia making speeches for these causes, Tilton associated with these "public" people. He essentially constructed his identity around his accomplishments as a writer and reformer. The principle of anti-slavery which united them created a supportive community which sustained Tilton in the face of dissatisfaction with his home life.

³³Ibid., p. 192.

³⁴HWB testimony, Trial, vol. II, p. 740.

Meanwhile, attempting to lower his level of frustration at home, in the spring of 1860, Tilton rented a house for himself and Elizabeth on Oxford Street in a somewhat better section of Brooklyn. Here the couple remained for three years, but this solution ultimately failed, partly because Tilton was not yet making enough money to afford a house, and partly because Elizabeth was unhappy about being separated from her family. By 1863 they moved back to the boardinghouse.³⁵

From Theodore's perspective, the next three years were the worst yet. During this period, as we have seen, he became editor-in-chief of the Independent and the closest friend of Henry Ward Beecher; his reputation as editor, lecturer, and reformer grew; and he was accepted as an important influence in national affairs. Still, he was not living like the important figure he had become! Tilton's distress waxed more and more acute as time went on. More and more the young editor blamed Elizabeth's family. "My life has been marred," he chided his wife, "by social influences coming from your mother."³⁶

Finally, however, in 1866, with earnings from his lecture tours, Tilton was able to afford a house on the

³⁵ET testimony, PCIC, Marshall, p. 189.

³⁶TT to ET, 31 July 1865, Chicago Tribune (hereafter CT), 13 August 1874.

Heights which reflected his higher social status. Here the young editor satisfied two of his basic desires: he escaped from the "mildew"--as he called it--of the boardinghouse, and he could entertain his friends in style. Proud of his fashionable three-story brownstone "establishment" with its complement of hired servants, Tilton anxiously began to urge his fellow intellectuals to visit as frequently as possible.³⁷ Horace Greeley was to have a room of his own on the second floor with a desk and the particular kind of ink he liked. Henry Ward Beecher was repeatedly invited to make the Tilton house a second home. Tilton also demanded that finest food be provided and that the house be furnished lavishly. He ordered a series of paintings by the well known artist William Page to grace the walls. (Among the figures he commissioned Page to paint were Beecher, Greeley, and Sumner!) He instructed Elizabeth to cultivate friendships with these people and to spare no expense to make them comfortable. And, of course, he hoped that his wife and children would reflect his success as well. "Spend all the money you need to make yourself comfortable," Theodore instructed Elizabeth in 1865, "don't fail to ride out plentifully--never mind the cost."³⁸

³⁷TT to ET, 31 July 1865, CT.

³⁸Ibid.

This final step in Tilton's upward climb was, ironically, the one which laid the groundwork for the scandal, the dissolution of his marriage, and the ruin of his career. Now more intensely than ever before, the young editor had to wrestle with the increasing problems created by his success. He had effectively separated himself from the larger family, but his wife remained a continuing embarrassment. On one level, Theodore recognized that Elizabeth was essentially a victim of his changing expectations. In fact, Theodore agreed with everyone who knew her that Elizabeth was a devoted mother; a loving wife; and a sympathetic, generous, and intelligent woman. A maid in the Tilton household testified that on numerous occasions, Theodore asked his wife to criticize articles he had written before they went to press. And Tilton once told a friend of the family that "Elizabeth was undervalued in her intellectual character, she was so domestic and so quiet; but that she was the finest critic he had ever had."³⁹

Yet, as his own social status rose, Theodore became increasingly dissatisfied with Elizabeth's public demeanor and conduct. His problem seems to have had more to do with what Elizabeth was not than with what she was. Affection, honesty, and sympathy could not make up for her

³⁹Sarah Putnam testimony, Trial, vol. II, p. 154.

inability to measure up socially to Theodore's new circle. To a friend Tilton summed up his complaints this way: Elizabeth was a "small woman, without presence, without port [deportment], not a woman of society, not a woman of culture." This same friend also reported Tilton's regrets that "he had married her young, and that he had grown and developed, and that she had not, and that there was a disparity between them."⁴⁰ In this same vein, another friend criticized Theodore for "disparaging" Elizabeth many times for "using the English language incorrectly."⁴¹ Elizabeth herself later described two incidents which proved upsetting:

I will tell you a little incident to explain this feeling in regard to my personal appearance (my presence was always mean, I know): I had often been invited to go with him to meet his friends, and very much against my will, I have gone; I never could appear as a lady; of course, I never could dress as other ladies did; that was not my taste; and when I have been there with them, going at his own desire, he has turned around to me and said, "I would give \$500 if you were not by my side," meaning that I was so insignificant that he was ashamed of me . . . he seemed unwilling that I should be as the Lord made me . . . one occasion I

⁴⁰ Samuel Wilkeson testimony, Trial, vol. II, p. 302.

⁴¹ Isabella Oakley testimony, Trial, vol. II, p. 245. Also Bessie Turner testimony, Trial, vol. II, p. 467.

remember very well; there was a large company of friends at our house; they were all his friends--a gathering of woman's rights people--and he particularly requested me not to come near him that night; it was very evident to me that he did not want comparisons made between us . . . it hurt me very much to know it.⁴²

It may have hurt Elizabeth to know that Theodore was ashamed of her, but only, it would seem, because it made him discontent. For herself, the unsophisticated lifestyle in which she had been raised remained satisfactory; dressing as other ladies did, she pointedly notes, was not to her "taste." In fact, upon reflection, Elizabeth concluded that the root of her difficulties with Theodore was her easy acceptance of "persons that he would find it a perfect bore to talk with."⁴³

That was a great annoyance to Mr. Tilton, and he said I gathered about me the most distressing sort of people, and he frequently had to go away; many persons that were pleasant to me were repulsive to him.⁴⁴

Most of these "distressing" people were former friends of Theodore's from Plymouth Church with whom Elizabeth

⁴²ET testimony, PCIC, Marshall, p. 198.

⁴³Ibid., p. 191.

⁴⁴Ibid.

continued to associate after the move to the new house; this enraged Theodore and he angrily ordered Elizabeth not to encourage their visits. They embarrassed him. Elizabeth, unfortunately for their marriage, did not share Theodore's sensitivity to issues of social class.

If Theodore's only source of dissatisfaction had been his wife's social ineptitude, he might have been able to deal with it in a less dramatic and violent fashion. But, after the move to the new house in 1866, other circumstances combined to intensify his anxiety. After the move, Elizabeth confirmed, Theodore "spent a great deal of his time at home in moods of dissatisfaction with the surroundings, yearning and wanting other ministrations; there was nothing in our home that satisfied him."⁴⁵ This change in behavior was observed by a maid who had been with the family since 1864. "He was at times kindly, and at times very unkindly," she said, "he would be very restless, and walk about the house with his hands in his pockets, and look very sullen; and he would seem to make everybody around him feel unhappy."⁴⁶ Theodore himself in 1866 admitted to a family friend that he regretted his

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 190.

⁴⁶ Bessie Turner testimony, Trial, vol. II, p. 466.

moods, recognizing that they made life difficult for everyone, but they were "beyond his control."⁴⁷

Drawing on his own experience, Henry Ward Beecher contended that it was natural for young men to be beset with doubt, confusion, and anxiety. Especially higher "sensitive" natures, he told his congregation in 1868, could not help but be tormented by the "passions whirling within"--passions created by intense ambition in an insecure world.⁴⁸ Tilton himself, however, did not comprehend why he was afflicted with such a volatile temperament; he speculated that his depressive periods were the "moods of genius . . . it was the penalty that genius had to pay."⁴⁹ Notwithstanding this theory--and history has not proven Theodore Tilton a genius--these mood swings can be traced, through the voluminous letters he wrote between 1866 and 1872, to a deep sense of economic, professional, and personal insecurity.

First, economic pressures increased significantly with the purchase of the new house. All of the lecture-tour earnings were required to pay the mortgage and keep it functioning. In 1868, three years after obtaining the

⁴⁷ Sarah Putnam testimony, Trial, vol. II, p. 161.

⁴⁸ HWB, "The Strong to Bear with the Weak," 25 October 1868, The Plymouth Pulpit, vol. 1, p. 122.

⁴⁹ Sarah Putnam testimony, Trial, vol. II, p. 161.

mortgage, he wrote to Elizabeth, "At the beginning I did not understand the magnitude of the task which I had undertaken. To start out on a pilgrimage for the raising of \$20,000 looked like an easier thing than it proved to be."⁵⁰ "Every cent of the money with which I am paying for my house has cost me a throb of my pulse, and heart and brain."⁵¹ This situation created a conflict between Tilton's desire for the rewards of his climb up the social ladder and his distaste for money-grubbing. "I don't believe in squandering one's life in fortune seeking," he complained, "I have not dedicated my life to . . . buy, sell, and get gain."⁵²

The tension led to an ambivalence in attitudes toward money which baffled Elizabeth. While insisting that everything in the house be of the finest quality, Tilton continually upbraided his wife for spending above her budget. A servant confirmed that his ambivalence became more striking after the move to the new house.⁵³ He was, she said, "very fastidious, very difficult to please," and that he would shut himself in a locked room with

⁵⁰TT to ET, 1 March 1868, CT.

⁵¹Ibid.

⁵²TT to ET, 17 December 1866, CT.

⁵³Bessie Turner testimony, PCIC, Marshall, p. 391; and Trial, vol. II, p. 466.

Elizabeth where, in a loud voice, he berated her management of the household.⁵⁴

This fear of losing his economic gains was a continuing theme of Tilton's letters home. His travels gave him the opportunity to observe the fluctuations in fortunes of those who speculated in the expansive economy of post-Civil War America. Recounting stories of men who had diligently built comfortable fortunes only to have them wiped out by flood, fire, or depression in the economic cycle, Tilton expressed his apprehension.

"Mr. G-- once told me," he wrote in 1868, "that he was worth a million dollars! Now his wife is a beggar! What a world this is for doing and undoing--for crowning and discrowning!"⁵⁵ In this era of American history this fear had a basis in reality, especially for people like Tilton whose marginal status made them particularly vulnerable to ups and downs in the economic cycle. They had no savings to provide a cushion.

Ever since last October I have been lecturing every week--sometimes every night, and the proceeds have all been swallowed up in my extravagant debts. . . . Not one penny of all my lecture earnings for years has ever yet gone into a bank.⁵⁶

⁵⁴Ibid., Trial, vol. II, p. 533.

⁵⁵TT to ET, 1 March 1868, CT.

⁵⁶TT to ET, 15 January 1869, CT.

For upwardly mobile men like Tilton, the realistic fear that money and status could be lost as quickly and mysteriously as they had been acquired caused constant anxiety. Henry Ward Beecher, in fact, was quick to realize that Tilton's fear and depression were not unique; one of the recurrent themes of his preaching was this fear of loss, not simply of money, but of the social position and reputation that accompanied it. In a sermon in 1868 Beecher sympathized with those who experienced, along with Tilton, "the awful fear--no not of being engulfed in poverty, but of exposure; the dread of shame; the horror of disgrace."⁵⁷ Perhaps what Tilton and Beecher were both wrestling with, without admitting it outright, was that money had become the measure of a man's worth.

Second, insecurity in Tilton's professional life seemed rooted in a loss of purpose. He described it this way:

I became editor of the Independent when I was quite young, and my hands were immediately filled with public questions--the anti-slavery movement, the prosecution of the war, the reconstruction of the Union. . . . But, when slavery was abolished and the war was over, and my occupation, in a certain sense, was gone. . . .⁵⁸

⁵⁷HWB, "Love of Money," 22 November 1868, Plymouth Pulpit, vol. 1, pp. 251-252.

⁵⁸TT testimony, Trial, vol. I, p. 629.

Tilton had spent all of his adult life as a crusader; the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment in 1870 seemed to resolve all the issues he had fought so hard for and to create a void in his professional life. True, there were other reform issues which attracted his attention-- political corruption and women's rights, for example, but these simply could not command the zeal and dedication that he had poured into the anti-slavery movement. When Tilton could no longer define himself as an abolitionist or a radical, the crucial elements in his identity were disrupted. His yearly lecture tours, primarily dedicated to raising money for himself, seemed tawdry compared to his previous goals.

Moreover, the lecture tours gave him enforced leisure time in isolation from not only his family, but worse, the circle of journalists and reformers who had given his existence meaning. He wrote to Elizabeth that in contrast to his days of crusading in Washington, the lecture circuit was interminably boring. "I do nothing all day," he wrote, "but sit either in a car or a hotel, and wait for the evening."⁵⁹ As a result, he complained, "I am driven nowadays to live much in the imagination."⁶⁰ This enforced introspection led the editor to some dismal

⁵⁹TT to ET, 23 March 1866, CT.

⁶⁰TT to ET, 27 January 1866, CT.

conclusions about his accomplishments and his career.

"I have always been earnest and straightforward," he acknowledged, "but always too much in the interest of myself."⁶¹

These two areas of anxiety--economic instability and loss of "occupation"--along with the young man's sense of social isolation created a void in his life which was both new and frightening. All during the winter of 1866-1867, Tilton utilized his solitude for what he referred to as his "winter of meditation."⁶² "Of late," Theodore wrote to Elizabeth, "I have been thinking much of my own life . . . endeavoring to ascertain what are my earthly ambitions, to struggle with them and to conquer them."⁶³ Though it seemed to Tilton's friends and colleagues that his hard work and dedication to principle proved him a model of honesty and selflessness, the young man himself now denigrated his previous activities. "I am a weak man, supposed to be strong; a selfish man, supposed to be the world's lover and helper; an earthly

⁶¹TT to ET, 1 December 1866, CT.

⁶²TT to ET, 1 February 1867, CT.

⁶³TT to ET, 6 December 1866, Trial, vol. I, p. 503.

mindful man, supposed to be more Christian than my fellows. I cannot endure the mockery--it breeds agony in me."⁶⁴

Tilton's problems in justifying his values were those of many newly urbanized middle-class Americans in the Gilded Age--the very people who responded so warmly to Henry Ward Beecher. As Tilton had discovered, survival in Brooklyn necessitated attention to aggressive "money getting," often at the expense of others. Selflessness was the ideal, but self-interest the reality for those hoping to make it. In fact, Henry Ward Beecher frequently preached that aggressive self-interest was absolutely necessary for survival. But, of course, the Calvinist values with which his parishioners had grown up labeled such self-interest evil and socially disruptive. So, Beecher, from his pulpit, encouraged the young men of his congregation to develop their own self-interest. He argued that the "profit" motive would do no harm, and "thoughts of personal interest are not wrong," as "Godliness" should be profitable. He urged his parishioners to pursue self-interest with "strength of purpose."⁶⁵ Yet notwithstanding Beecher's justification of self-interest

⁶⁴TT to ET, 6 December 1866, Trial, vol. I, p. 494.

⁶⁵HWB, "Motives of Action," 20 November 1872, Plymouth Pulpit, vol. 2, p. 212.

and money-making, Tilton could not rid himself of strong negative feelings toward this kind of motivation.

Economic and professional anxiety combined with isolation from family and community produced an excruciating loneliness new to Tilton. In a letter to Elizabeth he touched on the key to the problem. "I am passing daily through multitudes of strangers," he complained, "who glide among one another without mutual recognition or mutual interest in each other's welfare."⁶⁶ The anonymity and sense of isolation which plagued many newcomers to Brooklyn and New York had caught up with Theodore Tilton. The apparent result of this gloomy "winter of meditation" was that Theodore had affairs with one or more women. Immediately guilty, his moral lapse came to be the focus of an accumulating disillusionment with his own character. "In most of us," he lamented, "innocence or guilt depends more on the measure of our temptation than on the measure of our virtue. Many a strong man is conquered and falls, while many a weak man escapes because unattacked."⁶⁷

⁶⁶TT to ET, 9 January 1865, CT.

⁶⁷Theodore's infidelity appears to have taken place between December 27, 1866 and December 31, 1866 in Dubuque, or Clinton, Iowa. There are numerous fragments of evidence for this but one particular letter seems the most obvious. Over two years later, when Elizabeth knew of the affair, Theodore returned to Clinton, Iowa, and on February 20, 1868, wrote Elizabeth: ". . . the old fragrance has gone out of the 'prairie rose'! The flower is still comely, interesting, and agreeable, but I marvel at

Clearly, Tilton was convinced that he up until that point, had been the "weak" man who escaped simply because of a lack of temptation.

Again, Tilton's dilemma was a common one which Beecher had preached about on numerous occasions: the dangers and temptations which beset every young man when he left his home and community. When the watchful eyes of parents and neighbors were removed, so were the external restraints which guided as well as curbed the individual's behavior. The young man, Beecher said, was bound to surrender to temptation and make mistakes--this was what he called "intoxication with liberty."⁶⁸ As Beecher put it, "men . . . that begin to feel their freedom, are like birds that have been long in a cage . . . and the first thing when the door is left open . . . they fly out, and fly to their peril."⁶⁹ Beecher insisted, however, that through these mistakes, a young man would learn self-control; in short, he would, as a result of this

myself for once thinking it so fragrant above all the rest of the garden. It is gone forever! It can never be to me henceforth anything but a common flower. This figure of speech is a mystery which I think you will understand. . . . Faithfully yours--That word 'faithfully' means a great deal." TT to ET, 4 January 1867, CT.

⁶⁸HWB, "The Strong to Bear with the Weak," 25 October 1868, Plymouth Pulpit, vol. 1, p. 122.

⁶⁹Ibid.

trial-and-error process, learn to internalize the values formerly imposed on him by an ever-present family and community.

Tilton's problems were rooted in the rapid fading of familiar contours by which he might define his behavior and even his identity. The religion in which he had been raised had been replaced by the evangelical causes of abolition and radical Reconstruction--but now these were at an end. When Elizabeth later theorized that her husband's "morbid" state of mind in this period was a result of his rejection of traditional religious beliefs, she was not far from wrong--for these older beliefs represented a social milieu for which, as yet, Theodore had found no replacement.

In his visits to Tilton's wife, Beecher consoled her by reassuring her that Theodore was simply going through a transitional state of confusion and doubt common to all "sensitive" natures. It was consistent, he said, with his own model for human development which--adopting the new Darwinian vocabulary--he labeled "moral evolution." Man was in the lowest possible moral state when he defined his conduct simply by mindlessly obeying unexamined rules--the rigid doctrines of Calvinism in which Tilton had been raised, for example. The next higher state was rooted in moral and ethical beliefs which were personally chosen. Tilton's abolitionist and reform

principles were an example. But, the "highest" of all was the state in which each man possessed such a strong internal sense of identity and worth that no external moral or institutional coercion was necessary. The young editor, Beecher thought, would soon get over his confusion and enter a "higher sphere," where freedom and confidence went hand in hand.⁷⁰

Tilton's transition from one level to another, however, was not proving to be a smooth one. The seemingly sudden disappearance of external guidelines left him with no goals in life except money-making, his own social advancement, and a faltering marriage. The first two appeared unworthy goals by which to define his identity and shape his character, so after 1866, the marriage which had retarded him socially and the wife who annoyed him became the primary focus of Tilton's thoughts and ideals. No longer would his public career define his character; henceforth this would be determined by the "purity" of his family life. Tilton had turned the whole focus of his life inward. In a speech delivered at the disbanding of the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1870, Tilton revealed the idealistic basis for the internal struggle

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 116.

ahead: "How pure," he cried, "must be the one who seeks to rebuke a nation for its sins!"⁷¹

This struggle for internal purity, juxtaposed with his continuing efforts to maintain his gains in social standing, were to combine in a manner which would alter his marriage, produce a scandal, and sharpen the lines of social conflict in Brooklyn. Ironically, Henry Ward Beecher--ever fond of theatrics--who had set the stage and written the script, was also to play the leading role in Theodore Tilton's passion play.

⁷¹TT, Speech before the American Anti-Slavery Society, April 1870, quoted in Terry, p. 130.

C H A P T E R I I I

ELIZABETH TILTON:

THE TRANSFORMATION OF MARRIAGE

If Theodore Tilton was typical of the hundreds of young men in Beecher's congregation, illustrating their struggles to adjust their values to the necessities of urban competitiveness, Elizabeth Richards Tilton can easily serve the same purpose for the women of Beecher's congregation. Although Beecher was best known for his ability to attract large numbers of young men, women still made up fifty-eight percent of the membership.¹ Newly urbanized middle-class women of the mid-nineteenth century, like their male counterparts, had some very dramatic adjustments to make and Henry Ward Beecher had something to say to them as well. Beecher was one of the many spokesmen for a developing view of the spiritual sphere of home and woman's priestess-like role within it. The difference between the oppressive "mechanical" family Beecher so disparaged in his remarkable sermon on "moral affinity" and the spiritual haven he advocated so often was, of course, the quality of the bonds which held it

¹This figure computed from Plymouth Church Records, Register of Members, Book #38, Plymouth Church Library, Brooklyn, New York.

together. Simply being born into a particular family meant little--it could be characterized as "mere contiguity." "It is," he insisted, "the mother's and father's heart that makes the family dear."²

It was not enough, according to Beecher, for parents to provide the basics of existence to their children; they had the responsibility to develop an "affinity" with each child which would ensure its purity and virtue as an adult. Enforcing strict rules might even be a mistake; parents should rather strive for a spiritual nobility which would inspire the child. Given the necessity for men to be involved in what Beecher termed the "swinish herd" of the outside world, women must preserve the nobler virtues for their husbands and children.³ "It will not be the men," Beecher hastened to assure his women parishioners, "that shall stand highest in the world to come."⁴

In the broadest possible terms, the nineteenth century witnessed the transformation of marriage from a contractual arrangement which extended the community's authority into a virtuous "haven" from a threatening

²HWB, "Moral Affinity the Ground of True Unity," 6 December 1868, Plymouth Pulpit, vol. 1, p. 285.

³HWB, "Love of Money," 22 November 1868, Plymouth Pulpit, vol. 1, p. 235; and "Moral Affinity," p. 304.

⁴HWB, "Moral Affinity," p. 305.

disordered society.⁵ If men now had to develop internal controls to protect them from the temptations facing them in the world of work, women came to represent the innocence, purity, and simplicity which had been lost to society as a whole.⁶ It was this expectation of Christ-like perfection, coupled with the actual social reality of isolation and loneliness that resulted from their withdrawal from ordinary community life, which helped create what we have come to think of as the classic syndrome of nineteenth-century middle-class female disorders: nervousness, fearfulness, and, often, physical illness.⁷

These changes, and their consequences, are clearly evident in the Tilton marriage. For Elizabeth Tilton, the transition from a socially meaningful important and active role in the community to marble goddess came quite

⁵ See, for example: John Demos, A Little Commonwealth; and Kirk Jeffrey, "The Family as Utopian Retreat."

⁶ Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood"; and Phillida Bunkle, "Sentimental Womanhood and Domestic Education, 1830-1870," History of Education Quarterly, XIV, no. 1 (Spring 1974), pp. 13-30.

⁷ For women's health problems in the nineteenth century see: Catherine E. Beecher, Letters to the People of Health and Happiness (New York 1855); Ann D. Wood, "The Fashionable Diseases," Journal of Interdisciplinary History, 4 (Summer 1973), pp. 25-52; Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Hysterical Woman: Sex Roles and Role Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America," Social Research, 39, no. 4 (Winter 1972), pp. 652-678.

suddenly in 1866 with the move to the new house. Up to 1866, she had managed to preserve her relations with her family and friends despite Theodore's disapproval. Attributing his irritable and sometimes insulting behavior to his genius and ambition, Elizabeth was not afraid to hold her own in family squabbles by hurling insults back at her husband. One gets the distinct impression from references in their correspondence as well as some later testimony that there were regular free-for-alls in the boardinghouse which, as we have seen, included Elizabeth's mother, brother, friends of the family, and the boarders--as well as the young couple.⁸ For the most part, the others took Elizabeth's side; she, apparently, had been "idolized" since childhood for her "earnestness," "piety," and devotion to duty. They felt no hesitation in stepping in to reprimand the young husband for his "neglect" and "ill-treatment" of Elizabeth.⁹ So in spite of the fact that Elizabeth was becoming more and more "self-conscious" in Theodore's presence, unable any longer to converse with him naturally or freely, the continued interaction with

⁸For hints as to the nature of relationships in the boardinghouse, see: ET to TT, 28 February 1868, Trial, vol. I, pp. 492-493; ET to TT, 31 January 1868, Trial, vol. I, p. 503; ET testimony, PCIC, Marshall, p. 195.

⁹Marshall, pp. 103-106.

her family helped preserve her sense of self-respect.¹⁰ In their company, she continued to be her own unpretentious self, "chattering" happily away in defiance of Theodore's complaints.

A portent of things to come later can be observed in the brief time the couple lived in their own house on Oxford Street. With no money for servants, Elizabeth was alone with two young children, ages one and two. She became ill for long periods of time, later testifying that the doctor's diagnosis was "trouble in her mind."¹¹ Concurring in this assessment, Elizabeth insisted that part of the cause was that every visit from her mother prompted an argument with Theodore.¹² Although Elizabeth attempted to become friends with the "public men and women" who now came to see her husband, she felt ill at ease, knowing that Theodore was ashamed of her. As we have seen, for Elizabeth, if not for Theodore, the move back to the boardinghouse came as a great relief.

It was the permanent move to the Brooklyn Heights brownstone in 1866, that constituted the real turning point in Elizabeth's life. Even though the house was only a few blocks from her family, Theodore's disdain for her

¹⁰ET testimony, PCIC, Marshall, pp. 190, 197.

¹¹Ibid., p. 190.

¹²Ibid., p. 191.

relatives effectively cut off daily contact with them. Now that they could afford servants, he insisted, there was no longer any reason for her relatives to embarrass them by visiting. In reality, Elizabeth's new position as "lady" of the house was extremely intimidating. Always shy with strangers, she became more nervous, timid, and frightened of exercising authority over the Irish servants. Like her husband in the aftermath of the Civil War, Elizabeth sensed a loss of function and even of identity.

As insecurity and loneliness mounted, these two troubled people began to consider a totally new possibility: that of deriving their identity solely from each other. To replace Theodore's "causes" and Elizabeth's family--the very things which had provided support and protection against their dissatisfaction with each other, they now turned inward, focusing attention on each other with an almost exclusive intensity. "We must both," Elizabeth proposed, "cultivate each other's self-respect."¹³ Even as early as 1865, Theodore had discovered the "wonderful simplicity of God's plan for binding together human society . . . by creating in each breast some strong and dominating love for one human

¹³ET to TT, 31 January 1868, Trial, vol. I, p. 503.

being."¹⁴ Implicitly acknowledging the weakening of external buttressing elements in both their lives, Theodore expressed their mutual need when he wrote to Elizabeth, "I find . . . I need your presence and influence not only for the comfort of my life, but for the stability of my mind."¹⁵

To understand the causes of this shift in the expectations for their relationship, we must first return again to Theodore, for it was in his mind that the outlines of what he called the "new marriage" first took form. As we have seen, anxiety arising from a sense of professional fraudulence had been channeled into guilt specifically related to his own sexual infidelity. During the winter of 1866-1867, lonely, despondent, and without significant fear of discovery, Theodore had succumbed to sexual temptation. This event had shocked him into the realization that without a social deterrent, he lacked the "innate virtue of discipline" to prevent sin.¹⁶ His previous assumptions of "moral strength" and "unbending rectitude" were swept away in a confused orgy of self-denunciation.¹⁷ "I once thought myself a good,

¹⁴TT to ET, 9 January 1865, CT.

¹⁵TT to ET, 3 March 1866, CT.

¹⁶TT to ET, 4 January 1867, CT.

¹⁷TT to ET, 31 December 1866, CT.

true, and upright man," he confided to Elizabeth in 1866, but now, "I find myself a constant sinner. I feel myself scarred, spotted, miserable, and unworthy . . . an inward revelation of a man's self to himself is an awful thing."¹⁸

Far from alleviating his loneliness and despondency, Theodore's sexual encounters destroyed his faith not only in himself but in human nature in general. "Perhaps because I do not entertain so good an opinion of my own character," he wrote despondently, "human characters do not seem so lovely to me as they once did." Theodore's guilt haunted his thoughts and letters to Elizabeth; but since, as yet, she knew nothing of his infidelity, speculations on the dangers of physical passion were clearly an attempt to persuade himself that "the noblest part of love is honor, fidelity, constance, self-abnegation--not the clasp of the hand nor the kiss of the lips, nor the ecstasy of fondness."¹⁹ This sudden, real, and frightening prospect that he might be carried away by uncontrollable physical impulses convinced Theodore that "what most delights the heart [body] cheats the soul."²⁰

¹⁸TT to ET, 6 December 1866, Trial, vol. I, p. 494.

¹⁹TT to ET, 7 December 1866, Trial, vol. I, p. 494. Tilton's ideas on this subject are more fully explained in an article he wrote: "Love, Marriage, and Divorce," Independent, 1 December 1870.

²⁰TT to ET, 7 December 1866, Trial, vol. I, p. 494.

Concluding that spiritual or platonic love must transcend unpredictable passion, he wrote to Elizabeth of his desire that theirs should become a "soul-mated" marriage--one based on "a love that swells in the soul rather than in the heart [body]." ²¹

Whether Tilton absorbed these changes in attitudes toward love and sexuality from Henry Ward Beecher or came to them himself, it is clear that they bear a remarkable similarity to the minister's ideas:

The end to be sought in this life, then, is the suppression of the passion, of the animal disposition, and the development of the germs of heart-life which are planted in the soul. ²²

In fact, Beecher assured his listeners, "Love . . . is that which subjugates the passions." ²³ Thus, in a remarkable reversal of traditional assumptions about the inevitability of emotional and physical excitement connected with love and sex, Beecher held up love as a calming force. No longer should love be derived from duty to wife and family, but love itself should be the basis for

²¹ Ibid.

²² HWB, "The Primacy of Love," 29 March 1874, Plymouth Pulpit, vol. 6, p. 50.

²³ Ibid.

personal relationships. Romantic love had found its first popularizer in mainstream American society.²⁴

To Elizabeth the mysterious and powerful nature of romantic love was a new idea. Intrigued and attracted by the possibilities inherent in "soul-loving," early in 1867 she expressed to Theodore her fascination as well as her doubts:

You write today of the love of two interlocked souls remaining wedded for immortality, and ask whether such love is not more tenderly beautiful than those same souls can possibly feel toward God. Darling, I live in profound wonder and hushed solemnity at this great mystery of soul-loving to which I have awakened the past year. Am I your soul's mate?²⁵

After twelve years of marriage, Elizabeth had "awakened" to the potential of romantic love! Clearly up until then her attitudes toward marriage had been the traditional contractual ones. But in spite of her "profound wonder" and "hushed solemnity," Elizabeth was still painfully aware of Theodore's earlier complaints that she was the one person with whom he could not communicate because of her inability to relate to "intellectual" people. In recognition of this, Elizabeth attempted to bring her

²⁴ McLoughlin, pp. 91-92.

²⁵ ET to TT, 11 January 1867, CT.

husband's "imagination" more in line with reality:

"When my sweet, will you talk to me as you write? Pretending always that you think I am the best and loveliest of little wives."²⁶ Though their letters to each other were tender and loving, their actual relationship was usually hostile. This was painfully evident when Theodore returned from his first winter away and their marriage resumed its old patterns: Theodore's complaints and insults, followed by Elizabeth's scoldings. Much as they tried, neither could function in the romantic, loving way in which they had begun to write to each other. Indeed, by the next winter, Elizabeth actually began to fear Theodore's homecoming: "In the early part of your absence it was well enough to suffer you to believe in my perfection, but as you near home," she warned, "it is wise to dispel the infatuation little by little and convince you of the humanity and frailty of your loving-wife."²⁷

Theodore did not heed these warnings. His need for a "confessor" and a psychological "pillar and prop" only increased. "I am by nature so frank," he wrote, "that the attempt to hide my feelings, to cloak my shortcomings, to deny utterance to my inward sorrows, had

²⁶ET to TT, 7 January 1867, Trial, vol. I, p. 448.

²⁷ET to TT, 14 January 1867, CT.

lately driven me almost to despair."²⁸ Obviously, Theodore could not confess to his public that he was a "whited sepulcher," but he could and did--on January 25, 1868--confess his sexual infidelity to his "espoused saint," as he addressed Elizabeth.²⁹

As a prelude to his confession, however, Theodore insisted that Elizabeth was partly at fault, since she had frequently rejected his sexual advances. When she agreed with this analysis of the situation, Elizabeth accepted her husband's burden of despair. There was nothing she could do but implore forgiveness for her "cruelty."

Oh, Theodore, darling, I am haunted
night and day by the remorse of know-
ing that because of my harshness and
indifference to you, you were driven
to despair--perhaps sin, and these
last years of unhappiness. . . . I
am the chief of sinners!³⁰

Elizabeth was now prepared to do what she had never before been willing to do--immerse herself completely in her husband's will. From now on his judgment would determine her attitudes and actions--she vowed never to "scold" him again. "After all you have suffered through me," she

²⁸TT to ET, 26 January 1868, Trial, vol. I, p. 617.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰ET to TT, 31 January 1868, Trial, vol. I, p. 503.

wrote Theodore, "I . . . shall try to follow your wish in every particular."³¹

The effect of Elizabeth's forgiveness on Theodore was to rid him, for the time being, of his guilt and depression. Having once made his confession and been absolved, he felt released, transformed, "a new creature . . . no more despondency--no more repining--no more vain regrets--no more loss of self-respect--no more groveling in the dust."³² "I am once again a man among men," he joyfully proclaimed, "and a Christian among Christians."³³ Substituting Elizabeth for the religion in which he no longer found solace, he wrote, "You opened for me, that night [of confession] the gate of heaven, which had so long seemed shut." Henceforth, Elizabeth would be responsible for her husband's mental well-being. "You always have in your power either to crown or dethrone me," he told her, "you have the chief ruling influence of my life."³⁴ In the previous chapter we saw that Tilton worried about the power of a fickle public to "crown" or "dethrone" him; in transferring that function to Elizabeth he probably considered himself on safer ground.

³¹ET to TT, 3 February 1868, Trial, vol. I, p. 451.

³²TT to ET, 9 February 1868, Trial, vol. I, p. 451.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Ibid.

In a remarkable reversal, from being a social liability, Elizabeth had become for Theodore the personification of all that was good; the simplistic religious beliefs and lack of sophistication which had always annoyed him had now become her greatest virtue. She had, in fact, become a model for Theodore to emulate. "Now this transformation I owe to yourself," he assured her, "to your irrepressible love and devotion, to your ceaseless prayers, and to your victorious faith."³⁵ Converted from religion to a belief in salvation through Elizabeth's superior spirituality, Theodore reveled in a state of near-euphoria. "You are not only all," he wrote Elizabeth, "but more than all, than any man can need or ever can deserve. Life never seemed to me to be more full of objects and ends worth living for."³⁶ He rejoiced in the disappearance of his despondent moods. "I very rarely have any depression of spirits. The old claim has gone away entirely; the new day has dawned!"³⁷ Theodore, in fact, rivaled Beecher in his hymns to the perfection and glory of womanhood.

For the moment, Elizabeth embraced, with relief if not absolute conviction, her new spiritual identity as a

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ TT to ET, 20 February 1868, Trial, vol. I, p. 451.

"saint." In exploring the implications of her new role, she moved toward a "conversion" of her own. Just as Theodore had phrased his new adoration in religious terms, Elizabeth responded in kind by comparing her husband to Christ. "I learn to love you from my love to Him; I have learned to love Him from loving you!"³⁸ Soon she had come to equate the two: "The Great Lover and yourself, to whom as one I am eternally wedded."³⁹ With this juxtaposition, Elizabeth took a long step toward the "new marriage" in which her husband dominated her entire world.

Nevertheless, Elizabeth resented the practical ramifications of such a choice, arguing that their "ideal marriage" need not exclude "pure friendship with many."⁴⁰ She could not help but miss her family and the lively boardinghouse circle! However, driven by Theodore's continued insistence that they leave the "mildew" of her mother's "social influence" behind, Elizabeth capitulated. "I know that now, mother, children or friend have no longer possession of my heart," she assured him, "the supreme place is yours forever."⁴¹

³⁸ET to TT, 28 January 1868, Trial, vol. I, p. 449.

³⁹ET to TT, 29 February 1868, CT.

⁴⁰ET to TT, 31 January 1868, Trial, vol. I, p. 503.

⁴¹ET to TT, 1 February 1868, Trial, vol. I, p. 489.

By March 1868, she happily reported the completion of her transformation:

I am conscious of great inward
awakening toward . . . you. . . .
I shall teach my children to begin
their loves where now I am. I can-
not conceive of anything more
delicious than a life consecrated
to a faithful love. Oh, why did
I sleep so long?⁴²

The word "faithful" signified to Elizabeth far more than sexual fidelity; it was a promise of emotional dependence on, and devotion to, Theodore alone--to the exclusion of all previous social and familial bonds. She agreed with Theodore that they should raise their children--as they themselves had not been--"to revere spouse more than parents."⁴³ After thirteen years of marriage, Elizabeth and Theodore Tilton were embarking upon a new relationship--one based not on tangible duties and responsibilities, but on romantic imagination. In a letter written a few days after her "awakening" Elizabeth summed up her new role:

This, I think, I have decided--no
more chidings, scoldings! . . . I
never before saw my path as clear

⁴²ET to TT, 4 March 1868, Trial, vol. I, p. 499.

⁴³Ibid.

as now--that whatever you may do,
say, or be, it becometh me to be
the Christian wife and mother!⁴⁴

But try as she would to live the role dictated by her "awakening," Elizabeth indicated in her letters that she was never absolutely convinced of its validity. She repeatedly begged Theodore to reaffirm his love--to encourage her in the changes she was attempting. Admitting her recurrent fears as to her competency to manage the household, she wrote, "I would fain make the path smooth for your feet, or in other words, direct the children and the household that they minister harmony only, but I know I cannot, and I am afraid!"⁴⁵ This fear seemed to have had less to do with the actual work of the household than with her sole responsibility for sustaining "harmony."⁴⁶ And despite the tenor of their correspondence all through the spring--renewed vows, protestations of undying love, and mutual worship--Elizabeth, at least, remained aware that the relationship actually existed only in their "imaginationes." Although she reminded him repeatedly of her human frailties, Theodore invariably became depressed and moody when she failed to live up to his expectations. But when Theodore was away from home,

⁴⁴ET to TT, 8 March 1868, Trial, vol. I, p. 490.

⁴⁵ET to TT, 20 February 1868, Trial, vol. I, p. 491.

⁴⁶Ibid.

he wrote euphorically of his newfound happiness. Demonstrating a surprising insight, Elizabeth dismally responded, "I cannot help thinking that it [Theodore's happiness] is because I am not with you!"⁴⁷

Just how little the "new marriage" had altered things became clear when Theodore returned home in the spring of 1868. Elizabeth gave birth to their fourth child, who died in infancy.⁴⁸ But this event, which might have brought the parents together in their grief, only added to their inability to live in "harmony." Theodore again resorted to criticisms--and Elizabeth once more responded with scoldings. For all their good intentions, their treatment of each other had not changed. By November 1868, Theodore realistically assessed the seemingly unbridgeable gap between ideal and reality:

It is the greatest regret of my life that I do not seem constituted so as to make you as happy as you deserve to be; but I have the best of intentions--and the worst of success.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ET to TT, 17 February 1868, CT.

⁴⁸The Tilton children were: Florence, b. 1858; Alice, b. 1859; Mattie--died in infancy; Carroll, b. 1864; Paul--born and died, summer 1868; Ralph, b. 1869.

⁴⁹TT to ET, 3 November 1868, Trial, vol. I, p. 500.

Hoping to assure Elizabeth that she had not the "slightest" originating share in his troubles, Theodore sadly concluded, "They are of my own making."⁵⁰

Ironically, Theodore and Elizabeth had fallen into a trap of their own making. Out of their doubts, isolation, insecurity, and fear, they had created a perfect, imaginary marriage, centered in each other. And yet, it was painfully obvious that every time they were together for more than a few days, what Elizabeth called "the old demons of ungenerosity and fault-finding" reasserted themselves with excruciating regularity.⁵¹ Indeed, instead of enhancing their relationship, the "new marriage" only increased the bitterness of their mutual criticisms. If Theodore had been annoyed earlier at Elizabeth's lack of culture and refinement, he now was devastated by her inability to be a saint.

Thus, even though she was insistently reminded by both her husband and her minister of the necessity of maintaining her "sainthood," Elizabeth as yet did not fully believe in the role. She later testified that she felt like a "non-entity" who had lost not only her self-respect but her "will"--a euphemism for her sense of self. Much as she desired to please Theodore, she could not. As

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ ET to TT, 26 January 1869, Trial, vol. I, p. 450.

either his social equal or his "pillar and prop," she had failed. Although the new set of values indicated she should reap benefits of happiness and gratification, Elizabeth instead found herself glorified in the abstract and ignored, if not abused, in reality.

Why did these two people expend so much energy on creating the illusion of perfect togetherness? It is clear that on the deepest level both felt, in Elizabeth's words, like "non-entities." When they looked at their own motivations, they found only selfishness where previously--whether in family or reform issues--there had existed a social purpose which carried with it a social identity. Turning to each other as the sole providers of a meaningful identity created a situation that was, at best, precarious. Theodore and Elizabeth's generation was caught up in a kind of never-never land between a time when an individual's identity was provided by the social institutions of family, community, or church, and the era when identity could be found in profession or social class. In such a state of transition and confusion, one source of comfort and reassurance was the formalized, but illusory romanticism of a Victorian marriage.

This inability to relate on a genuinely intimate level with a wife or husband, according to Byron Strong, was common in nineteenth-century Victorian marriages.

Because, perhaps, the outside world had become so threatening, it was more imperative than ever that the marriage relation be orderly and calm. Often the "calmness" and "fitting together" were emphasized at the cost of the personal identities involved in the relation. Strong adopts the term "pseudo-mutuality" to describe the intense effort exerted to create and maintain the illusion of an intimate, compatible marriage.⁵² This is an apt description of the intense effort employed by Theodore and Elizabeth, especially in their letters, to fabricate the illusion of a highly romantic, even perfect, marriage. Unlike most couples, however, the couple's involvement with Henry Ward Beecher and the "higher sphere" brought about a series of events which made it impossible to suppress their underlying anger and hostility.

⁵² Byron Strong, "Toward a History of the Experiential Family: Sex and Incest in the Nineteenth Century Family," Journal of Marriage and the Family, 35 (August 1973), pp. 457-466.

C H A P T E R I V

HENRY WARD BEECHER:

THE EMERGENCE OF THE GOSPEL OF LOVE

Henry Ward Beecher's "Gospel of Love" was so influential that it is important to understand its origins and evolution. William McLoughlin has pointed out that although Beecher did not develop an original doctrine--similar ideas had long been preached by the Transcendentalists and the Methodists--he was the first to bring such ideas to a mass middle-class public.

Beecher reached a much wider audience than any of those theologians who struggled so hard to say on a high plane of system and consistency what could only strike home at a much lower and nonrational plane.¹

For McLoughlin, Beecher's novel Norwood, written in 1866, stands as a milestone in the development of both American Christianity and the philosophy of the minister. The pivotal concept in Beecher's book and indeed his preaching, McLoughlin suggests, is non-judgmental, self-sacrificing, mother-like love. Devotion to duty, adherence to a set of moral standards, theological consistency,

¹William G. McLoughlin, The Meaning of Henry Ward Beecher (New York 1970), p. 85.

all are rejected or at least subsumed under the all-encompassing, all-powerful love force. Although this kind of rhetoric sounds fairly standard to twentieth-century churchgoers, in Beecher's day, it was an innovation. Before Norwood, McLoughlin writes, "It is difficult to find . . . in American evangelical writing such an explicit statement of the romantic basis of love as distinct from the older contractual or sacramental basis."²

Significantly, it was Norwood which brought Elizabeth Tilton and the minister together. As Beecher wrote the novel he read chapters of it to Elizabeth, asking her opinion. When questioned in court as to why he did this, Beecher replied that he had so little confidence in his ability to write that he needed someone to provide "uncritical praise."³ His honesty here was somewhat disarming since, of course, Elizabeth thought he appreciated her critical abilities--he "respected me," she said in her testimony.⁴ The truth was that Beecher generally cultivated people who admired and worshipped him. In fact, much of his famous magnetism seemed to emanate from the almost desperate need to win the praise and approval of

²Ibid., pp. 91-92. McLoughlin's book is essentially an exploration of the ideas presented in Norwood.

³HWB testimony, Trial, vol. II, p. 735.

⁴ET testimony, PCIC, Marshall, p. 192.

everyone--from family and friends to his congregation. Paxton Hibben, Beecher's biographer, has noted that the only consistent goals in his life were the hunger for love and for the acquisition of power. Though his theology was vague, his moral standards inconsistent, and his reform efforts sporadic, the pursuit of love and power was always evident.⁵ In admitting that he sought "uncritical praise" from Mrs. Tilton, Beecher revealed a need that had shaped his entire life.

Born on June 24, 1813, in Litchfield, Connecticut, Beecher was the eighth child of famed evangelical preacher Lyman Beecher. Barely three years after Henry Ward was born, his mother Roxanna died and his care was left in the hands of his older sisters and stepmother. Much has been written on the entire Beecher family, several of whom became influential ministers or writers. Historians who have studied the various children of Lyman Beecher agree that this controversial minister was also a domineering father who irrevocably shaped, for better or worse, the lives of all his children.⁶ Henry Ward was no

⁵Paxton Hibben, Henry Ward Beecher: An American Portrait (New York 1927), p. 50.

⁶For the Beecher family see: HWB testimony, Trial, vol. II, p. 729; Barbara Cross, ed., The Autobiography of Lyman Beecher (Cambridge 1961); Constance Rourke, Trumpets of Jubilee (New York 1927); Kathryn Kish Sklar, Catherine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity (New

exception; references to his parents and his childhood occur in his sermons and writings until the end of his life. Although in these reminiscences it is clear that Beecher respected his father--"I never saw my father do a thing that had duplicity in it in my life," he once wrote--for the most part he recalled a childhood fraught with pain and anger. Often he felt neglected and cheated of the love he thought every child deserved:

My father was so busy, and my mother had so many other children to look after, that except here and there, I hardly came under the parental hand at all.⁷

Beecher's older sister, Harriet, confirmed this assessment of his childhood but attributed it to prevalent practices in raising children. "The community did not recognize them," she said, "there was no child's literature; there were no children's books . . . the childhood of Henry Ward was unmarked by the possession of a single

Haven 1973); Charles H. Foster, The Rungless Ladder: Harriet Beecher Stowe and New England Puritanism (Durham, North Carolina 1954); Lyman Beecher Stowe, Saints, Sinners, and Beechers (Indianapolis 1934); Robert Merideth, The Politics of the Universe: Edward Beecher, Abolition, and Orthodoxy (Nashville 1968); Stuart C. Henry, Unvanquished Puritan: A Portrait of Lyman Beecher (Grand Rapids, Michigan 1973).

⁷ HWB, Trial, vol. II, p. 729.

child's toy as a gift from any older person or a single fête."⁸

Whether this treatment was standard for the period or not, Henry Ward resented it, feeling that when he did receive attention from his father, it was negative. Love, in the Beecher household, he remembered, had been conditional and judgmental; he was frightened and bewildered by the expectations of his father. Lyman Beecher's habit was to relate to his children--male and female--by challenging them to intellectual debates over points of religious doctrine, rewarding those who exhibited the most agility of mind. "I was brought up," Beecher recalled, "in the school of dispute."⁹ Henry Ward consistently rated lower in these contests than any of his siblings, including sisters Catherine and Harriet. Beecher referred to these episodes of humiliation as going through the "colic and anguish" of "hyper-calvinism."¹⁰ Not surprisingly young Henry was "mortified" and developed a stutter which impaired his oratorical ability until late in his college career. Beecher never forgave his father, brothers, and

⁸Harriet Beecher Stowe, n.d., quoted in Lyman Abbott, ed., Henry Ward Beecher: A Sketch of His Career (New York 1883), pp. 14-15.

⁹HWB Autobiography, in Joseph Howard, Jr., The Life of Henry Ward Beecher (Philadelphia 1887), p. 589.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 587.

sisters for treating his efforts to be heard with contempt and embarrassment; in a lecture room talk forty years later, he referred emotionally to his own "shame" and their "ungracious" behavior in this situation.¹¹

Not only did young Henry Ward fail to measure up intellectually, but he seemed to lack the moral character to resist "wrongdoing." In referring to his childhood, Beecher once said that it was most often characterized by "shame and terror."

I had not the courage to confess,
and tell the truth . . . shame hindered me; second, fear. . . . And when I got to going wrong I went on going wrong. . . . I was afraid of being found out . . . when my father came home, I would watch his face to see if he looked as though he knew it . . . and out of that depression and low state it was easier to be tempted again . . . and I became more and more uneasy.¹²

Henry apparently spent the better part of his youth ashamed, fearful, and convinced of his how inadequacy. His stepmother referred to him as "deceitful" and he himself wrote to his sister Harriet that, "I find no place with so little sympathy as home."¹³

¹¹Christian Union, 15 January 1870, p. 36.

¹²Ibid., 8 October 1870. Also quoted in Hibben, p. 50.

¹³HWB to Harriet Beecher Stowe, 28 March 1833, Beecher Collection, Amherst College.

For Beecher, then, home was a place of fear, judgment, and stern retribution. He conceded that his father had been "kind" to him, but he never demonstrated the love Beecher craved so intensely--a love not dependent on intellectual prowess or righteous conduct. Thus as Beecher rejected any kind of rigid doctrine or dogma as the touchstone of his religious faith, he also rejected what he called the "mechanical" ties of family.

We cannot choose who shall be
our companions in the cradle. . . .
And whether they be suitable or not,
they are our brothers, they are our
sisters, they are our parents.¹⁴

Beecher's objection here was aimed specifically at his father--because as a young man he did look up to one member of his family as his "salvation." That person was the mother who died when Beecher was three years old. At the age of eighteen, Beecher discovered some letters his mother had written and confided to his diary: "I found out more of her mind than I ever knew before--more of her feelings, her piety. And I could not help observing that her letters were superior--more refined and conclusive than the corresponding ones of father's."¹⁵ As this

¹⁴HWB, "Moral Affinity the Ground of True Unity," 6 December 1868, Plymouth Pulpit, vol. 1, pp. 286-289.

¹⁵HWB Diary, Beecher Papers, Box 47, Folder 2, Yale.

vision of his mother evolved, Beecher came more and more to believe that he could actually remember his mother. By the end of his life he spoke as though she had been a constant presence throughout his childhood. The year before his death, Beecher recalled that she had a "wonderful depth of affection" and while his father was "tormenting himself," she "threw the oil of faith and trust on the waters and they were quieted."¹⁶ All his good qualities, all his accomplishments in life, insisted Beecher, originated in his mother's undemanding and unconditional love--the only counterpoint to his father's inflexibility. "From her," he said, "I received my love of the beautiful, my poetic temperament . . . simplicity . . . and childlike faith in God."¹⁷ The image of woman as more refined and superior was eventually to be a key force in the development of the "Gospel of Love."

At the same time that Beecher was developing a mythical profile of his mother and rejecting the demands of his father, he was still very much under the authority of the powerful Lyman. The elder Beecher had always insisted that all his sons become ministers, but encountered the most obstacles to this plan with Henry Ward. From the beginning it had been obvious that Henry was no

¹⁶HWB Autobiography, Howard, p. 586.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 587.

theologian, or scholar for that matter. In addition, he stuttered. And finally, when the family lived in Boston, the young man threatened to run away to sea. Lyman promptly sent his recalcitrant son ninety miles inland to Mt. Pleasant Academy in Amherst.¹⁸ Besides removing Henry from Boston ships, Lyman hoped his son would improve enough academically to be sent to Yale, where several other Beecher sons had gone. When the time came, however, it was clear that Henry could not measure up to Yale. Lyman Beecher's dissatisfaction was evident in the letter he wrote to the president of Amherst College informing him that after "much deliberation and some hesitation" he had decided to send Henry to Amherst. At Mt. Pleasant, said the elder Beecher, Henry had been taught "carelessly" and learned his lessons "superficially."¹⁹ Lyman hoped that Amherst College could somehow "retrieve" the losses.

In this hope, Henry Ward's father was disappointed. During his college years at Amherst (1830-1834) the young man gained a reputation for his lack of interest in scholarship. He liked the social activities and he did work hard at overcoming the stutter which had bothered him

¹⁸Hibben, p. 27.

¹⁹Lyman Beecher to H. Humphrey, 30 September 1830, Beecher Papers, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

so long--but this may have also had something to do with his physical distance from the father he was so frightened of. Most of the time, however, Henry Ward spent cultivating what his sister Harriet was later to call his "genius for friendship."²⁰ Apparently Henry had finally found some friends who appreciated him, people who, unlike most of his family, made him feel loved and important. The first of these was a Greek student, Constantine Fondolaik, with whom Beecher made a pact of friendship which he called "a marriage of man to man."²¹ Beecher later named one of his own children after this college friend, indicating the closeness they had experienced and the importance this relationship held for Beecher's self-esteem.

Besides cultivating friends who, for the first time, made Henry Ward feel positive about himself, the young man began to develop his oratorical ability. It was in a somewhat different direction than his father might have hoped, however. Beecher formed a working partnership with another Amherst student, Orson Fowler, later to become famous for his books on phrenology, love, and sex. Fowler introduced Beecher to the new "science" of phrenology which was just becoming popular in America. Later in the

²⁰Quoted in Hibben, p. 14.

²¹Ibid., pp. 31-32.

century, phrenology was treated as a joke, sarcastically referred to as the science of bumps; but in the pre-Civil War period, many intelligent people were taking the new theories seriously. Phrenology taught that different areas of the brain controlled each attribute or faculty in man, and that the skull, since it conformed closely to the shape of the brain, would indicate which of the faculties were well developed or underdeveloped.²² For example, the area of the skull at the base of the neck was believed to represent "amateness" or interest in love and sex; several areas at the front of the head, reason. Thus, a phrenologist could, with a close examination of an individual's head, produce a character analysis. Orson Fowler was eventually to become the most successful phrenologist in America--and Beecher was one of his earliest disciples. The two traveled around western Massachusetts, Beecher delivering speeches explaining phrenology while Fowler examined heads and wrote out mental profiles. As part of his function, he would often advise his subjects on how to strengthen one or more faculties, such as ambition or acquisitiveness, in order to improve the individual's chances for success.²³

²² Madeleine B. Stern, Heads and Headlines: The Phrenological Fowlers (New York 1971).

²³ Hibben, p. 43.

Beecher was fascinated by this new approach to the study of human nature. It seemed to liberate man from the constraints of family background by giving him the opportunity to discover and work with his own natural propensities. Rather than interpreting phrenology (as it was later) as essentially conservative and elitist by reserving to the white Anglo-Saxon race the best head shapes, Beecher's generation saw it as a way to escape the confining institutions and expectations of the past. "It gives a new power," he declared, "over the intellect and the will."²⁴ For a young man like Beecher, oppressed and guilt-ridden by his father's intellectual demands and the fear invoked by the doctrines of his father's Calvinism, this new "science" offered a more benevolent and hopeful way to explain and justify his own temperament.

The influence of phrenology on Beecher's religious ideas was immediately apparent in a "conversion" he said he experienced at about the same time. He related this event at a much later time--when he was almost eighty years old--so his recollection may have been distorted. Indeed, every time he recounted the experience in later life, he altered the details as to where and when it took place, so there may be some question whether this event happened in such a dramatic way at all: perhaps Beecher

²⁴ Commencement Address, 1834, Alonzo Gray Collection, Amherst College. Quoted in Hibben, p. 43.

simply realized there were some psychological changes taking place in him at about that time. But there is no doubt that during these college years, Beecher's fear of his father, adoration of his mother, his unconscious rejection of the theological dogmas of his youth, and his introduction to phrenology combined to produce a conversion experience, not to his father's religion, but from it.

One morning the "light" broke upon his mind, Beecher said, revealing to him God's "infinite, universal" love. For Beecher, this was a dramatic revelation because it came to him in spite of his consistent inability to "do the things that were right." Surprisingly, God wanted to help him, not condemn him to eternal damnation. When this insight occurred, Beecher said, "One might have thought that I was a lunatic escaped from confinement." This assurance that he might be accepted for himself along with all his imperfections was exactly what Beecher had longed for all his life. Prior to this, he had painfully concluded that with the death of his mother, he had lost that possibility. What the conversion revealed most clearly, however, was that God was like his mother, not his father--in short, a sympathetic figure rather than a judgmental one. "I ran up and down," Beecher recalled, "through the primeval forest . . . shouting, Glory! Glory! . . . All the old troubles gone, and light

breaking upon my mind, I cried, 'I have found my God,
I have found my God!'"²⁵

If this conversion really happened, it constituted the beginnings of what gradually evolved into the "Gospel of Love." This emphasis on freedom, love, and forgiveness eventually led Beecher to reject the doctrines of predestination, hell, and atonement upon which his father's religion was based. Instead he moved toward toleration and universal salvation. Beecher's "Gospel," however, was not original, but a popularization of ideas developed at about this time by a group of New England intellectuals known as Transcendentalists. This group, led by Ralph Waldo Emerson, argued that God, as a kind of benevolent mystical force, was immanent in nature; He manifested Himself in moral and ethical principles which transcended the doctrinal differences between organized churches. Universal love formed the bonds between men, not membership in one particular denomination or community. The Transcendentalists scorned the ideas of predestination, hell, and election, arguing that man's essential goodness, if allowed to develop freely, would come to the surface. At the time Beecher was in college, however, the Transcendentalists were still considered heretics. If the young man was influenced by them--as he certainly must

²⁵HWB Autobiography, Howard, p. 588.

have been--he would not have dared to begin voicing their sentiments openly.

Indeed, in his years at divinity school and his first two small parishes in Indiana, Beecher kept the implications of his conversion experience to himself. In order to be licensed for preaching, he had to appear traditional in his views on hell, original sin, and predestination. And his style, if not the substance of his preaching, remained much like his father's. He attempted to invoke fear in his congregation--not so much for their lack of knowledge of theological points as for moral lapses. In one of his first widely successful endeavors, Beecher delivered a set of lectures designed to guide young men into righteous paths as they ventured out into the world. These Seven Lectures to Young Men, first published in 1843, were so successful that they were published in book form and reprinted many times.²⁶ Many other preachers, at this time, were writing similar manuals, but Beecher's was one of the most popular. It was a time when the stable communities of preindustrial America were breaking down and forcing young men to migrate either West or to the cities. As we saw in the case of Theodore Tilton, this was a threatening

²⁶ Henry Ward Beecher, Seven Lectures to Young Men (Indianapolis 1844).

journey--both physically and emotionally--and many were ready to buy books which might show them how to retain their small town virtue when surrounded by temptation.

In his Seven Lectures, however, Beecher did not take the opportunity to preach the "Gospel of Love," understanding, and forgiveness which he would later adopt. Apparently he was still convinced that fear of an angry God was the best device for preserving morality. For example, in one lecture concerning "sensual habit"--presumably masturbation--Beecher compared the results of this habit with the tortures endured by blacks in the slave ships:

The agony of midnight massacre,
the frenzy of the ship's dungeon,
the living death of the middle-
passage, the wails of separation,
and the dismal torpor of hopeless
servitude--are these found only
in the piracy of the slave-trade?
They are all among us! Worse
assassinations! Worse dragging
to a prison-ship! Worse groans
ringing from the fetid hold!
Worse separations of families!
Worse bondage of intemperate men,
enslaved by that most inexorable
of all taskmasters sensual habit.²⁷

It was noticeable that Beecher did not devote much time to theological doctrine and when he did, his comments were

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 68-69.

often inconsistent. Yet his emphasis--as in the above passage--on colorful rhetoric, projection of emotion, and dramatic style began to win followers. Aware that his success did not depend on consistency, Beecher said of his early preaching:

I had time to sow all my ministerial wild oats without damage to my people, for they knew little whether I was orthodox or not. . . . I said a great many extravagant things in my pulpit and preached with a great deal of crudeness.²⁸

This was a period of trial and error for Beecher and he used it well, admitting later that he "tried everything."²⁹ It soon became clear to the struggling young minister that all he needed to do was determine what most of his congregation wanted to hear. "I got this idea," he remembered later, "that the Apostles were accustomed first to feel for a ground on which the people and they stood together; a common ground where they could meet."³⁰ Then the minister should cull out that "knowledge" which

²⁸ Henry Ward Beecher, Yale Lectures on Preaching (New York 1872), p. 146.

²⁹ HWB Autobiography, Howard, p. 589.

³⁰ HWB, Yale Lectures, p. 11. Quoted in Hibben, p. 86.

"everybody would admit" and place it before them with "excited heart and feeling."³¹

This attitude was a striking reversal of traditional ideas about a minister's role. The older idea was that, whether they liked it or not, the minister had certain knowledge to impart to his flock. What was right was immutable and people had to be molded to fit the truth. An example was Beecher's own father, who had always stood for the unchangeable doctrines of Calvinism; he had spent much of his time fighting Catholicism and Unitarianism. Beecher, however, was beginning to adopt the notion that truth evolved from a general consensus of the people. If he could only discover what it was and preach it, popularity was assured. But his father's primary concern had been to be right, while Beecher's was to be popular. Thus, Beecher had found more than personal reasons for the rejection of his father. Professional success required it as well. Beecher had adjusted, unconsciously perhaps, to the fact that ministers were not exempt from the competitive, laissez-faire market economy of nineteenth-century America. As Ann Douglas and Daniel Calhoun have documented, by the time Beecher launched his career, the ministerial profession had lost the authority and social status it held in colonial society. Economic problems,

³¹Ibid.

the proliferation of denominations, and the secularization of society had combined to deprive the minister of his respected status. No longer could a young minister emerging from college or seminary count on a secure lifetime position. These men were now forced to appeal to masses of people, and Henry Ward Beecher was the most successful minister of his century in packaging his ideas and style in response to this market.³²

In rejecting the traditions and authority of his father to win success in nineteenth-century America, Beecher was not alone. In fact, one of the reasons for his remarkable empathy with thousands of listeners was the similarity between his plight and theirs. In traditional society, fathers had been able to provide their sons, not only with religious and moral values, but with a concrete economic foundation. Patriarchal authoritarianism was accepted and sometimes treasured because it was rooted in real economic power over the lives of children. With the increase in population and the diminishing land supply of the late eighteenth century, this power was considerably weakened, leaving only the outer shell of religious and moral authority. Sons, in particular, had to leave their

³² Daniel C. Calhoun, Professional Lives in America 1750-1850: Structure and Aspiration (Cambridge 1965); Ann Douglas, The Feminization of American Culture (New York 1977), pp. 17-49.

childhood homes and learn to make their livelihood in very different ways from the agricultural milieu of their fathers. Eventually, of course, the moral authority of fathers was inevitably diminished along with economic power.³³ In dealing with the emotional struggle an individual encountered as he left home and rejected parental values, Henry Ward Beecher was touching a chord common to his generation.

But it was not until Beecher came to Plymouth Church in Brooklyn in 1847 that he began fully to develop the Gospel of Love and to understand its implications--for himself as well as for his audience. There he found a congregation of young men whose chances for survival in a changing world required freedom from the past--geographically, economically, and intellectually. They instinctively accepted Beecher's proclamation that the "secret of true religion is that it sets at liberty," and that Jesus, "comes to every man's heart to make him free--free in thinking, free in choosing; free in tastes and sentiments; free in all pleasurable associations."³⁴

³³On the importance of land in shaping relations between fathers and sons, see: Philip Greven, Jr., Four Generations: Population, Land, and Family in Colonial Andover, Massachusetts (Ithaca 1970), pp. 125-172, 222-238.

³⁴Christian Union, 9 October 1872, p. 306.

The reasons for this empathy between Beecher and the young men of his congregation are illustrated by a book written by one of his parishioners, Stephen Griswold, a faithful member of Plymouth Church for fifty-three years.³⁵ In many ways Griswold was a more typical example of Beecher's parishioners than Theodore Tilton. Like most Plymouth Church members, Griswold grew up on his father's farm in Windsor, Connecticut. Indeed, forty percent of a random sample of the church members had similar New England origins, and another twenty-four percent were listed in the 1870 census as having come from New York (probably upstate--an area settled by New Englanders).³⁶ Biographies of many others indicate a rural background was common. Typically, Griswold was a teen-ager who had lived an "uneventful life" on his father's farm until 1851 when he proposed to his parents that he go to New York in "search of fame and fortune--a wider horizon and a larger life."³⁷ Convincing his reluctant parents that he could

³⁵ Stephen Griswold, Sixty Years with Plymouth Church (Chicago 1907).

³⁶ Plymouth Church Membership List, in Noyes L. Thompson, The History of Plymouth Church (Henry Ward Beecher): 1847-1872 (New York 1873), pp. 237-289; Ninth Census of the United States, Population Schedules, Brooklyn, New York, Wards 1-12.

³⁷ Griswold, p. 17. Biographies of other members also indicate that a rural New England background was common. George Burt Lincoln, for example, was born in Hardwick, Massachusetts in 1817, and left the farm at

not be "content" to live out his days on the farm, he started out to "make his way in the world."³⁸

Though Griswold does not say specifically what motivated him to leave the family farm in what he referred to as the "beautiful valley of the Connecticut," his reference to "fame and fortune" probably reflects the unfortunate truth that New England agriculture was in such a depressed condition that mere survival as a farmer was no longer possible. The condition of poor stony soil exhausted by 200 years of intensive farming had been aggravated by competition from the fertile ground of western New York and the Ohio Valley; the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825 made it cheaper for New Englanders to buy western wheat than to grow it themselves. Since the early years of the nineteenth century, young men like Stephen Griswold had been leaving New England in droves for western farm lands or cities like New York, Philadelphia, and Boston. With its population static, unproductive farm lands, and a still infant manufacturing industry, New England must have presented dismal prospects

age 15. Another farmer's son was Abraham Daily, born in Sheffield, Massachusetts, who left the farm for New York in 1858. Henry R. Stiles, ed., The Civil, Political, Professional, and Ecclesiastical History and Commercial and Industrial Record of the County of Kings and the City of Brooklyn, New York, from 1683 to 1884, 2 vols. (New York 1884), pp. 866, 1244.

³⁸Griswold, p. 17.

for her sons in the 1840s and 1850s.³⁹ Griswold made it clear that leaving home was no easy task. In the summer of 1851 he wistfully reported that he arrived in New York, "a lonely country boy, with no introductions and no one to hold out a helping hand."⁴⁰

If Griswold lamented the loss of his "quiet home at Windsor," he indicated no compensation for this loss by the pull or attraction of the glamorous metropolis. He and his parents considered New York to be "a city of untold lawlessness and full of pitfalls, where an unsophisticated country youth like myself would be beset with many temptations on every hand, and be led away from the straight and narrow path of his upbringing by his godly parents."⁴¹ Nor was the Griswold family alone in this assessment of city life; one has only to read some contemporary literature to realize that the city, for all its financial opportunity, was regarded as bestial, degenerate, and dangerous.⁴² Yet for a farm boy with no

³⁹For economic conditions in New England, see: James Henretta, The Evolution of American Society 1700-1815 (Lexington, Massachusetts 1973); Percy W. Bidwell and John I. Falconer, History of Agriculture in the Northern U.S. 1620-1860 (1925; reprint New York 1941), pp. 89-98.

⁴⁰Griswold, p. 17.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 16.

⁴²One example of many books portraying this image is Matthew Hale Smith, Sunshine and Shadow (Hartford 1869).

particular skills and no capital, the city seemed the only avenue to "fame and fortune."

In New England being a young man meant, in many cases, being closely tied to one's father both in a geographic, an economic, and an emotional sense. It involved dependence on land provided by a father when he judged the son ready to be on his own. Even after the son received his own land (often not until he was in his late twenties or early thirties) parents, brothers, relatives were always nearby to watch and advise. How different was Brooklyn--where there were no familiar landmarks or friendly faces--and no inheritance from father to assure a secure future. These young men, like Henry Ward Beecher himself, were on their own in the marketplace.

Griswold was successful in a small way, for within a week, he had found employment as a clerk in a business house in Brooklyn. For a short time, Griswold recalled, everything seemed to go well; he was fascinated by the "hurry and bustle" of the city and adjusted to his new occupation which called into play, he said, "an entirely different line of thought." But after a few weeks, he began to feel the separation from his childhood home:

A few weeks of this, however, sufficed to wear away the novelty, and a full sense of my solitary condition rushed over me; I had made few acquaintances and had

practically no society. I began to look around for companions, or at least for some place where I could spend my evenings, when the time dragged most heavily.⁴³

Griswold's reactions can only be understood if one realizes the drastic change he experienced--coming from a New England village where the majority of the inhabitants were related and all at least knew each other--where social intercourse was a constant daily activity and where the Puritan tradition of keeping tabs on everyone else was still alive. From a community where it was nearly impossible to be alone, Griswold had come to a place teeming with individuals who were invisible to each other.

Griswold feared his situation was desperate, even dangerous, and that he might soon be "tempted to wander into questionable or even harmful ways."⁴⁴ At this crucial juncture he happened to attend Plymouth Church and hear Henry Ward Beecher. Despite the crowds, Griswold "received such a cordial welcome" as to make him feel "at home," and was impressed by the sermon, even though he admitted he had never heard anything like it in New England. "From this time on," he said, "I had no reason to complain of any lack of social life," and concluded,

⁴³Griswold, p. 19.

⁴⁴Ibid.

"Plymouth Church has been more to me than I can possibly express."⁴⁵ These men had left home and family, probably because of economic necessity, and migrated to the city, where they were faced not only with adjusting to a whole new social and economic environment, but with assuaging the deeply felt loss of roots and stability. It is easy to see why their experiences were similar to Beecher's in his quest for a new avenue to enduring success within the ministerial profession. Beecher's genius was that he articulated for this group an explanation and a justification for the changes in their lives and attitudes.

The 1873 sermon "Through Fear to Love" illustrates the ideas which comforted his displaced parishioners.⁴⁶ Beecher began by stating his theory of evolutionary moral development, from the most primitive state, fear, to the most advanced, love. Conceding that the world is built on "universal destructiveness," and evoking the image of big fish eating little fish, Beecher believed that this was true in every species, that "the whole world is an open mouth, and destroying goes on everywhere." Surely his parishioners agreed that this was an apt description of

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 21.

⁴⁶HWB, "Through Fear to Love," 16 February 1873, Plymouth Pulpit, vol. 5, pp. 451-461.

New York! Fear, therefore, is a "preservation," said Beecher, "and a bounty" because it stimulates man to "look out for danger, and to reduce the evasion of danger to a habit . . . to an intuition." Fear, for example, motivates parents to protect children and children to obey parents. In fact, fear is a positive good:

The beginnings of morality and virtue are in fear; for although men may finally be organized so highly that they shall work for the love of working, as men do that are in health and are well cerebrated, yet in the beginnings, among low and rude people, men do not work because they like it.

Thus, he was not necessarily pronouncing his father's stern moralistic religion "bad" or "wrong"--it was simply that in those days people had not yet "ripened" to the "nobler plane." And even now, Beecher believed, there were still many men who "as yet . . . are so low in the scale that they must needs have the ruder treatment. They are not yet carried up to that sphere in which they can do the works of true manhood by the attraction of goodness."

But gradually, Beecher maintained, the motive of fear gives way to "other feelings" and finally "ripens" into love--which is the "highest element." Love, for Beecher, was the result of an internalization of the

values which had previously been enforced by fear of God, family, or community. In a prefiguring of Freudian thought, Beecher was attempting to convince his listeners that they could, indeed, survive on their own in a world without the accustomed external boundaries. It was, indeed, astute of him to argue for internal controls while using the theory of evolution to justify the past. He granted those still in the lower spheres time to advance through the proper use of fear or law by the society, but he glorified those who "have by culture and training, passed out of the lower states into the higher ones." Although Beecher denied being a perfectionist, he seemed to carry the ideal of evolution to its logical conclusion. Eventually, any sort of social institution would be superfluous to those most highly evolved. Since anything "higher sphere" individuals wished to do was automatically good, doing the right thing is, for them, Beecher claimed, almost as normal as breathing. These people have risen to a "likeness of God," they live in a higher sphere, and on a "nobler plane."

For Beecher, this conception of the uses of fear on the lowest stage of moral development justified the continuance of coercive social institutions. Still necessary were authoritarian tactics in raising children, in the law, in religion, and in marriage. The authoritarian

dogma of Roman Catholicism, for example, was appropriate to the stage of moral development of the immigrants. Beecher asserted that "low and rude" people--Plymouth Church members could readily identify as the Irish and German immigrants inhabiting the slum sections of Brooklyn--basked in the sun; gorged themselves, when they had it, with food; and starved when they had none. Only fear, reiterated Beecher, could stimulate them to build houses, cultivate food, and plan ahead. "Fear is the strongest impulse," he said, "toward improvement on the lower range in the scale of human life."

Beecher's hierarchy resembles the seventeenth-century Puritan concept of the "elect" as opposed to the non-elect; his higher and lower spheres constitute a nineteenth-century version of predestination in a heterogeneous urban setting. In traditional New England, however, the saints or elect were always presumed to be visible in the eyes of the community; they were those in communion with the church, those who led upright lives, those with the most wealth and influence. Beecher, however, rejected such obvious badges as a method of determining moral status and adopted instead a psychologically based system. People like Beecher and his parishioners, who had sensitive natures, were surely on the higher plane. The problem was that these kinds of individuals

were in the minority in urban environments like Brooklyn. Therefore, for society as a whole, fear in the form of law was necessary. But for individuals who have reached the "higher and nobler plane . . . fear no longer has any function."

Beecher never seemed to doubt that man should be released from the arbitrary ideas and institutions of the past, but he was not entirely clear about what should take their place. Instead of intellect, he recommended emotion; instead of religious doctrine, love; instead of duty, spiritual affinity. How these vague concepts would preserve social order was never specifically articulated. But Beecher's brand of Protestantism did not depend on logic or intellect; his role as a minister was based on an emotional and spiritual purity. Like the nineteenth-century woman--perhaps like the mother he so idolized--Beecher expected to inspire rather than inform. If religion in nineteenth-century middle-class culture had become feminized, so, too, had the image of the minister.⁴⁷ Because of Beecher's own background, it was an image he readily adopted--acting out successfully the same kind of inspirational model for his church that Elizabeth had been less successfully badgered into playing for her husband and family.

⁴⁷ See Douglas, The Feminization of American Culture.

Indeed, his success is evident in descriptions of the 1872 "Silver Wedding" Anniversary of Plymouth Church. This not only illustrates Beecher's image of himself as a model of feminine goodness but also the phenomenal popularity he achieved. The musical programs, lectures, processions of children, and prayer meetings which the church planned to commemorate Beecher's twenty-five years with Plymouth Church occupied an entire week in October 1872. On the first day a procession of children and adults from the various Sunday Schools marched past Beecher's house with drum rolls and band music. Beecher himself stood on his front porch, his face "wreathed" in smiles of expectation. As the column approached "expressing by the delight depicted upon their faces their happiness at seeing him and love for him in their hearts," pandemonium broke loose:

Handkerchiefs were waved, banners held aloft, smiles everywhere, cheers triumphant rent the air, and to complete one of the most joyous demonstrations that any one clergyman was ever made the recipient of, a perfect shower of the choicest bouquets were cast at Mr. Beecher's feet . . . one of the urchins succeeding with admirable precision in planting a rosebud on Mr. Beecher's eye.⁴⁸

⁴⁸Thompson, pp. 181-182.

Gratified by this touching display, Beecher followed the "Wedding Procession" to the church for another round of cheering. One of the banners posted over the platform read, "One family in heaven and earth."⁴⁹

On the next day of this commemorative week, Beecher related the story of how he came to Plymouth Church from Indiana. In his characteristic emotional style, he made his business negotiations with the church's representative sound like a seduction! He was living in Indiana in 1846, Beecher recalled, when an "innocent-looking" gentleman appeared and introduced himself; he "proved to be a conspirer against my person. He induced me to go with him on fishing excursions, for drives and other amusements, and when he had got out of me what he wanted, he told of his deep-laid scheme of getting me away from the land of the West."⁵⁰

In 1871, Beecher made explicit his tendency to identify religion, God, and Christ with feminine gentleness rather than male authority:

The opening phrase [of the Lord's Prayer], Our Father, is the key to Christianity. God is father; government is personal. All the

⁴⁹Ibid., pp. 202-203.

⁵⁰Ibid.

tenderness which now is stored
up in the word "mother" was of old
included in the name "father."⁵¹

Thus, did Beecher, in a few words, reverse the traditional thrust of Christianity! Simply translate "father" to read "mother" and all the mysteries of religion are explained. If any doubt remains as to Beecher's vision of himself, or his congregation's acceptance of that image, the following quote of a verse from the "Plymouth Silver Wedding Anthem" composed by the church organist especially for the occasion should dispel it:

Who speak of aught but joy?
Five and twenty years together
We have trod the Way of life
Shared its fair and stormy weather
Church and Pastor--Man and wife!⁵²

This obvious equation--church equals man, pastor equals wife--is, of course, completely contrary to the Biblical representation of the church as bride with Christ as bridegroom. Once again, Beecher had successfully reversed traditional symbolism.

Henry Ward Beecher was certainly not the initiator of this concept of the divine nature of womanhood. He was merely an extraordinarily popular spokesman for a general

⁵¹Henry Ward Beecher, The Life of Christ (New York 1871), p. 345.

⁵²Thompson, p. 223.

cultural shift. The ubiquity of this point of view obviates any need to explain Beecher's idealization of woman in Freudian terms--by the loss of his own mother at an early age. More important is that the majority of the young men who were attracted to Plymouth Church had, like Beecher, witnessed the weakening of their father's ability to exert authority--and, as Beecher had, turned to the feminine model for guidance.

Beecher's genius was that he articulated for the uprooted individuals of his congregation--including Theodore and Elizabeth Tilton--a set of values which might replace the bonds of traditional communal society. The focus he provided was the home, joined by affinity and guarded by woman. Beecher's contention was that the divine redemptive love of woman was intuitive; that is, an individual who had attained the "higher religious sphere" would have, like woman, an intuitive understanding of right behavior.

In his sermons, Beecher never dealt directly with the problem of a "higher" individual whose inner moral sense instructed him to disobey the law--he always assumed that all laws were good and benevolent in nature and those on the higher stage of moral development would obey them automatically. However, Beecher's personal marital problems and his need for love eventually created for him, just such a dilemma in his own life.

Beecher had met his future wife Eunice Bullard when he was a student at Amherst College. She was the daughter of a prosperous farmer in Sutton, Massachusetts; at the time of their meeting she was teaching school. They were to be engaged seven years before marrying in 1837 after Henry Ward's graduation from Lane Seminary in Ohio. Very little is known of the relationship between the couple except for some mostly non-revealing correspondence and a novel Eunice Beecher wrote in 1859 entitled From Dawn to Daylight: The Simple Story of a Western Home, which was a thinly veiled account of their early years together. These sources, however, do contain some hints as to the nature of their marriage.

Apparently during the early years Eunice was the recipient of all the love and attention Henry Ward was capable of lavishing on the object of his "genius for friendship." At least one letter Eunice wrote to Beecher before their marriage referred to the long, intimate dialogues the two engaged in and the possibilities of "perfecting" their friendship as well as their love.⁵³ It was just the kind of "uncritical" adoration Henry Ward craved. In fact, if one is to judge from the extant letters the couple exchanged when apart, the first

⁵³Eunice Bullard to HWB, Winter 1834-1835, Beecher Papers, Box 7, Folder 308, Yale.

ten to fifteen years of their marriage were characterized by a deep affection and regard for each other. Many of those which do survive have been carefully censored, however, presumably by the family. For example, in 1847 (ten years after their marriage) Beecher wrote to Eunice, "I shall not write again--I do despise writing--especially when I feel, Oh how much better would one look . . . [two lines inked out], be than ten thousand letters." The letter was signed, "Your more than ever loving and affectionate husband."⁵⁴

These first ten years which the Beechers spent in small parishes in Indiana seemed to be the most difficult for Eunice. Disappointment at being separated from her parents and community, as well as disillusionment with the role of wife and mother, combined to make her unhappy. Paxton Hibben reports that it was common knowledge among the Indiana parishioners that Eunice was miserable in Indiana and complained constantly. Part of this, Hibben attributes to Eunice's knowledge that Henry Ward began having affairs with other women about 1841. He claims that her hair turned gray because of it.⁵⁵ However, there is no direct evidence of any such thing.

⁵⁴HWB to Eunice Beecher, 27 September 1847, Beecher Papers, Box 7, Folder 308, Yale.

⁵⁵Hibben, p. 86.

Of course, later, when more concrete proof came out that Beecher had affairs in Brooklyn, many of his contemporaries as well as historians jumped to the conclusion that it all began in Indiana.

Whatever the truth, Eunice, like Elizabeth Tilton and other middle-class women of their generation, had ample reason for being discontent with the kind of life marriage brought. In From Dawn to Daylight, Eunice discusses the frustrations she encountered. First was the trauma of leaving the home of her childhood--parents, brothers, and sisters--to join her husband in Indiana. "The joys and sorrows, hopes and fears, belonging to those last days, when a young, warm-hearted girl prepares to leave father and mother, brother and sister, to go forth with the chosen one, need no description."⁵⁶ Eunice, however, stressed the anguish more than the joys:

Will he deal gently with her
always--remembering that he is now
her all--that for his dear sake,
she leaves every tie, and each
familiar scene, to follow him into
a land of strangers.⁵⁷

It was a sentiment Elizabeth Tilton could have echoed after she and Theodore moved into the new house in 1866, and her family was forbidden to visit.

⁵⁶Eunice Beecher, From Dawn to Daylight: The Simple Story of a Western Home (New York 1859), p. 39.

⁵⁷Ibid.

More than just separation from home, however, troubled Eunice after the move. She found life in Indiana extreme in its physical demands, and the people there crude and unfriendly. Her husband was too busy to spend much time with her; in addition, she did not possess his "healthful elasticity of spirit" and "natural mirthfulness" to help cope with "life's burdens."⁵⁸ Often, when she felt her strength and "capacity for exertion diminishing," she wrote, her "youthful aspirations were brought vividly back to her mind."⁵⁹

To spend a lifetime in this
wearisome, unchanging routine--
caring only for bodily wants--to
cook--to wash and mend--was that
all woman was born for?⁶⁰

Eunice's uneasiness sprang from the recognition that a woman who devoted her entire efforts to housekeeping and child care could not possibly be a fit companion for a husband of "high intellectual" abilities. Indeed, as she perceived their early intellectual communication slipping away, it caused her "periods of despondency" which she tried to keep "carefully hidden" from Henry Ward.⁶¹ She

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 292.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid., pp. 292-293.

⁶¹ Ibid.

may have thought her feelings were hidden but obviously her unhappiness was interpreted by parishioners, and by her husband himself, as whimpering complaints and demands for his precious time.⁶²

Eunice, however, made an effort to solve her domestic frustration in ways similar to many middle-class women. She learned, as she said in her novel, to place a "higher estimate on purely domestic qualifications--to feel that a woman's proper ambition should be, the endeavor to relieve her husband . . . from those homecares which are incompatible with high mental effort--that he may turn, when wearied and perplexed with parochial or public duties, to his own hearth as a resting place--the sweetest earthly refuge from care and trouble."⁶³

Although Eunice adopted what was to become a traditional solution to the problem, she belonged to a generation of women for whom this represented a novel, even radical departure. Like Elizabeth Tilton, Eunice had to make a self-conscious and intense effort to convince herself that domesticity and devotion to her husband offered the greatest possible rewards.

⁶²Eunice Beecher to HWB, 20 September 1843, Beecher Papers, Box 7, Folder 308, Yale. In this letter Eunice lets her husband know that she is aware of his perception of her as a whimpering complainer.

⁶³Eunice Beecher, From Dawn to Daylight, p. 293.

It is a moot question whether either of them ever really believed in the role, but there is no doubt that Henry Ward and Eunice grew apart. Beecher's letters to his wife became more impersonal and perfunctory. More and more he vented his emotional frustration in his sermons. In 1859 he analyzed in thinly veiled generalizations the reasons for the deterioration of his marriage:

Domestic unhappiness comes from the fact that people do not know or do not enough recognize the peculiarities of each other's natures. They expect impossible things of each other. If a flaming demonstrative nature and a cool, undemonstrative nature come together, neither of whom understands or makes allowance for the peculiarities of the other, there can hardly fail of being unhappiness.⁶⁴

Clearly, Beecher had come to think of Eunice, not as his worshipful admirer, but as "cool," "undemonstrative," and critical. In fact, Beecher may have compared Eunice's recent judgmental tendencies to those of his father. Neither understood Beecher's own "flaming demonstrative" nature.

As a result, Beecher apparently turned to someone who did understand and sympathize--Lucy Maria Bowen, the wife of his closest friend in Plymouth Church. She was

⁶⁴HWB Sermon, Independent, 27 October 1859. Quoted in Hibben, p. 144.

the daughter of abolitionist Lewis Tappan, a powerful member of Plymouth Church; while her husband, Henry Bowen, was the church's principal founder. Little is known of the liaison between Beecher and Lucy. Indeed, it cannot actually be proven, but a variety of evidence strongly suggests that it did take place. For example, Lucy's husband seems to have discovered the affair around 1858, for in a letter to Beecher in 1863, Bowen claimed to have been a "silent sufferer" from about 1857-1858 on.⁶⁵ Later, in his testimony before the Church Council, Bowen stated he learned Beecher was a "libertine" and an "adulterer" around the year 1860 from a "lady" whose veracity he could "hardly doubt."⁶⁶ Plymouth Church records also indicate that this was the approximate time Bowen, while still retaining his pew, ceased to attend church meetings.⁶⁷ Most damaging, however, was Bowen's letter to Theodore Tilton in 1863 which darkly hinted that "one word" from him (Bowen) would cause a "revolution in Plymouth Church."⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Henry C. Bowen to HWB, 31 July 1863, Beecher Papers, Box 9, Folder 345, Yale.

⁶⁶ Henry Bowen's Statement to the Examining Committee of Plymouth Church, 4 February 1876. In the Independent, 10 February 1876, p. 3.

⁶⁷ Plymouth Church Records, Book #39, Minutes of the Board of Trustees 1856-1900.

⁶⁸ Henry C. Bowen to Theodore Tilton, 14 June 1863, Beecher Collection, Box 1, Library of Congress. Later, after the Congregational Council when Bowen admitted he

Further evidence is Beecher's own agitated state of mind during this period. Bowen's discovery of the affair with Lucy seems to have brought on an attack of anxiety of the kind Beecher had not experienced since childhood. In his trial testimony, as Beecher described the course of his ministerial career, he noted that between 1856 and 1858 he experienced "violent" but "elusive" symptoms which he at first attributed to apoplexy but soon concluded were due to "excessive cerebral activity and fatigue-over-action of the mind."⁶⁹ In a letter written to a friend in 1858 Beecher begged off from a social engagement because he was so "nervous" and "sleepless" that he "could not bear social excitement during the day."⁷⁰ The pattern was an old one he could not alter, the wrongdoing, followed by shame, fear, dread, and anguish. But Beecher was learning how to translate his anguish into more general terms that would enhance rather than diminish his effectiveness as a minister.

In 1856--possibly in a state of agitation over the affair with Lucy--Beecher delivered a sermon entitled "The

knew Beecher to be an adulterer, Bowen still insisted that it was not his wife who had been involved. He would not reveal names but said he knew of several women whom Beecher had seduced.

⁶⁹HWB testimony, Trial, vol. III, p. 127.

⁷⁰HWB to J. P. Clarke, January 1858, Beecher Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard.

Seducer." It was often Beecher's habit to give sermons on topics which were of immediate concern to himself, and this was no exception. In "The Seducer" he accomplished two purposes, both of which were important to his psychological well-being. The more obvious one was indirectly to confess his guilt to his public and heap upon himself all the condemnation he perhaps thought he deserved. "The polished scoundrel betrays her to abandon her," Beecher cried, "and walks the street to boast his hellish deed." Worst of all, lamented the minister, the seducer is "courted, passed from honor to honor. . . . On her mangled corpse they stand to put the laurels on her murderer's brow!" Why do you honor me, when I am a guilty sinner? he seemed to be saying. And much as Beecher may have been developing the Gospel of Love and forgiveness, in this sermon, he reverted to his father's stern style. "When I see such things as these," thundered Beecher, "I thank God that there is a judgment and that there is a hell!"

The second objective Beecher manages to achieve in this sermon is just as characteristic. Strangely enough, although the sermon is entitled "The Seducer," its focus is primarily on the victim of the seduction and her sufferings. These are presented at such great length and in such graphic detail that it almost seems as if Beecher

himself identified not with the seducer, but with the innocent victim! We have seen that as a child, Beecher often did things which got him, or threatened to get him, into trouble with his father, when, in fact, what he felt he needed was attention, love, and understanding. Now, however, his sins threatened to bring about public censure when he thought of himself as the innocent victim of a sinful world. This interpretation seems to be reinforced, by the beginning of the sermon when Beecher hastens, somewhat gratuitously, to inform his listeners that the seducer's victim cannot be considered an "accomplice." She is a "sufferer" who has been "betrayed" by the seducer who played upon her "noblest affections." Surely, Beecher is grappling with the notion that he has been led astray only by his honest, deeply felt need for affection. In a long section, Beecher attempts to elicit sympathy from the audience for the trusting victim:

The accursed sorcerer opens the door of the world to push her forth. She looks out all shuddering; for there is shame, and sharp-toothed hatred, and chattering slander, and malignant envy, and triumphing jealousy, and murderous revenge--these are seen rising before her; clouds full of fire, that burn but will not kill.⁷¹

⁷¹HWB, "The Seducer," in The Beecher-Tilton Investigation: The Scandal of the Age (Philadelphia 1874), p. 75.

Of course, Beecher is implying the victim does not deserve such a fate. He thought he did not deserve such a fate! But in a strange twist of mind, Beecher considered himself the innocent victim of an unfair world! And he was probably describing what he thought was in store for him if Bowen chose to reveal the affair. For reasons we shall examine in the next chapter, Bowen concealed the adultery from the church and the public; Beecher had escaped disgrace this time.

Besides exorcising guilt by delivering this emotional sermon, Beecher simultaneously became acquainted with a set of beliefs which would help rationalize his own behavior as well as shape the Gospel of Love. At about the same time the minister was feeling both guilty and victimized by sexual temptation, he met one of the leaders of a group of social radicals. Appearing one evening in 1856 at a meeting at Beecher's home, was Stephen Pearl Andrews.⁷² Andrews was a radical political and social philosopher who, like Beecher, took the concept of freedom to its ultimate conclusion. Unlike Beecher, however, he argued publicly that man could be perfected and therefore capable of making all his own decisions without the need for governmental or religious institutions. Marriage,

⁷²"Mr. Beecher's Initiation into Free Love," unsigned manuscript, 1872, Woodhull Collection, University of Southern Illinois, Carbondale.

Andrews proclaimed, was just another institution which was oppressive and ought to be abolished. Perfect love, not human law, ought to determine sexual relationships.⁷³

Beecher was fascinated by Andrews' theories, since they coincided with his own ideas on the need for freedom and the satisfaction of emotional needs. But what attracted him most was the idea that spiritual, holy love, rather than the legalistic bonds of marriage, should determine sexual relations. If true, this would explain his own unhappiness with Eunice--their love had vanished long ago--and his "affinity" for Lucy Maria.

Another source which may have helped confirm these ideas was a book on love and sex written by his college friend Orson Fowler. In Love and Parentage, published in 1843, Fowler explicitly stated that "spiritual love" was equal to matrimony and "entitled to its prerogatives [sex] . . . without the least regard to the presence or absence of the legal ceremony."⁷⁴ Thus, the real marriage takes place when the couple recognizes their attraction for each other, not when the ceremony occurs. Fowler was convinced that woman's natural purity would guide her

⁷³Madeleine Bettina Stern, The Pantarch: A Biography of Stephen Pearl Andrews (New York 1977).

⁷⁴O. S. Fowler, Love and Parentage (New York 1843), p. 87.

judgment in choosing a mate based on spiritual love. Though Fowler remained conservative on the surface, continuing to argue that the only place for this spiritualized romantic love was within marriage, he made it very clear that even within that institution, if love were not present, the marriage should be dissolved. In short, people should adjust their legal obligations to their feelings, not their feelings to duty. It is easy to understand why Beecher embraced such ideas.

Still, the minister was perceptive enough a judge of the public temper to realize that most middle-class Americans, although generally welcoming the new notions on romantic love, were not ready to contemplate the abolition of marriage. In fact, ironically, just the opposite was true; most people became more rigid regarding the institution, demanding not only legal commitment, but exalted love. We have seen how this changing ideal of marriage brought emotional turmoil as well as structural change to the Tilton marriage. So, although Beecher, in his sermons, focused more and more on the importance of emotion and love as guiding principles of society, he always stopped short of condemning the marriage bond. In fact, when asked about the "new theories of marriage"--meaning the absence of legal marriage--Beecher responded that the aspirations of the reformers like Andrews were "unrealistic" because they assumed all men were "perfect,"

when in reality most men still required "external law" to keep them from a "plunge into utter ruin."⁷⁵

Undoubtedly, in his mind, Beecher reserved the right of those like himself who had reached the "higher sphere" to act upon their "intuition" without regard for "external forms."

By the late 1860s, then, Henry Ward Beecher's personal charisma and distinctive formulation of the Gospel of Love had achieved for him the popularity and public approval he had always sought. One aspect of this success was his appeal to the women of his congregation.⁷⁶ Given his nature, Beecher must have found it very difficult, even impossible, to resist the praise and adulation of these women, even though it might threaten his career. The minister was so hungry for love, both personal and

⁷⁵"The New Theories of Marriage," Christian Union, 26 July 1871. On the issue of Free Love, no less a respected personage than Elizabeth Cady Stanton had this to say: "We are one and all free lovers at heart, although we may not have thought so. We all believe in a good time coming, either in this world or another, when man and woman will be good and wise, when they will be 'a law unto themselves,' and when therefore the external law of compulsion will be no longer needed." Elizabeth Cady Stanton Speech, "On Marriage and Divorce," 1870; in Signs, vol. 1, no. 1 (Autumn 1975), pp. 265-268.

⁷⁶The Chicago Tribune reported that Beecher received many love letters from women. "He receives love letters by the ream and cord. . . . His wife reads them before he does." Chicago Tribune, 24 July 1874, p. 1, col. 6.

public, that he was willing to risk the one for the other. Thus, he was irresistibly drawn to the "uncritical praise" of Elizabeth Tilton. In Chapter VIII we shall examine the effect that entering into Beecher's "higher sphere" had on the Tilton marriage and on Elizabeth's concept of herself as a woman. First, however, we will pause to explore the social conflict produced by Beecher's widespread popularity in Plymouth Church and Brooklyn.

P A R T I I

SOCIAL ORIGINS OF THE SCANDAL

C H A P T E R V

PLYMOUTH: "THE ROCK UPON WHICH MR. BEECHER STANDS"

The "Beecher-Tilton affair" did not begin in 1866 when the minister began calling on Mrs. Tilton, or even in 1860 when he and Theodore Tilton became colleagues. Rather, its origins go back to conflicts initiated in 1848 when Henry Ward Beecher was called to Brooklyn to take over the pastorate of Plymouth Church. Just as changing patterns in the Tilton marriage would eventually lead to a scandal, the effect of Beecher's approach to religion on Plymouth Church had a great deal to do with the emergence of the scandal as a public event.

The 1840s were a time of extremely rapid growth for the New York City area, and Brooklyn, across the East River, was part of this expansion. The small Dutch community of the 1820s and 1830s had already been lost to a mixture of new ethnic groups and commercial activity. Irish and German immigrants dominated the eastern and northern areas of the city while wealthy Yankee merchants developed Brooklyn Heights as New York's newest suburb. The ferries connecting Brooklyn with New York (the

Brooklyn Bridge was not built until the 1880s) did a brisk business as commuters daily jammed their decks.¹

The founding of Plymouth Church was part of the explosion of population and commercial expansion which characterized this period of Brooklyn's history. Later Brooklyn would earn the designation "city of churches," and it was during the 1840s and 1850s that the majority of them were established.² Plymouth was an offshoot of the first Congregational Church formed in Brooklyn, the Church of the Pilgrims.

Both the Church of the Pilgrims and Plymouth Church were a part of the attempt to revive Congregationalism in areas outside New England. Since the Plan of Union in 1801 had provided that churches organized by Congregationalists and/or Presbyterians outside New England would adopt Presbyterian form, the former denomination was waning. Many New Englanders who now populated New York City were unhappy with this arrangement: Henry C. Bowen and John T. Howard were two such individuals.

¹Harold Coffin Syrett, The City of Brooklyn 1865-1898: A Political History (New York 1944), pp. 13-19.

²Henry R. Stiles, ed., The Civil, Political, Professional, and Ecclesiastical History and Commercial and Industrial Record of the County of Kings and the City of Brooklyn, New York, from 1683 to 1844, 2 vols. (New York 1884), pp. 815-824.

Bowen and Howard had migrated to New York City in the 1820s, Howard from Salem, Massachusetts, and Bowen from Woodstock, Connecticut. Howard was the son of an established Salem merchant who simply moved his business to the more active city. Bowen's background was less prestigious: he was a member of an old Woodstock family but had been only a clerk in a small store in that town. After his arrival in New York, however, Bowen's fortunes improved when he obtained a position in Lewis and Arthur Tappan's prosperous silk importing business and married Lewis Tappan's daughter. Both Bowen and Howard were well established financially by the time they took up residence in fashionable brownstones on Brooklyn Heights.³

Bowen and Howard first joined the local Presbyterian church, but soon decided to take the initiative in bringing the traditional religion of New England, Congregationalism, to the Heights. As a result, in 1844 they joined with others to found the Church of the Pilgrims and called, as its pastor, Richard Salter Storrs--a young clergyman from a family boasting a long line of traditional Congregational ministers. It is unclear why these men felt the need only three years later to break away and begin another Congregational church. The History of

³Henry W. B. Howard, ed., The Eagle and Brooklyn, 2 vols. (Brooklyn 1893), vol. 2, pp. 294-296.

Plymouth Church says only that the population increase of the Heights demanded it, and "several public spirited Christian gentlemen determined to supply that want."⁴ Hints abound, however, that when Rev. Storrs arrived in late 1846 to take up his pastoral duties, it soon became apparent that he was too stodgy and conservative for some of the members. By early the next year, Bowen and Howard were planning to organize another church.⁵

Apparently, while Storrs was a gifted scholar and theologian, he was not aggressive enough in selling his religion to cause revivals and increase the membership. Bowen insisted that "splitting hairs in theology will not save souls."⁶ As a result, one Plymouth member later commented, the founders were "convinced that a wide and unoccupied field of influence was open to them in the city of Brooklyn."⁷ Indeed, Bowen especially seemed persuaded that the time was ripe to adopt the methods of business enterprise to religious endeavor. He wrote to Beecher in 1847:

⁴Noyes L. Thompson, The History of Plymouth Church (Henry Ward Beecher) 1847-1872 (New York 1873), p. 65.

⁵Henry C. Bowen to HWB, 26 March 1847, Beecher Papers, Box 9, Folder 345, Yale.

⁶Henry C. Bowen to HWB, 6 August 1847, Beecher Papers, Box 9, Folder 345, Yale.

⁷Joseph Howard, Jr., The Life of Henry Ward Beecher (Philadelphia 1887), p. 172.

We are on the eve of the
greatest events in this country.
Hundreds and hundreds of thousands
from all nations are yearly landed
upon our northern and eastern
shores.⁸

"Now is the time for the church to awake," Bowen argued.

"A more propitious time never was, when prospects were so good."⁹ Indeed, most accounts of the founders of the church stress their commitment to enterprising activities. One parishioner later wrote that the "greater number" were "aggressive men" and "of them all," Bowen was the "most aggressive and the most of a leader."¹⁰

Another reason for the founding of Plymouth Church was the prosperous economic climate of the 1840s. "Have seen much of business in this city the past fourteen years," Bowen enthused in a letter to Beecher, "but never saw anything to be compared with the present year and more particularly the present season. We hardly have time to eat and sleep and have fifty men employed all told. We could use 25 more if we had the room to show the goods." Bowen expressed his astonishment ("I hardly know what to

⁸Henry C. Bowen to HWB, 6 August 1847, Beecher Papers, Box 9, Folder 345, Yale.

⁹Henry C. Bowen to HWB, 1 September 1847, Beecher Papers, Box 9, Folder 345, Yale.

¹⁰Stephen M. Griswold, Sixty Years with Plymouth Church (Chicago 1907), pp. 28, 61.

make of it") and attributed the unexpected prosperity to a "kind providence favoring us with a rich harvest." But he added, with some concern, "may it not prove a curse to us." In the same letter, Bowen followed the reference to a possible "curse" with an explanation and a solution. This prosperity may be, he feared, "hardening our hearts and riveting them more closely to the work." The solution? "Now is the time to do great things to extend Christ's kingdom."¹¹ Like Theodore Tilton later on, Bowen was experiencing uneasy guilt over his worldly success.

Bowen was not suggesting, however, that he and others turn away from business and commerce, but only that they bring the methods and results of that prosperity to church affairs. This would explain why he was dissatisfied with Storrs' preaching in the Church of the Pilgrims; he wanted someone who could package the traditional doctrines of Congregationalism in marketable form and thus save more souls. From the beginning, Henry Ward Beecher seemed the man for the job. "Your name was spoken of at the first prayer meeting," Bowen wrote to Beecher, "as the man of our choice."¹²

¹¹Henry C. Bowen to HWB, 1 September 1847, Beecher Papers, Box 9, Folder 345, Yale.

¹²Henry C. Bowen to HWB, 20 May 1847, Beecher Papers, Box 9, Folder 345, Yale.

What was important to the founders of Plymouth Church, and what Beecher had demonstrated he could do, was bring in the crowds. "God had . . . prepared you and given you," wrote Bowen to Beecher, "the ability--the happy faculty to present truth to the conscience and heart in a way to produce an effect."¹³ Although some observers were already noticing that Beecher's theology was inconsistent, the preacher's followers argued that "he preached Christ as revealed in his own heart."¹⁴ Indeed, as we have seen, the foundation of Beecher's popularity lay in his ability to project emotion, rather than to display theological logic. This talent allowed his audience to identify with him and created the magnetism for which he became so famous.

From the moment Beecher took charge of his new parish in 1848 he was a controversial figure. There were those who doubted his theological soundness and who predicted he would last less than a year, especially after the first few sermons, which caused "dissatisfaction" to some and "astonishment" to all.¹⁵ But Brooklynites, particularly those of New England origin, were attracted by

¹³Henry C. Bowen to HWB, 21 July 1847, Beecher Papers, Box 9, Folder 345, Yale.

¹⁴John H. Barrows, Henry Ward Beecher: The Shakespeare of the Pulpit (New York 1893), p. 490.

¹⁵Thompson, p. 64.

Beecher's style; the church grew faster than any other in the "city of churches," quickly surpassing the older Church of the Pilgrims. Within ten years it was the largest in the city.¹⁶

However, issues that would profoundly influence the crisis of the 1870s began taking form soon after Beecher was installed. They revolved around the very nature of a Congregational church and the role of its minister. Bowen may have been interested in winning large numbers of converts, but he was also very much committed to a revival of Congregational polity. Plymouth Church was not, after all, a camp meeting, where the denominational orientation of the preacher did not matter. Would Plymouth Church continue as a Congregational church or would it simply provide a platform for the effusive personality of Henry Ward Beecher himself? From the beginning, hostile observers pointed out that a Plymouth Church service was not the accustomed "prayerful worship" but a "performance" which "glorified" not Christ but Beecher himself.¹⁷ Many people in Brooklyn--particularly the older Church of the Pilgrims--became more and more

¹⁶Ibid., p. 160.

¹⁷William Beach summation, Theodore Tilton vs. Henry Ward Beecher, Action for Crim. Con., 3 vols. (New York 1875), vol. III, p. 319.

disturbed by the lack of religious doctrine and moral standards in the new church--the tendency of Beecher to demand nothing from his congregation but personal loyalty. And the fact is that Beecher never did want to confine himself to ministering to a particular flock. "My ministry," he wrote his brother in 1852, "is much more a ministry to the world than to the Church."¹⁸

Indeed, the records of Plymouth Church indicate that over the course of twenty-five years, Beecher gradually altered the rules and character of the church to fit his own objectives. Even Bowen, the founder most committed to Congregationalism, sometimes opposed these changes; but especially in the early years he more often acquiesced, simply because Beecher was so successful. Beecher's influence on the church as an institution became apparent almost immediately upon his arrival in Brooklyn Heights. Before he appeared, in July 1847, Bowen and Howard--perhaps Bowen alone--had composed the Ecclesiastical Principles and Rules, the Covenant, and Form of Admission for the church. They had also chosen the name Plymouth, which signified their determination to preserve their New England heritage in the heterogeneous city of Brooklyn. The rules, covenant, and form of admission, too, reflected the standard approach to organization of

¹⁸HWB to Charles Jones [November 1852], Beecher Papers, Yale.

Congregational bodies. Prior to Beecher's appearance, the members were sufficiently satisfied with Bowen's drafts that they ordered a hundred copies printed and ready for distribution.¹⁹

But immediately after Beecher's installation, he moved for some changes in these rules.²⁰ The very first ecclesiastical principle, for example, began with the statement, "This church regards the scriptures as the only infallible guide in matters of church order and discipline, and is therefore, answerable to no other ecclesiastical body."²¹ This rule deliberately stressed independence of a Congregational church from other religious bodies, and its dependence solely on scripture to reveal the proper course of conduct. Beecher substituted another statement: "This church is an independent ecclesiastical body; and in matters of doctrine, order and discipline, is answerable to no other organization."²² In his version, the scriptures are left out entirely! Beecher's opponents would say, of course, that he left them out of his preaching as well. Instead, Beecher

¹⁹Plymouth Church Records, Book #21, Minutes, Baptisms, Admissions, 1847-1865, 30 August 1847, Plymouth Church.

²⁰Ibid., 25 February 1848.

²¹Ibid., 30 July 1847.

²²Ibid., 17 April 1848.

wanted the independence of the church (and of his own style?) to stand alone in the first rule. It was still Congregationalism--but with a subtly different point of view: one that fit Beecher's freewheeling style.

In another change having to do with scriptures, Beecher further watered down the "infallibility" of the Articles of Faith. The original version declared that the Old and New Testaments were "given by inspiration of God"; Beecher wanted it to read simply "inspired of God." Again, a far less powerful version. Similarly, the Bowen draft asserted that the scriptures were "the only perfect rule of faith and practice," while Beecher substituted "authoritative" for "perfect."²³

Beecher also wanted to modify the Article of Faith having to do with God. Bowen's original version stressed the trinity, and the Deity's commanding if somewhat frightening power:

We believe in one God, subsisting in three persons, the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, eternal, unchangeable and omnipresent; infinite in power, wisdom and holiness; the creator and preserver of

²³ Ibid.

all things; whose purposes and providence extend to all events, and who exercises a righteous moral government over all his intelligent creatures.²⁴

Beecher's substitute read: "We believe in the existence of one everlasting and True God, Sovereign and unchangeable, Infinite in Power, wisdom and Goodness." Bowen's version dwells on God's righteous moral government; Beecher's concludes with a reference to His benevolence.²⁵

In the rules for admission, too, Beecher sought to play down complicated procedures and authoritarianism. In the original rule for admission of new members, Bowen spent two long paragraphs discussing the scrutiny of applicants by an Examining Committee, gathering of testimonials, and giving notice to the congregation two weeks in advance. Beecher cut the verbiage by more than half, stating simply that application should be made to the Committee with no testimonials required, and the congregation should have only one week's notice.²⁶

Obviously, the direction of these alterations was to make it easier to get into the church and to stay in. As Beecher's popularity grew, he loosened still further

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Ibid.

the admission standards and disciplining functions of the church. The culmination of this trend came in 1871 when, through Beecher's influence, the church ceased to require new members to subscribe to any of the Articles of Faith upon admission. To join the church, all one had to do was to express the "desire" to become a "Christian."²⁷ A minority in the church protested this move, and the more orthodox ministers in Brooklyn were appalled. There was talk of disfellowshipping Plymouth Church even then. The Brooklyn Eagle, generally sympathetic to Beecher, pointed out that the minister had finally "abjured Calvinism" and showed his congregation a "less rugged path to the happiness of the hereafter."²⁸

A similar pattern was evident in matters of church discipline. The covenant of the church stressed the collective nature of Congregationalism in admonishing each member to "watch over" every other member and to "submit to necessary discipline."²⁹ In colonial Puritan churches "discipline" had extended to all areas of the parishioners' lives, not just theological beliefs. Communicants were to avoid all causes of "scandal" whether in

²⁷ Plymouth Church Records, Book #36, Minutes 1865-1874, 7 January 1870, Plymouth Church.

²⁸ Brooklyn Eagle, 9 January 1871.

²⁹ Plymouth Church Records, Book #21, Minutes, Baptisms, Admissions, 1847-1865, 17 April 1848.

religious, economic, political, or social spheres. Therefore, in the early years of Plymouth Church, much time and attention went into the discipline of members. Many of these cases had to do with sexual immorality. But another case demonstrates just how far-reaching the church thought its responsibility lay: in 1850, one of the founders was tried for dishonest business practices. Dr. Charles Rowland was accused of "falsehoods" in the conduct of his insurance business. Some of the members who had dealings with Rowland insisted that such practices were traditionally within the purview of Congregational discipline. The church as a whole agreed and convicted Rowland.³⁰ Beecher did not object to this procedure--he may have been too new in Brooklyn--but he did not encourage such action.

By 1858, however, when his popularity was greater, he could and did take a direct hand in another similar matter. In that year, George Livingston, a liquor dealer, applied for admission to the church. The admissions committee, of which Beecher was a member, approved, even though the church had declared itself a temperance organization and annually raised money to support temperance societies. But several members did protest Livingston's admission, insisting that his occupation proved him

³⁰ Ibid., 23 February 1850.

unworthy of membership. Predictably, Beecher responded by pointing out that as long as Livingston assured the church that he himself was "totally abstinent" he should be allowed in on the grounds that "in the present state of society it is not possible to exclude from membership all who may be so entangled."³¹ Everyone, Beecher implied, had to somehow be touched by worldly corruption. Thus the church was wrong (just as Beecher's father had been) when it insisted on making judgments. Later on, in the heat of the scandal, when Plymouth Church was attacked by the other Congregational churches in Brooklyn, the members declared that they "rejected the responsibility of authority" and accepted only the responsibility of "affection."³² Beecher was essentially securing his personal popularity by emasculating the traditional authority of the church.

There was resistance, however, especially in the years before 1858, to this erosion of church authority and doctrine. Bowen himself was behind two movements to control Beecher's freedom of action in the areas of church funds and music.³³ But the most extensive attempt to

³¹Ibid., 3 December 1858.

³²Plymouth Church to the Brooklyn Congregational Council, March 1874, in The Brooklyn Council of 1874 (New York 1874), p. 120.

³³Plymouth Church Records, Book #21, 3 December 1852.

counter Beecher's influence came in 1856. By that time the membership had grown to around 750--too many people to actually know and "watch over" each other. Beecher was happy with this since he was not interested in discipline, and it was an indication of his own popularity. But older members were disturbed that the church was becoming, for the members if not for the minister, such an anonymous institution. A committee was appointed to find a solution to the problem; it was chaired by Henry Bowen's father-in-law, Lewis Tappan. (Also named was an enthusiastic new member--Theodore Tilton.)³⁴ The report submitted by this committee, reflecting Bowen's view, decried the growing ineffectiveness and anonymity of the church:

It is better that a Church should be small in numbers, if they are living Christians, than more numerous if the members have but little knowledge of each other, and are remiss in their religious duties.³⁵

Of course, no one was ready to limit the number who might join, so the Tappan committee proposed a remedy: they suggested small Methodist-type group meetings in private homes "to promote the temporal and spiritual welfare of

³⁴Ibid., 11 December 1856.

³⁵Ibid., 17 December 1856.

the members."³⁶ They went so far as to recommend appointment of an assistant pastor to oversee visitation and "promote the spiritual good" of the church.³⁷ This was a veiled slap at Beecher who, despite his growing popularity, could not or would not attend personally to the individual needs of his flock. The committee's plan was never carried out; the greatest revival in the church's history (1857-1858) doubled the membership and rendered the group idea untenable.³⁸

Beecher was not averse to using small social groups to make Plymouth Church a more attractive place but he wanted their emphasis to be on the encouragement of social and business contacts rather than prayer and "spiritual welfare." He was particularly interested in providing a place where young people could meet. Several members later remembered that one of the most unique and attractive features of the early church was this emphasis on social contact. One man recalled that after he first came to Brooklyn he was very lonely and about to be drawn into "harmful" ways when he chanced upon the fellowship of Plymouth Church. Subsequently he was never bored or

³⁶ Ibid., 11 December 1856.

³⁷ Ibid., 17 December 1856.

³⁸ Thompson, p. 160.

without the company of what he termed the "best society."³⁹ Elizabeth Tilton and her family found most of their friends in Plymouth Church after their move from New York City.

During these social hours of the first seven or eight years, Beecher mingled with each clique, introducing people and encouraging "mixing." John Howard remembered him as "democratic" in his insistence that all social classes be equal in these meetings--that servants, for example, should mingle with employers without self-consciousness. For Howard, this demonstrated Beecher's innocence of social realities. Separation of social classes, Howard claimed, was "inevitable" and Beecher simply did not understand the harsh facts of life. He thought this explained why after 1860 these popular social meetings were largely a thing of the past.⁴⁰

The truth was, however, that after Beecher's reputation had become solidly established, the preacher no longer needed to put the effort into such functions. The turning point was the revival of 1857-1858 which brought membership up to 1,200. By 1870 it was over 2,000.⁴¹ Finally, the minister no longer had to worry about

³⁹Griswold, p. 21.

⁴⁰Howard, HWB, p. 204.

⁴¹Thompson, p. 160.

strategies for a successful ministry--in fact, he did not have to do anything he did not want to do--and he quickly gave up such bothersome chores as social meetings and the few pastoral calls he had previously felt compelled to make. Beecher was free to concentrate on what he did best--preaching to thousands of admirers. Having set out to mass-produce a personalized religion, Beecher had succeeded perhaps beyond his wildest expectations.

By 1870 Beecher was secure enough in his position to declare that "external forms" should be of only peripheral concern.⁴² In fact, men of developed sensitivity had no need for such traditional institutions. As we have seen, he believed that "moral affinity," rather than institutional bonds should act as the "glue" of human society. Plymouth Church had demonstrated the possibility of transforming a traditional authoritarian institution into a group voluntarily attracted to each other--and to Henry Ward Beecher--by personal affinity. In the History of Plymouth Church written in 1873 the subtitle was Henry Ward Beecher--an indication that the minister himself had become the institution!

By the late 1860s Beecher's message was reaching even more than the hundreds who crowded Plymouth Church.

⁴²Christian Union, 1 January 1870, p. 8.

Beginning in 1859 his sermons were taken down stenographically and reported in newspapers across the country; he also had published a series of articles in the Independent, and his Seven Lectures to Young Men had been reprinted several times. Indeed, Beecher had become, in a remarkably short time more than a popular minister: he was the foundation of a large business about whose head swirled all the intrigue and power struggles common to the Gilded Age.

After Beecher arrived in Brooklyn his circle of friends included both of the prominent founders of Plymouth Church, Henry Bowen and John T. Howard, but it was Bowen who became his closest friend and business partner. Bowen had been so anxious to persuade Beecher to accept the call to the new church that he personally raised money to pay the minister's debts and moving expenses.⁴³ Authorizing the preacher to draw upon his own business firm for any money he needed, Bowen emphasized to Beecher, "We want you to be free of debt entirely."⁴⁴ At the same time that Bowen was organizing the church, he started a religious newspaper, the Independent, devoted to the revival of Congregationalism

⁴³ Henry C. Bowen to HWB, 26 March 1847, Beecher Papers, Box 9, Folder 345, Yale.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

in New York and to the cause of anti-slavery.⁴⁵ Soon after Beecher's arrival, Bowen invited him to become a regular contributor, thus providing the minister with a much wider opportunity to be heard. The two men became fast friends as well, and Beecher was often at Bowen's home--a mansion in the best section of Brooklyn Heights.

Their friendship continued for about eight years, even though Beecher's changes in church rules had put a strain upon it. More serious difficulties were created when Bowen discovered that Beecher was entirely undependable in his work habits as well as his financial dealings. As an efficient businessman, Bowen's patience was continually tried by Beecher's inability to get the articles for the Independent written on time. The publisher tried writing penalty clauses into Beecher's contract for missed deadlines, but to no avail.⁴⁶ As we have seen, Bowen finally had to hire Theodore Tilton to "ghost" Beecher's articles. In addition, Beecher's financial

⁴⁵ Lyman Abbott, ed., Henry Ward Beecher, A Sketch of His Career (New York 1883), p. 124. Bowen, like Beecher, was always committed to anti-slavery rather than abolitionism. The Independent was a moderate paper until Tilton became the editor; after he was fired it returned to the conservative side of moderate.

⁴⁶ For these disagreements between Bowen and Beecher, see the series of letters Bowen wrote to Beecher, 27 November 1856; 3 May 1860; 11 May 1861; 1 January 1863; all in the Beecher Collection, Box 1, Library of Congress. This series of problems was finally settled by arbitrator Charles Gould who awarded Bowen \$1,000 in damages.

account at the offices of the Independent was often overdrawn. On two occasions between 1855 and 1864 the two men had to submit their differences to a neutral friend for arbitration.⁴⁷

Worse than these annoying business problems, there is evidence, which we have already examined, that the minister engaged--around 1855--in an affair with Henry Bowen's wife, Lucy Maria. On that occasion Bowen swallowed his pride and accepted his private humiliation for the sake of his wife--and his continued economic prosperity. Bowen's financial position was extremely vulnerable around this time; his silk business had collapsed in the Panic of 1857 and in the early part of 1861 his dry goods merchandising firm went bankrupt because of the Civil War.⁴⁸ All Bowen had left was the Independent, and even that was in grave financial danger. The only thing keeping the paper afloat was Henry Ward Beecher--many people bought it just to read his articles and sermons. It must have been with deeply mixed feelings, then, that Henry Bowen in December 1861 offered the editorship of the paper to the errant minister. Fortunately, from Bowen's perspective, he was not asking Beecher to conduct the

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Henry Bowen biography, The Great Brooklyn Romance: All the Documents in the Famous Beecher-Tilton Case: Unabridged (New York 1874), pp. 95-99.

business of the paper--all the real work would be done by assistant editor Theodore Tilton--but only that his name appear as editor to increase circulation.

Theodore Tilton, who became more friendly with both Bowen and Beecher at this point, later confirmed that his employer was deeply disturbed by the wrongs Beecher had committed; on numerous occasions between 1860 and 1870, Tilton claimed, Bowen confided tales of Beecher's adulteries--often accompanied by an "exhibition" of a "deep sense of personal injury."⁴⁹ To Beecher's constant pleas that the two old friends resolve their difficulties and resume the social intimacy, Bowen responded with studied politeness. "In the relations which now exist between us, there is no want of cordiality, respect or sympathy," he wrote to Beecher in 1862. Significantly he then reiterated that he did not want to "damage" the paper. Referring to Beecher's transgressions, Bowen wrote, "If we either of us make one or two or 'seventy times seven' mistakes . . . we shall forgive each other and work on for God and humanity."⁵⁰

⁴⁹TT, "The True Story," December 1872, in the New York Tribune, 6 March 1875; and in the Trial, vol. II, pp. 716-719.

⁵⁰Henry C. Bowen to HWB, 1 May 1862, Box 1, Beecher Papers, Library of Congress.

In May 1863 Lucy Bowen's death revived all her husband's frustration and bitterness toward Beecher, and removed one powerful restraint--regard for Lucy's feelings--which had prevented him from making public Beecher's relations with his wife. It was at this point, as we have seen, that Bowen wrote to Tilton that one word from him--Bowen--could cause a "revolution" in Plymouth Church and drive Beecher from his pulpit.⁵¹ Yet to Beecher himself, when he returned that fall from a triumphal speaking tour of England, Bowen wrote that although he mourned the death of his wife, he hoped the past could now be "buried" and their friendship restored.⁵²

To someone familiar with Bowen's character, these were genuinely ambivalent responses, not the calculated comments of one hypocritically pursuing financial gain.

⁵¹Henry C. Bowen to TT, 14 June 1863, Beecher Collection, Box 1, Library of Congress. This letter is both strong evidence that Beecher was, in fact, an adulterer and that, despite Bowen's later denials, it was with Lucy that Beecher had committed adultery. It seems significant that Lucy's death prompted Bowen to use such strong language in his letter to Tilton.

⁵²Henry C. Bowen to HWB, 31 July 1863, Beecher Papers, Box 9, Folder 345, Yale. Long Beecher family tradition holds that Beecher exerted a decisive influence on the diplomacy of the Civil War when he was in England. He is supposed to have "persuaded" the English people and government, for that matter, not to give aid to the South. More recent historians have pointed out, however, that the decision was made by military events and the Emancipation Proclamation, and had little to do with Beecher's oratorical ability.

As we have seen, Bowen had begun his career as a humble clerk in Connecticut, and even after he obtained Lewis Tappan's considerable financial backing through marriage, prosperity eluded him until well into the 1860s. Like Tilton, he too was flattered and dazzled by association with the rich and the famous--he collected autographs and preserved all the letters he received from such notables as President Grant and Senator Roscoe Conkling.⁵³ Fame was a very high recommendation in Henry Bowen's estimation, and the Rev. Beecher, adulterer or not, had as much of that as anyone in America. Later, Bowen excused his concealment of Beecher's sexual adventures by arguing that the minister had persuaded him that he was a "repentant man."⁵⁴ This perhaps is only a partial version of the truth; Bowen, like others in the Gilded Age, believed that fame, power, and money indicated innate good qualities that demanded respect. Bowen's ambiguity reflected his dilemma--Beecher's behavior deserved contempt, but his public stature required admiration--and Bowen floundered between the two. As we shall see, many people in Brooklyn and Plymouth Church had similar problems in their attitudes toward Beecher.

⁵³Bowen Scrapbooks, vol. 1, no. 45, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

⁵⁴Henry C. Bowen to the Examining Committee of Plymouth Church, 4 February 1876, Independent, 10 February 1876, p. 3.

Still, Bowen and Beecher could never again have the same intimate and trusting friendship as before. Beecher had already turned to his new friend Theodore Tilton for the admiring adulation he needed from his associates. In addition, the minister cultivated the friendship of the other primary founder of Plymouth Church, John T. Howard. Unlike Bowen, Howard had never objected to Beecher's alterations in rules and discipline. Thus, after Beecher's break with Bowen, Howard and his family became the preacher's chief advisers on political and economic matters. It was a delicate situation for the Howards were Democrats while most members of Plymouth Church were Republicans.⁵⁵ Joseph R. Howard, the son of John, was at the time city editor of the Democratic Brooklyn Eagle.⁵⁶ Although Beecher preferred to remain noncommittal on political issues, the Howard influence was apparent in many of the pastor's political utterances. Thus, Beecher continually attacked President Lincoln for his lack of "social refinement" and "personal magnetism," while supporting New York's Democratic Mayor A. Oakey

⁵⁵ Brooklyn Eagle, 20 February 1871. Also Henry W. B. Howard, ed., The Eagle and Brooklyn, 2 vols. (New York 1893), vol. 2, p. 105.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

Hall, Boss William M. Tweed, and the Tammany Ring.⁵⁷

Still, Beecher remained nominally a Republican since that was what most of his followers were; and his sermons continued to appear in the Independent, a newspaper committed to Republicanism. In his usual style, Beecher managed, through the early 1860s, to preserve a precarious balance.

Tilton was a new force in the circle which surrounded Beecher. When the two became close friends in 1861, Tilton was so overcome by the attentions of such a man that he extended unconditionally the adoration Beecher so craved and appreciated. Tilton, however, was an idealistic young man and before long he noticed that Beecher never seemed to preach in public the radical ideas he expressed in private. Moderation was Beecher's lifelong instinct--don't "scare" your listeners, he had once written to his brother--but it was a theme Tilton never comprehended.⁵⁸ In 1860, for instance, the two men disagreed over the distribution of some church funds. Tilton objected to supporting an organization that was "soft" on slavery while Beecher was quite content to continue the

⁵⁷ HWB sermon on Lincoln, New York Times, 14 November 1864, p. 8, col. 5; Beecher sermon on "Charity," Brooklyn Eagle, 10 January 1870; "Beecher Backs Conkling," New York Times, 9 October 1879.

⁵⁸ HWB to Charles Beecher, n.d., in The Autobiography of Lyman Beecher, vol. II, pp. 476-477. Quoted in Hibben, p. 89.

funding.⁵⁹ While this issue was settled without a personal rift between the two men, their next clash--over politics--caused a serious split. By fall of 1866 most Republicans had turned against President Andrew Johnson's lenient policies on Reconstruction, and, as we have seen, Tilton was in the forefront of Johnson's critics.⁶⁰ Beecher, however, to his friend's surprise and dismay, came out in the Independent with a statement--the Cleveland letter--which urged leniency toward the South and support for Johnson.⁶¹

At this point, Beecher's usually safe moderation got him into trouble. Since most Republicans were closer to Tilton's views than Beecher's, there was general consternation at his sympathy for the southern "traitors." Even Bowen had to endorse Tilton's editorial policy and allow the scathing editorials which Tilton rained on Beecher's head. Beecher found himself beset on every side by unaccustomed public criticism. "The mail has groaned and travailed in pain with woe-smitten letters," he lamented to a colleague. "One would think I was in

⁵⁹HWB testimony, Trial, vol. II, p. 736.

⁶⁰Terry, p. 73.

⁶¹HWB to the Cleveland Convention, 30 August 1866, Trial, vol. II, pp. 476-477.

Purgatory, and that all ministers were come to lament over me, or rather to suggest that Purgatory was too good for me."⁶²

Beecher was hurt by the criticism--especially from his friend at the Independent. After writing a public letter of retraction and apology, the minister notified Bowen of his intention to withdraw the right to all his articles and sermons from the Independent.⁶³ "Toward me," he complained, "the feeling [at the Independent] is not grief but ferocity."⁶⁴ The tenuous alliance between Beecher and Bowen was now, in 1866, at an end. Beecher had made a powerful enemy--one who would help shape the contours of the scandal which exploded six years later.

As a result of his debacle, Beecher, in the fall of 1866, approached his friends the Howards, suggesting they might help him launch a new religious newspaper of his own.⁶⁵ Delighted at Beecher's break with Bowen, the Howards immediately formed a publishing company which would be devoted exclusively to the minister's writings.

⁶² HWB to Leonard Bacon, 21 September 1866, Beecher Papers, Box 7, Folder 291, Yale.

⁶³ Beecher's Calendar of Events, n.d., Beecher Papers, Box 72, Folder 29, Yale.

⁶⁴ HWB to Leonard Bacon, 21 September 1866, Beecher Papers, Box 7, Folder 291, Yale.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

They signed him on to a contract to do a two-volume biography of Christ and began making arrangements to purchase for him a floundering religious weekly, the Church Union. The outrage over his "Cleveland letter" had abated by now and Beecher was determined to avoid politics in the future. Indeed, he was already embarked upon a new venture which was different from anything he had ever attempted. Not to be outdone by his wife, who had published a novel, and his sister, who had achieved a stunning success with Uncle Tom's Cabin, Henry Ward Beecher signed a contract to write what was published in 1868 as Norwood: Or Village Life in New England--as his first effort at fiction.

Henry Bowen could only fulminate inwardly. Bowen had brought Beecher to Brooklyn, paid his debts, and given him the forum on which his popularity was built. Now, this same man had seduced his wife, robbed the Independent of its most important asset--the Beecher name--and reduced Plymouth Church to a mass of sycophants and sentimental gush. But Bowen had no intentions of giving up. He still thought of Plymouth Church as "his" church (he later told a reporter that he had been there before Beecher and he "intended" to be there after him).⁶⁶ The Independent increased in circulation even without Beecher,

⁶⁶Brooklyn Eagle, 7 August 1874.

however--thanks to the growing popularity of Theodore Tilton. So Bowen continued his denunciations of Beecher to Tilton and a few friends, but said nothing publicly.

The years after 1866 were increasingly difficult for Beecher as ideological conflict and economic rivalry intensified within the church. Despite the fiction that Plymouth Church was a harmonious, close-knit "family" united by the powerful bond of "affinity," even Beecher acknowledged that there were three distinct "parties" in the inner circle of the church--each of which continually pressured the minister to move in its direction.⁶⁷ When Beecher could not satisfy everyone, he had to suffer the one thing he could not endure--open, face-to-face criticism.

The first of the three parties consisted of younger men--journalists and reformers like Theodore Tilton. These men wanted Beecher to take an even more liberal religious position, and a more radical political and social stand. They were not happy with Beecher's habit of flirting with radical positions without ever making definitive declarations. A characteristic example of Beecher's equivocal radicalism which infuriated them was his involvement in what became known as the MacFarland

⁶⁷Trial, vol. II, p. 836.

scandal. In 1869 New York papers were full of this intricate affair. In December of that year Beecher had been asked to perform a marriage ceremony between a divorced woman, Mrs. MacFarland, and her lover, Thomas Richardson. At the time of the marriage Richardson lay on his deathbed, having been shot by Mrs. MacFarland's husband. The issue centered on whether it was within the bounds of morality for a divorced woman to remarry. In addition, many people questioned whether the divorce was legal at all since it had been granted in Indiana, which was notoriously lenient in its divorce laws. If the couple had not really been divorced, Beecher would be a party to bigamy. The minister, however, in accordance with his own beliefs in the romantic basis of marriage, performed the ceremony.⁶⁸ Tilton, in the Independent, applauded the minister's decision.⁶⁹ But most church members were appalled. This was carrying liberality too far. Capitulating to the majority, Beecher backed down and issued an apologetic statement. By this time, however, Tilton and his radical allies in the church were completely disillusioned.

A second, conservative party, led by Henry Bowen and his friends believed that Beecher's tremendous

⁶⁸Hibben, p. 197.

⁶⁹TT, Editorial in the Independent, quoted in Ellis, Free Love, pp. 456-457.

influence was subverting Congregationalism and, more and more, the Republican Party. They interpreted both these institutions as founded on inviolable principles--for them there was a "right" way to think and believe which transcended popularity. These were older members of the church who were, like Henry Bowen himself, now well established. Although they had admired Beecher's aggressive and freewheeling style in winning converts, they were now afraid that he had gone too far. This was the minority of twenty-five that had voted in 1871 against Beecher's elimination of the Articles of Faith as an admission requirement for church membership. One reason for their small numbers was that many of them had become so disturbed by Beecher's preaching they had returned to the Church of the Pilgrims or joined the new Clinton Avenue Congregational Church. The few who remained in Plymouth Church were, like Bowen, among the oldest, most prestigious members of the church. They could not be ignored with impunity. Now, they worried over the "man-worship" apparent in Beecher's religious services and criticized the minister's willingness to support such unprincipled "machine" politicians as Boss Tweed.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ It is impossible to quantify and statistically analyze these factions--as useful as that would be. Church records do not indicate how individual members voted on the various issues which would reveal who belonged to each faction. There was a consistent group

The third faction, the one most satisfied by Beecher was the largest in the church, led by the Howard family, Benjamin Tracy, and Thomas Shearman. Tracy and Shearman were to be Beecher's lawyers in the trial of 1875 and Tracy, in particular, was to figure prominently in Brooklyn political struggles which became entangled with the scandal. Both Tracy and Shearman were fiercely loyal to their minister and saw no conflict between Beecher and Plymouth Church. In fact, in church meetings, Shearman was always the first to urge that all decisions concerning church policy be left to the pastor.⁷¹

It is perhaps Benjamin Tracy who best exemplifies the kind of parishioner who defended Beecher at any cost. Born in a small upstate New York town, of New England ancestry, Tracy was first apprenticed in a private law office, then served in the Civil War. After the war he

of about twenty-five members who opposed Beecher and several of these are identifiable as friends and supporters of Henry Bowen. A scrutiny of the records of the Church of the Pilgrims and the newer Clinton Avenue Church indicates that a significant number (perhaps thirty-five or forty) left Beecher's church to join these two churches. The reason for joining Clinton Avenue Church may have been a change in residence since this church was located in one of the newer wealthy sections of the city. Church of the Pilgrims, however, was located in Brooklyn Heights only a few blocks from Plymouth Church. The reason for these parishioners' switch, then, was probably dissatisfaction with Beecher.

⁷¹ Plymouth Church Records, Book #36, 8 July 1870.

settled in Brooklyn and as a reward for his loyalty to the state Republican machine was appointed United States District Attorney.⁷² Like the majority of Beecher's parishioners in 1870, he was young--in his mid-thirties--and had arrived in Brooklyn recently. Awed by the confusion and anonymity of city life, Tracy had written to a friend that he needed the position of U.S. Attorney, not for any "pecuniary compensation" but that it would serve to "distinguish" him from "the great mass of mankind by which I am surrounded."⁷³ The Tracys in Plymouth Church were still struggling--in whatever way they could--to make a niche for themselves in a hostile social environment. Unlike the Bowen circle with its established wealth, they could not afford the luxury of "principles." Thus Beecher's emphasis on "private" character as more important than public actions served to justify business or political practices which might be morally or ethically questionable. Beecher, for example, excused Boss Tweed's public corruption on the grounds that he was a good family man and a loyal

⁷²B. Franklin Cooling, Benjamin Franklin Tracy: Father of the Modern American Fighting Navy (Hamden, Connecticut 1973), p. 36.

⁷³*Ibid.*, p. 38.

friend.⁷⁴ In the same vein, Tracy was once quoted as saying that "lying is justified" in defense of a friend.⁷⁵

The large numbers of church members who sympathized with the Howard, Tracy, Shearman faction could only make Henry Bowen more and more of an outcast in a church he felt belonged to him. By January 1870 Beecher's new religious paper began to be published, further threatening the Independent's circulation. Beecher had changed the name of his new organ from the Church Union to the Christian Union to signify disdain for organized religious bodies; he announced in the initial issue that he intended to put aside any discussion of the "external forms" of society. What mattered, said Beecher, was not an individual's beliefs, intellectual attainments, morality, or principles, but rather, his "heart."⁷⁶

For Bowen, it was all too much. Although he had made a peace of sorts with Beecher early in 1870 in which the minister had once again allowed his sermons to appear in the Independent, the Christian Union promised to be formidable competition. Because of his animosity

⁷⁴HWB Sermon, "Charity," Brooklyn Eagle, 10 January 1870.

⁷⁵Frank Moulton testimony, Trial, vol. I, p. 116.

⁷⁶Christian Union, 1 January 1870.

toward Beecher he was no longer welcome in Plymouth Church. In January 1870 Henry Bowen shifted his focus from the religious to the political arena, ensuring that political intrigue, as well as church tensions would play a major role in the scandal which was about to erupt.

C H A P T E R V I

THE SCANDAL AND LOCAL POLITICS:

THE "RADICAL RUMPUS"

In January 1870 Henry Bowen bought the controlling interest in Brooklyn's Republican newspaper, the Union. In doing so he transferred the economic and ideological rivalry between himself and the Howard-Tracy faction in Plymouth Church from the church itself to Brooklyn politics. Joseph Howard had been city editor of the Democratic Eagle and his family was still connected with that paper. During the late 1860s and early 1870s, there was an intense rivalry between the two political parties and the papers that represented them. Indeed, when the Beecher affair erupted, a small weekly newspaper claimed that it was this journalistic-political rivalry that lay at the root of the scandal!¹

The Brooklyn Eagle had not taken kindly to the Union since its founding in 1863, but when Henry Bowen took over the paper, the Democrats had even more reason to attack the Union and its owner. Bowen was possibly the most powerful Republican in an overwhelmingly Democratic Brooklyn, controlling federal patronage through his connections

¹Brooklyn Sunday Press, 6 July 1873. Reprinted in Woodhull & Claflin's Weekly, 19 July 1873, p. 12.

with President Grant and Senator Roscoe Conkling.

It angered the Democrats to see a minority Republican party hold so much power in their city--especially since the origins of that power came from outside the city. The Democrats were ready to support any group that could break Bowen's power. For this reason, when a small group of dissident Republicans challenged Bowen's leadership within the party, the Eagle gave them its wholehearted support. It was in the midst of this jockeying for power that the scandal broke in the fall of 1872. Eagerly the Democratic Eagle seized the opportunity to blame Henry Bowen--denouncing him for causing the affair by perpetrating infamous lies. Indeed, for months the Eagle referred to the entire imbroglio as the "Bowen scandal". Only in 1874, when it was clear that Bowen was no longer a power in Brooklyn politics, and when Tilton's public statement focused attention on himself and Beecher, did the Eagle reluctantly switch its attacks from Bowen to Tilton. Thus it was in the course of this power struggle within the Republican Party--dubbed by the Eagle the "Radical Rumpus"--that the scandal was used by both sides in the hope of discrediting the enemy. Henry Ward Beecher was caught in the middle--powerless to prevent the affair from becoming entangled in political rivalry. To understand why these political disagreements were so critical

to the public exposure of the scandal, we need to know more about the evolution of Brooklyn politics.

In the years since Henry Ward Beecher's arrival in 1848, as Brooklyn had been transformed from a Yankee-Dutch village into the country's third largest city, it had also become dominated by an immigrant machine government.² The voting strength which sustained the Democratic machine rested primarily on the Irish, who constituted about a third of the population. The aldermen and most local elected officials were immigrant politicians who were under the control of the local boss, Hugh McLoughlin. Originally a foreman at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, by the 1860s McLoughlin was in undisputed command of the Democratic machine--and as such, openly recognized and supported by the city's largest daily newspaper, the Eagle.³

Founded in 1841, the Eagle was so assured of its pre-eminent position and widespread circulation that its attitude toward Brooklyn's Republican-Protestant minority

²Harold Coffin Syrett, The City of Brooklyn 1865-1898: A Political History (New York 1944), pp. 13-19.

³"The Brooklyn Ring," New York Times, 26 October 1870 and 3 September 1875. In a conversation with a wealthy citizen of Brooklyn, McLoughlin made the following statement: "When I first entered politics, a poor man in Brooklyn could not get a nomination for office. I determined to remedy that state of things. When you rich men

on the Heights was one of amused toleration.⁴

Perceiving no threat from Beecher, Eagle editor Thomas Kinsella had become friends with him through Joseph Howard and membership in the same social club.⁵ This was a key connection for Beecher--for it gave him a sympathetic local press. In any case, Kinsella found it easy to support the minister because, much as Beecher might criticize corruption in the abstract, he made it a policy never to interfere directly in local politics.⁶

made a nomination, the nominee always had to pay his election expenses, and of course the poor man had no chance. Now, all that has been changed. When we make a nomination and our man has no money, we give him a thousand dollars to treat the boys, and we raise the money by levying on men of your class."

McLoughlin was elected registrar in 1861 and 1864, defeated in 1867, and re-elected for the last time in 1870. He never held any other office. When he retired in 1873 he was undisputed leader of Brooklyn's Democrats--and did not relinquish power until 1903. Syrett claims that McLoughlin was not ambitious. "His sole aim was to maintain his ascendancy over Kings County Democracy. Influence beyond Brooklyn was always secondary." Syrett also says McLoughlin was a "simple, moderate man" who stayed in the background. He drank only infrequently and was a devoted Catholic who attended church regularly. Syrett, pp. 72-73, 77.

⁴Raymond A. Schroth, The Eagle and Brooklyn: A Community Newspaper 1841-1955 (Westport, Connecticut 1974); see Chapter 4, "The Age of Kinsella." Henry W. B. Howard, The Eagle and Brooklyn, 2 vols. (Brooklyn 1893). Also Brooklyn Sunday Review, 5 July 1874.

⁵Both Beecher and Kinsella belonged to the Faust Club. Brooklyn Eagle, 30 October 1872.

⁶Syrett, p. 20.

Until the 1870s, many of the New Englanders who lived on Brooklyn Heights were satisfied with this aloof attitude as well. Doubtless disturbed by the growing resemblance of Brooklyn to New York City, they, nevertheless, took great pains to deny the similarity. As late as the 1890s, many Brooklynites claimed that their city had managed to maintain a small town atmosphere which excluded the evils of New York--crowding, poverty, prostitution, corruption. At the same time it had increased its commercial and industrial productivity to an equal if not superior level to that of the neighboring city.⁷ Brooklynites were proud of the sobriquet "the city of churches" since it indicated the superior moral virtue of their city.⁸

But this idea of Brooklyn applied in reality only to the suburban community of Brooklyn Heights. While this small area of the city did retain its upper-middle-class New England character, elsewhere in the city a burgeoning immigrant population, with its resultant poverty and ethnic hostilities, had indeed created urban problems very much like New York's. However, even the Republican newspaper, the Union, customarily ignored local issues and politics before 1870, preferring to focus on national

⁷Ibid., p. 12.

⁸Ibid.

problems such as the Civil War and Reconstruction. This left the development of services in the rapidly expanding city--roads, sanitary collection, police and fire departments, and schools--to Hugh McLoughlin and his "saloon keeper" alderman.⁹

During the first four months of the Union under Henry Bowen's supervision (January-April 1870) this aloof attitude continued, and the paper was not particularly successful. Despite editorial appeals to all good Republicans to subscribe, most residents of Brooklyn--Democrats or Republicans--still read the Eagle. Not yet threatened, Eagle editor Thomas Kinsella wrote contemptuous editorials about the "amateur" newspaper.¹⁰ At this point Bowen made a decision which ensured the success of the Union--but at the same time laid the groundwork for the public exposure of the long-simmering personal conflicts within Plymouth Church: he hired Theodore Tilton to be the paper's editor. From a business perspective, it was a wise choice. Following the defection of Beecher in 1866 from the Independent, Tilton--surprisingly--had made that paper even more popular than ever before. His highly personal, sometimes caustic style had increased circulation. Though

⁹Ibid., p. 77.

¹⁰For a history of the rivalry between the Eagle and the Union, see the Brooklyn Sunday Review, 27 April 1873.

some of his recent tendencies toward social radicalism were disturbing, his professional ability was still highly regarded.

When Tilton became editor of the Brooklyn Union in May 1870, he decided to shift his attention from national issues like Reconstruction and women's suffrage to the reform of corrupt machine politics in Brooklyn. Bowen heartily applauded his new editor's attacks on the Democrats, but when Tilton began to criticize "spoilsmen" and "patronage" politics in the Republican Party as well, Bowen vehemently objected. Ironically, Tilton had moved from faulting Beecher's opportunistic personal religion to hinting that Bowen was guilty of the same methods in politics! The inevitable split between the two took place when Bowen's puppet, E. D. Webster, ran as a Republican for Congress in the mid-term elections that November. Bowen insisted that the Union support his candidacy; Tilton defiantly refused.¹¹

Joining a newly formed group of reform Republicans--or "Liberals" as they called themselves--Tilton and this faction objected to Webster because he was the "known and recognized dispenser of federal patronage in this city."¹²

¹¹TT testimony, Trial, vol. I, p. 596. Marshall, p. 260.

¹²Brooklyn Eagle, 27 October 1870.

The Liberal Republicans of Brooklyn patterned themselves after the national reform movement of the same name which had been organized by Carl Schurz in Missouri. These men were appalled by the increasing political corruption in the country--on both a national and a local level. Indignant at the selfish personalism which they felt was rapidly beginning to dominate the political climate, the Liberals wanted to restore principles and ideology to politics. Concluding that too much energy had gone into preserving radical military Reconstruction in the South, they thought the party should shift its attention to fighting corruption in government. They were also impatient with the tendency of many Republicans to ignore the pressing issues of the day and to rely on the "bloody shirt" to win elections.¹³

Dominated by merchants and professional men hitherto aloof from local politics, the Liberal Republican organization of Brooklyn declared its intention of fighting for reform in the local arena by nominating the "best men" and emphasizing honesty and educational qualifications as more important than blind party loyalty.¹⁴ They proposed to restore integrity to politics. This was a

¹³ John G. Sproat, "The Best Men": Liberal Reformers in the Gilded Age (London 1968). Matthew T. Downey, "The Rebirth of Reform: A Study of Liberal Reform Movements 1865-1872" (Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton, 1963).

¹⁴ "Liberals," Brooklyn Eagle, 27 August 1874.

particularly appealing concept for Theodore Tilton, for it was reminiscent of the old days of the abolition struggle when no organized religious or political group could command the loyalty of the abolitionists unless the moral principle for which they stood was acknowledged. The problem with these latter-day political purists, however, was that in 1870 there was no such clearly defined "principle" at stake. In the context of Brooklyn politics, the Liberals' claim to power based on their superior education and moral character sounded suspiciously elitist. Indeed, it was recognized as such by Boss McLoughlin who insisted that even though these were personally "good" men, they had never done anything for the city of Brooklyn.¹⁵

The members of Brooklyn's elite who had rallied to the Liberal Republican banner now set out to change that assessment. Claiming that Bowen's Republican organization had become more interested in dispensing federal patronage than in winning local elections, this group nominated an alternative to Webster as a candidate for Congress.¹⁶ Tilton agreed to support him in the Union.¹⁷

¹⁵"A Jubilee at the General Committee Rooms--Speech by Boss McLoughlin," Brooklyn Eagle, 6 November 1874.

¹⁶"Meeting of Reform Republicans," Brooklyn Eagle, 1 November 1870.

¹⁷TT testimony, Trial, vol. I, p. 596.

If Thomas Kinsella of the Eagle had felt threatened by the following Tilton brought with him to the Union, he observed with relish the editor's defection to the rebellious wing of the Republican Party. The Eagle lent its wholehearted support to the Liberals, denouncing Bowen and Webster as the "great carpetbaggers."¹⁸ When Webster was defeated in the November 1870 election (losing to the Democratic candidate--none other than Kinsella himself), local Republicans were more than ever divided, confused, and disorderly.¹⁹ The Union especially, as representative of Republicanism, became the butt of ridicule from the spectacle of its editor and owner at odds with each other. As Republican recriminations and subsequent jockeying for power within the party ensued, Kinsella and the Eagle looked on with amusement and delight.

Although the Liberals had not succeeded in winning the election nor unseating Bowen, they had opened the way for another group of younger Republicans to challenge--and break--Bowen's power. This faction was led by forty-year-old Benjamin Tracy, Beecher's future lawyer as well as his close friend and supporter in Plymouth Church. As we have seen, Tracy was a relative newcomer to Brooklyn, having

¹⁸Brooklyn Eagle, 22 December 1870.

¹⁹Ibid., 15 November 1870.

arrived in 1866 from a small town in upstate New York. The next year, as a reward for his faithful service and loyalty to the Republican Party, he was appointed United States District Attorney.²⁰ So far as can be ascertained from Tracy's public or private papers, he was primarily--indeed exclusively--committed to his own interests and power. Even his biographer acknowledges that he was a "personal" politician who never felt bound by party principles and platforms.²¹ So despite Tracy's recent entry into Republican politics in Brooklyn, he could well muster enough support to challenge the leadership of Henry Bowen. His prospects of success were considerably enhanced after the way had been paved by the bolt of the Liberals and the defection of Tilton.

Essentially, then, the three factions that had worried Beecher so much in Plymouth Church had now been replicated, in both personnel and ideology, in the larger framework of Brooklyn Republican politics. Tilton and the Liberals were the radical idealists who wanted social and political institutions based on ideological principles and laws; Bowen and his faction were older men who had been willing to back, even emulate Beecher's personal approach

²⁰ B. Franklin Cooling, Benjamin Franklin Tracy: Father of the American Fighting Navy (Hamden, Connecticut 1973), p. 36.

²¹ Ibid.

to religion and politics, but were now afraid things had gone too far; Benjamin Tracy and the regular Republicans seemed nearly identical to the largest group in Plymouth Church who sought to extend to politics the system of personal loyalties Beecher stood for in the church.

Now under attack from two sides--the idealists and the practical politicians--Bowen decided in mid-November 1870 to bolster his position with a trip to Washington for a personal conference with President Grant. The issue involved the appointment of a new assessor in Brooklyn. If Grant could be persuaded to appoint Bowen's choice instead of one advocated by Tracy, his credibility might be restored.²² The attempt failed, however, forcing Bowen to return to Brooklyn empty-handed in his fight for control of the Republican General Committee in Brooklyn. For a time, in early December, however, it looked as though Bowen might retain a semblance of his old power. On December 7, at the first post-election meeting of the Committee, Bowen mustered enough support--including Tilton's, whom he seems to have persuaded to return to the fold--to dominate the meeting.²³

²²Brooklyn Eagle, 26 November 1870. Brooklyn Union, 11 November 1870.

²³Brooklyn Eagle, 7 December 1870.

It is impossible to say with certainty why Tilton backtracked at this point, but it was probably related to his contract renewal. Bowen had just informed him that he was to be removed as editor of the Independent--a response to reader criticism that he was becoming too radical--while offering to keep him on as editor of the Union.²⁴ Tilton, naturally frightened by the possibility of losing both editorships at a time when he was under great economic pressure to pay for his new house, agreed to support Bowen once again.²⁵ On or about December 20, 1870, he signed the new contract.²⁶

This renewal of Tilton's support did not improve Bowen's situation significantly, however. By December 22 he angrily accused the Liberals of conspiring with the Tracy faction and the Democrats to oust him from the General Committee. Further, Bowen charged that the Tracy group was envious and wanted to "control the Federal patronage," thus implicitly conceding that his own power rested on that control.²⁷ Feelings on both sides ran high when that same day the Republican Committee met to select delegates for the coming year; the meeting was unusually

²⁴TT testimony, PCIC, Marshall, pp. 145-146.

²⁵TT to ET, 15 January 1869, Chicago Tribune.

²⁶Marshall, pp. 145-146.

²⁷Brooklyn Union, 22 December 1870.

well attended. The Eagle gleefully reported the "radical rumpus," as tensions built to a final shocking moment when a close friend of Bowen's struck a Tracy partisan a smashing blow in the face!²⁸ This violence sprang from panic; Bowen's faction was clearly losing out to Tracy's.

In this overheated atmosphere, a confrontation took place between Bowen and Tilton which brought together the still simmering sexual scandal and the political conflict. Four days after the Committee debacle, with the taste of defeat still fresh, Bowen summoned Tilton to his home. He had heard, Tilton said later, some rumors that were "prejudicial" to the editor.²⁹ Later, at the trial, Beecher's lawyers would suggest that the meeting related to Tilton's illicit relations with several married women, but it seems more likely, from the recent political differences between the two, that Bowen had again become worried over Tilton's sympathy with the insurgent Republicans. Apparently this issue was at least partially resolved--most likely by Tilton's reassurances of loyalty--and the conversation turned to the relations of the Union to Plymouth Church. Noting the damage done to the Independent by Beecher's absence from its columns,

²⁸Brooklyn Eagle, 22 December 1870.

²⁹TT testimony, PCIC, Marshall, pp. 145-146.

Bowen suggested that Tilton "make more of Plymouth Church" in the Union. Tilton first replied simply that he could not and would not attend that church, but when Bowen insisted, his pent-up agitation and anger gave way and he revealed the real reason: Beecher, he told his employer, had seduced his wife! She had confessed six months ago in July 1870. Though hurt, he had promised to protect her and had said nothing to anyone--including Beecher. Still worse, just a few weeks ago, Beecher had had the audacity to advise Elizabeth to seek a divorce! Now in a state of feverish excitement, Tilton declared that he could not be expected to write favorably about Plymouth Church in the paper.³⁰

Smarting from political setbacks, Bowen now saw his opportunity to regain his ground in another arena where he had been bested: Plymouth Church. Now he could strike at Beecher with more than rumors; here was concrete evidence of gross sexual immorality. Hastily changing his tactics, Bowen persuaded Tilton at this same meeting to write the letter demanding that Beecher resign from Plymouth Church and leave Brooklyn. Although he refrained from co-signing the letter with Tilton, Bowen assured the editor that he would support the demand and that he would even deliver it

³⁰ Ibid. Also present at this meeting was Oliver Johnson, a friend of both Bowen and Tilton. He later confirmed Tilton's version of the meeting.

to Beecher personally!³¹ Obviously, he had not just discovered Beecher's moral corruption--he had lived with the memory of his own wife's seduction for years. But in the excitement of the moment, Bowen perceived a real chance to prove something against Beecher with no risk to himself--here was an opportunity to rid Plymouth Church--his church--of Henry Ward Beecher. In addition this would have the happy effect of discrediting the rival Christian Union, and possibly--or at least so Bowen must have hoped--even undermining Benjamin Tracy's growing influence in Brooklyn politics.

But the later events of that same day and the next indicated that Bowen had made a hasty and unsound judgment. When he delivered the threatening letter to Beecher, the minister demonstrated that he was not sufficiently intimidated to give in. And after "mutual friend" Francis Moulton persuaded Tilton that Bowen was only playing himself against Beecher, Tilton decided to try and make his own peace with Beecher.³² Bowen's rashly conceived plan threatened to backfire. He began to worry that his own involvement in the genesis of the threatening letter might be revealed. If this happened,

³¹Ibid.

³²"Mr. Moulton's Last Statement," 11 September 1874, Marshall, p. 479.

Bowen himself could be the one "ruined." At this point, it seemed that he had only put himself in a damaging position.

The day after delivering the letter to Beecher, Bowen attempted to retreat. He "excitedly" called on Tilton at the Union office. With "unaccountable emotion" in his manner and a face "livid with rage," Tilton said, Bowen threatened in a "loud voice" that if the editor should ever disclose his--Bowen's--part in the matter, he would "deprive" Tilton of his position and have him "ejected" by force from the office.³³

However, an agitated and confused Bowen did not wait to find out whether Tilton would keep quiet, but wrote him a letter of dismissal from both the Independent and the Union. Tilton's worst fears were now realized. He was jobless and he had been humiliated as well as manipulated. In desperation, Tilton blamed Henry Ward Beecher for all his troubles--the destruction of his marriage and the loss of his livelihood and his reputation. It was now Tilton's turn to act in panic. On December 29, 1870, he angrily insisted that Elizabeth produce a written version of the confession she had made verbally six months ago. Assuring her that he would not make the document

³³TT to Henry C. Bowen, 1 January 1871, Marshall, pp. 313-314.

public, Tilton said he only wanted to enlist the minister's influence in getting reinstated by Bowen. The next evening, Tilton's friend Moulton appeared at Plymouth Church and informed Beecher that the affair with Elizabeth was now documented with written evidence. Moulton offered to arbitrate between the two men and with Beecher's acceptance began the conspiracy to cover up the scandal.³⁴

Henry Bowen's enraged outburst and dismissal of Tilton signified not only the strain of the previous few months, but also the defensive position from which he was operating. With his future as Republican Party leader in clear jeopardy, the success of both the Independent and the Union in doubt, and the overwhelming popularity of Henry Ward Beecher virtually ostracizing him from the church he had created and considered his own, Henry Bowen had lashed out bitterly and irreparably. Although during the next two and a half years Bowen attempted to strengthen and re-establish his political power in Brooklyn, his precipitate action in forcing the scandal issue proved to be the mechanism which finally drove him out of Plymouth Church and Brooklyn politics.³⁵ By mid-1873

³⁴"Mr. Moulton's Last Statement," 11 September 1874, Marshall, p. 479.

³⁵Bowen made one more attempt to make peace with Beecher in 1872. He, Beecher, and Tilton signed a compact known as the Tri-Partite Covenant in which they agreed not to spread rumors about each other; Beecher promised to

Bowen realized the futility of holding on to the Union. He sold out to a group headed by John Howard and his rival Benjamin Tracy. This faction had finally succeeded in eclipsing Bowen's leadership within the party as well as Plymouth Church.³⁶

In politics as in the church, it is clear that Henry Bowen had been attempting to operate on the personalized level--in imitation of Beecher's methods. Much of the strength of his feeling toward the minister--both the resentment and the admiration--may be explained by Bowen's failure to emulate him successfully. In the early years Bowen had nothing but praise for Beecher's ability to create a following for himself. As it became apparent that Bowen himself could not inspire the same kind of devotion and loyalty, however, his attitude changed. The fact that Beecher had probably been able to seduce his wife merely symbolized the personal and social impotence Bowen felt so acutely. Thus, it is ironic that Bowen was now being attacked for corrupt politicking--he, who

reinstate Bowen in the church and Bowen was to pay Tilton \$7,000 compensation for breaking his contracts. This was all supposed to be a secret document but in April 1873 several friends of Beecher's had it published. They hoped it would place all the blame on Bowen for the rumors about Beecher and Mrs. Tilton but it only succeeded in reviving talk of the scandal.

³⁶For the history of the Union, see: "Paper People," Brooklyn Sunday Review, 19 April 1874; "Union," Brooklyn Sunday Review, July 1874; Brooklyn Eagle, 1 August 1874; Syrett, p. 21.

considered himself the defender of Republican principles! This attack itself and the way Bowen had been edged out of Plymouth Church led him to reconsider his social and religious alignments in Brooklyn. Now, it seemed that the only way to preserve his own status and influence was to rely on strong social institutions. This return to more conservative ideas was symbolized by his return to the Church of the Pilgrims. Officially, Bowen refused to give up his pew at Plymouth Church--he would not admit defeat by Henry Ward Beecher--but, in practice, he attended Storrs' more orthodox church.

When the dust settled after this three-way Republican conflict in Brooklyn, two opposing groups emerged with a new clarity--the Regulars and the Liberals. With Bowen out of the way, the largest and most powerful Republican faction was the one led by Benjamin Tracy. Throughout the first half of the 1870s, Tracy's group engaged the powerful Democratic machine in a contest for control of Brooklyn's local government. This was, however, purely a power struggle; there were no real ideological issues at stake. In fact, the underlying similarities between the Republican machine and its Democratic counterpart were far more striking than the surface differences. Both were organizations centered around personal loyalties and reciprocal obligations; both valued loyalty above honesty and

morality; and both sought power for its own sake.³⁷

In short, the kind of politics Henry Ward Beecher spoke for when he defended Boss Tweed because he was a loyal friend and a good family man.

There were good reasons for Beecher's tolerant attitude toward both Boss Tweed and Boss McLoughlin. Most obvious was Beecher's friendship with John and Joseph Howard who were involved in both the New York and Brooklyn Democratic machines. But more than this links the minister to these organizations. There is, for example, the similarity of Plymouth Church itself to a political machine. We have seen how the church began as a

³⁷The struggle between the reformers and the machine politicians was focused throughout the 1870s on the issue of control of local government. Tracy and the regulars sought to retain as many departments of the city within the state and federal jurisdictions, thus circumventing the power of McLoughlin. The Democrats, of course, fought to gain more and more authority on the ward level which the immigrant politicians controlled. This was a reasonably straightforward power struggle--issues were few. The Liberals, however, claiming non-partisanship--began to agitate for a new city charter which would structure the city government so that Yankee Protestants could hold local offices. They proposed to make more offices mayoral appointees rather than locally elected by the wards--Yankees had more chance to capture a citywide mayoral election than winning ward contests.

However, one event points up just how much animosity existed between the two Yankee factions. In a city charter proposed to the legislature in 1872 which had been drawn up by the Liberals, Tracy and one of his lieutenants appeared as Republican delegates in Albany, ostensibly to support the charter, but, in fact, took turns "decrying" it, thus effectively "sabotaging" it. Syrett, pp. 51-69.

traditional institution organized around principles which, theoretically at least, it had the power to enforce. Beecher's personal success, however, negated the older traditions and transformed the institution into a religious "machine" for the support of the minister himself. This change became blatantly apparent when the adultery case came to trial, as the members of the church--many of them convinced of his guilt--closed ranks behind Beecher and proceeded like a steamroller to crush any opposition. As we shall see, Tilton was practically exiled from America; Bowen and his friends summarily excommunicated; and Beecher and the financial interests he represented protected at all costs.

Political machines, too, had in many cities replaced the principles or issues around which party politics had once revolved. The personal power of the bosses overshadowed party ideals in much the same way that Beecher's popularity overshadowed the principles of Congregationalism. This description of a city boss by Alexander Callow could be applied equally as well to Beecher: "His road was charted not by signs of moral principles but by political expediency, for the boss tiptoed around Burning Issues with uncanny dexterity."³⁸ If Boss McLoughlin was

³⁸Alexander B. Callow, Jr., ed., The City Boss in America (London 1976), p. 51.

a political entrepreneur, it might be said that Henry Ward Beecher was a religious entrepreneur. Both men were interested in blind obedience and unquestioning loyalty from their constituents.

The Liberals, on the other hand, were a minority of the Republican Party in Brooklyn. Upset at the stranglehold the Democratic immigrant machine had on the city, the Liberals were even more horrified at the prospect of their own party operating with the same disregard for honesty and principle which characterized the immigrants. If anything, it seems that the Liberals were more shaken by the capitulation of their fellow Republicans to personalism and power hunger than by the same behavior by the Democrats. As a result, the Liberals, who were too few in numbers to win elections on their own, in 1872 chose to form an alliance with the Democratic machine in order to defeat the regular Republicans. In this action they reflected the national alliance between Liberals and Democrats in support of the presidential campaign of Horace Greeley. Tilton, in fact, was campaigning for Greeley in the fall of 1872 when Woodhull's "bombshell" article appeared.³⁹

³⁹In 1872, Victoria Woodhull decided to run for President herself. Not taken seriously by anyone else, Woodhull apparently was convinced she had a chance. Because of her recent friendship (she claimed love affair) with Tilton, she expected his support. Tilton,

The Brooklyn Liberals, however, were in a dilemma after Greeley's ignominious defeat. The national movement virtually disappeared, but in Brooklyn the party was still a viable organization and its supporters admitted their discomfort with the Democratic alliance. Liberal political meetings were taken up with the question of whether the party would unite once more with the Democrats or rejoin the Republicans. Clearly, the majority of the Liberals wanted to be identified with the Republican Party, yet those they called the "obnoxious leaders" of the regulars--Tracy and his followers--were so distasteful that they could not bring themselves to make that move.⁴⁰ By this time as well the adultery scandal was front-page news--giving them still another reason for their dislike of Tracy. (His ties to the minister and Plymouth Church were well known.) Consequently, in the congressional elections of 1874, Brooklyn Liberals again decided they preferred the Democrats to Tracy's Republicans. Nominating a man with impeccable business and

however, was still committed to the Liberal Republicans, attending the convention in Cincinnati in the summer of 1872 which nominated Horace Greeley. Although Woodhull had mentioned her anger at Beecher's sisters for attacking her in the Christian Union, there seems good reason to suspect--as one reason for the "bombshell" article--her resentment of Tilton for not supporting her political campaign. Johnston, Mrs. Satan, p. 105.

⁴⁰ Brooklyn Eagle, 19 August 1874, 8 October 1874, 2 December 1874.

social credentials, Simeon B. Chittenden, they bargained with the Democrats for support. The Eagle reported that the Democratic convention was consequently filled with "men of a character which is rarely represented at political conventions." The Liberals, the Eagle reported, had won "a startling political coup" when Boss McLoughlin was persuaded to endorse Chittenden for Congress.⁴¹

This 1874 campaign revealed even more clearly the links between the religious and social unrest in Brooklyn and the more visible political conflict. The key document in the Liberals' campaign was a petition signed by the leading members of the party asking Simeon Chittenden to run for Congress.⁴² This petition, signed by ninety Liberals, published in the Brooklyn Eagle on October 26, 1874, reveals that fully one-third of the leading Liberals of Brooklyn, the "city of churches," were in fact members of the Church of the Pilgrims--the longtime opponent of Beecher and Plymouth Church.⁴³

⁴¹Ibid., 26 October 1874.

⁴²"S. B. Chittenden--Nominated by the Democrats for Congress," Brooklyn Eagle, 26 October 1874. The article quotes from the petition and lists the ninety leaders of the Liberals who signed it.

⁴³Records of Church of the Pilgrims, Book #1, Admissions, 1844-1894, Plymouth Church. (Since Plymouth Church and Church of the Pilgrims merged in the 1920s,

Of all Brooklynites, then, it was Church of the Pilgrims members who were the most anxious to stem the burgeoning political power of Tracy and his regular Republican machine. Having established this point we are now in a position to place in broader context the central role of the Church of the Pilgrims in the Beecher-Tilton scandal. After the publication of Woodhull's "bombshell" article on November 2, 1872, Plymouth Church members made efforts to have Tilton excommunicated for his "slander" of the pastor and his friendship with Woodhull. These efforts were opposed by Beecher because he was afraid of what an investigation might reveal. At first, he managed to stop any action from being taken, but in October 1873, the church finally "dropped" Tilton's name from its membership roll.⁴⁴ This gave Richard Salter Storrs and Church of the Pilgrims an excuse to take steps to destroy the power of Henry Ward Beecher. In partnership with

all the records of Church of the Pilgrims are housed in Plymouth Church.) Thirty-one of the petition signers were Church of the Pilgrims members.

No other church seems so heavily represented on the petition. Four of the signers were Plymouth Church members. Three belonged to the Clinton Avenue Congregational Church which was located in the newer wealthy "hill" section of Brooklyn. Its minister William Ives Budington had also been a longtime critic of Beecher and Plymouth Church but he was not as fully supported by the membership as was Storrs.

⁴⁴Plymouth Church Records, Book #40, Membership Committee, 30 October 1871-5 January 1900, p. 86.

another anti-Beecher Congregational church in Brooklyn, Storrs called for a Congregational Council to investigate the entire matter.⁴⁵ Calling the behavior of Plymouth Church a "disgrace" to Congregationalism, they threatened to dismiss Beecher's church from the Congregational Association.⁴⁶ (As we shall see, this Council underscored the fact that Storrs and his parishioners were worried far more about the effect of Beecher's methods on society as a whole than simply on Congregationalism.) The result of the Council itself was rather inconclusive, but shortly afterwards, a minister friend of Beecher's who had attended the meetings delivered a speech criticizing the Council and calling Tilton a "knave" and a "dog."⁴⁷ It was Tilton's indignant response to this speech which initiated the "scandal summer" of 1874 when the affair came out fully in the national press.⁴⁸

The important point here is that for all Woodhull's attempts to expose Beecher, it was, in reality, the determined actions of the Church of the Pilgrims which

⁴⁵The other church was Clinton Avenue Congregational Church.

⁴⁶The Brooklyn Council of 1874 (New York 1874).

⁴⁷"Dr. Bacon's Speech," 2 April 1874, Marshall, pp. 40-42.

⁴⁸TT to Dr. Leonard Bacon, 21 June 1874, Marshall, pp. 42-63.

kept the scandal rumors before the public and which goaded Tilton into making public charges against Henry Ward Beecher. By the end of the summer, Beecher and what the Chicago Tribune called the whole "Plymouth Church crowd" were in disrepute in Brooklyn and the country. Thus, in October 1874 the Liberals may well have considered the time to be ripe for an all-out political assault on Tracy's regular Republicans and through them, Beecher and Plymouth Church.⁴⁹ And in fact, they were correct, for their candidate, Chittenden, was elected to Congress the next month.

⁴⁹The political conflict was further delineated in the trial between January and June 1875. It is no accident that the political affiliations of the lawyers spell out quite unmistakably the larger political divisions in Brooklyn. Five out of six of Beecher's lawyers were regular Republicans, while four out of five of Tilton's were reform Democrats. The two exceptions were William Maxwell Evarts, a nationally famous lawyer brought in from New York to conduct the defense, and William Beach for Tilton--also from New York.

In regard to the Liberal-Regular lineup, it is interesting to note that the most well known Liberal newspapers across the country editorialized against Beecher: the Springfield Republican, the Chicago Tribune, the New York Times, and the Louisville Courier-Journal.

The immediate objective of the Liberals was, indeed, accomplished when their candidate, Chittenden, was elected. In the long run, too, the Liberals--or Mugwumps as they were later called--with the help of reform Democrats (even Kinsella turned into a reformer by the 1880s) managed to reform Brooklyn politics. In the 1880s a successful movement known as the "Brooklyn Idea" became the model for other cities seeking to curb corruption of machine politics.

The key, then, to understanding the emergence of the scandal as the focal point of religious and political conflict in Brooklyn is an examination of the differences between these two Brooklyn churches. If we can discover the social and ideological roots of the hostility between them, we will understand the intensity of the response to the scandal.

C H A P T E R V I I

PLYMOUTH CHURCH AND CHURCH OF THE PILGRIMS:

MONEY, POWER, AND SOCIAL CONFLICT

IN BROOKLYN

Although Victoria Woodhull hoped her "bombshell" revelation of 1872 would force Henry Ward Beecher into a position of leadership in what she saw as an inevitable social revolution, there was virtually no chance that such a thing would happen. Whatever his private beliefs about "affinity" and Free Love, Beecher was far too shrewd to associate with the notorious Woodhull. Beecher had been burned once in the arena of social radicalism; he had learned his lesson from the public outrage that resulted in 1869 after he married Mrs. MacFarland to her lover. If the minister had previously harbored any ideas as to public readiness for Free Love, this incident disabused him of them.

Theodore Tilton, too, attempted, in the trial to appear as conventional in regard to marriage and religion as Beecher. Although admitting he favored more "lenient" divorce laws, Tilton insisted that this change, far from destroying marriage, would simply purify the institution by ensuring that all marriages would be based on spiritual affinity. He had always, he insisted, opposed the "evil"

of Free Love. In fact, the strategy of both sides at the trial was to appear as absolutely conventional in religious and moral beliefs, while attempting to associate the other side with such disreputable ideas as spiritualism, perfectionism, and communism.¹

Thus, although some historians have analyzed the scandal trial as a forum for the issues of social radicalism, these issues were never overtly at stake in the courtroom.² As we shall see, few people really believed that absolute proof of Beecher's guilt would mean the downfall of the Christian religion or of the institution of marriage. No, in Brooklyn, as in the nation, both marriage and Christianity were actually being revitalized in the 1870s.

What was at issue--and this was especially apparent in the Congregational Council which took place a year before the trial--was the question of the source and

¹Although Victoria Woodhull was never called to testify, Beecher's lawyers called a parade of admitted spiritualists, mediums, and even one communist in an attempt to show that Tilton was part of their group. The high point of this effort came when Stephen Pearl Andrews testified to the hoots and laughter of the spectators.

²Neither side argued for abolishing marriage or for Free Love; both proclaimed their commitment to stable monogamous marriage. Evarts, however, did try to alarm the jury by insisting that Beecher was so representative of American religion that if he were guilty, the entire Christian religion would collapse.

nature of power--religious, political, and social. This question had particular significance for the Brooklyn of 1875. In a heterogeneous and fluid urban environment such as that of New York and Brooklyn, who should exercise leadership? On close examination, the disagreements between orthodox and liberal churches were fundamentally similar to those between regular and liberal politicians. The Rev. Richard Salter Storrs and his Church of the Pilgrims worried about Congregational institutions becoming irrelevant because of the personalization of religion by Henry Ward Beecher. The Liberal political reformers (many of whom, as we have seen, belonged to the Church of the Pilgrims) had become frightened that political power was being usurped by "machines" which were, in reality, based on personal loyalty and reciprocal obligations. Principle and honesty, it seemed, had become outdated. On the surface, then, the question was one of principle and law versus personal power.

The arguments on this question were subsumed during the trial under the euphemism "character," or in another variation, the "great man" theme. It was the only theoretical issue on which lawyers for the defendant and the plaintiff substantially disagreed. Briefly stated, Beecher's lawyers made it clear that their client's long-standing reputation as "generous," "kind," and "noble," added to his forty years of service as a minister, should

render actual refutation of Tilton's charges unnecessary. All the jury needed to decide, insisted Beecher's lawyer, William Maxwell Evarts, was whether this depraved action was consistent with Beecher's known character. "I prefer," said the lawyer, "to find in character the refutation of false evidence."³ Evarts was clearly making use of Beecher's monumental stature in the eyes of the American public. The judge took Evarts' argument to heart, for in his charge to the jury, he reiterated the point, contending that Beecher's "pious service has prima facie the benefit of a presumption which the mere man of the world has not."⁴

Evarts' point (if not the judge's) was not that Beecher's "noble" nature had prevented him from committing adultery--although he used that argument, too--but rather that his mistakes should be forgiven. In his final summation Evarts half-jokingly quoted a "lady" admirer of Beecher's who had written that "for a man who had done so much good . . . a little aberration of this kind . . . instead of being excused, should be justified."⁵ Most of Beecher's parishioners seem to have agreed. One's comment

³William Maxwell Evarts summation, Trial, vol. III, p. 654.

⁴Trial, vol. III, p. 1026.

⁵Evarts summation, Trial, vol. III, p. 656.

on the case is representative: "Whether the insinuations [of adultery] have any foundation or not . . . I shall, as long as I live, look up to him."⁶ (Indeed, as we have seen, Henry Bowen, at an earlier date, demonstrated his agreement with this view by keeping quiet about Beecher's seduction of his own wife.)

Tilton's lawyers, on the other hand, put the issue somewhat differently. "The struggle this day," one of them argued, "is between the law and a great character and a great church." Simply because Beecher was a popular minister, and a "good" man, did not guarantee his innocence or place him above the law. Tilton's lawyer hoped to win the case by removing some of the aura which surrounded Beecher as a minister and a hero. Indeed, from Tilton's point of view, "established character" was no protection at all, since before his dispute with Beecher, Tilton himself was a highly respected "moral teacher." The real difference between the two men, the lawyer insisted, was the backing Beecher had from a wealthy organization such as Plymouth Church. The important question of this trial, Tilton's lawyer concluded, was whether society would allow Theodore Tilton to be "hounded to his ruin" by a system of "influence and denunciation and

⁶C. T. Christianson to J. T. Howard, 25 June 1874, Beecher Papers, Box 45, Folder 1987, Yale.

clamor."⁷ The truth was that the defense of Beecher's character amounted to nothing more than a defense of the raw power of money and influence.

For Tilton, then, and even more particularly for the Church of the Pilgrims, the trial involved not only Beecher's guilt or innocence, but also the question of the legitimacy of his power and influence. Should Beecher's mass appeal be permitted to generate its own definition of right? Did the impressive fidelity and loyalty of Plymouth Church in itself justify Beecher's influence? Could the wealth of Plymouth Church buy innocence? Was Beecher's sheer magnetism, charisma, and physical appeal to make him infallible in the public eye no matter what he did? And did this mean that there were no longer any standards, principles, or institutions which could legitimately or effectively exert influence on American society? Or, as Tilton as well as the leaders of the Church of the Pilgrims and the Liberals of Brooklyn hoped, did there still exist some objective, rational standard which would serve as the foundation of morality and justice? If there were not, people like Tilton and Richard Salter Storrs were doomed to impotence.

For Tilton, the trial was a private assault, not only on Beecher, but on society itself for the arbitrary

⁷Trial, vol. III, p. 816.

and capricious way in which he had been treated. In a single stroke, Tilton had been stripped of his livelihood, his reputation, and his social status; just as he had once felt that his success was "undeserved" so now he knew that his "ruin" was unwarranted. Henry Ward Beecher was merely an example of the instability and unpredictability of the anonymous force known to Tilton as "public" or "popular sentiment"--a force which rewarded a morally flaccid and hypocritical minister and "crushed" principled men like himself.

This anxiety helps explain why Tilton felt impelled to press charges against Beecher when he must have realized that the facts about his own personal life would come to light along with Beecher's. Once his reputation and influence had been assailed, his profound anger and rage emerged. In continuing to insist, as he did throughout the trial, on Beecher's "greatness" and "purity," Tilton was implicitly asking for a measure of mercy for his own indiscretions. I am no better and no worse than Henry Ward Beecher, he seems to be saying, you must vindicate us both or crush us both. That, at least, would be comprehensible and rational; it would soothe the rage. But it was not to be the case, and Tilton was once again--as he had been in so many instances in his life--left to rage uncontrollably at society and himself.

For Richard Salter Storrs, the members of the Church of the Pilgrims, and for the Liberal Republicans of Brooklyn, Tilton's frustration and rage at the Plymouth pastor were similar to their own. Not that they had any sympathy with Tilton, for he as well as Beecher had violated their moral code: but his experience with the emotional irrationality of the "popular sentiment" which so capriciously determined a man's position in the social order mirrored their own plight in Brooklyn society.

Storrs himself epitomizes the kind of man who was frustrated by the ascendancy of personalism and emotionalism in Brooklyn. Born in Braintree, Massachusetts, the neighbor of such illustrious families as the Adamses, the Quincys, and the Hancocks, Storrs carried on a ministerial tradition of four generations. After graduating from Andover Theological Seminary, he had been called in 1846, at the age of twenty-five, to the Church of the Pilgrims in Brooklyn Heights, where he had soon gained a reputation for unruffled dignity, tempered orthodoxy, and scholarly manner.⁸ Unlike Henry Ward Beecher, Storrs treasured the authority conferred on Congregationalism by its long history. Although his theological doctrine was clearly "liberal," his scholarly, dignified, and tradition-bound manner labeled him "orthodox."

⁸Stiles, vol. 2, pp. 1016-1017.

By 1875, Storrs' Church of the Pilgrims had grown to 720 members, largely New York merchants and their families who formed the stable, loyal core of the church. It would seem to be a success story--except for the incredible mushrooming of Plymouth Church after the advent of Henry Ward Beecher. Within five years of his arrival in 1847, Beecher had attracted the same number of parishioners that Storrs would attract in thirty!⁹ Beecher never wrote a sermon--at most, he preached from one-page outlines--but the spontaneous emotional outpouring which resulted was amazing.¹⁰ Storrs was not a jealous or vindictive man, but he did want to learn how to be more successful at his calling--so he began to preach without notes. The response of his congregation was less than enthusiastic--he could not seem to communicate his thoughts without the manuscript before him. After making sporadic attempts with this technique, he gave it up entirely and accepted his limitations.¹¹ Neither the liberalizing of his theology nor the exhibition of his

⁹The Church of the Pilgrims Manual (New York 1876), pp. 51-60. Thompson, p. 160.

¹⁰HWB Sermon Outlines, Beecher Collection, Library of Congress.

¹¹Richard S. Storrs, The Church of the Pilgrims, Brooklyn, New York: Its Character and Work, With the Changes around It, during Forty Years of Pastoral Service (New York 1886), p. 18.

logical mind was going to win great influence and a large number of converts. He just did not possess the magnetism of a Henry Ward Beecher.

Storrs could have been speaking of himself in an oration delivered late in his life when he described the elusive quality he could not seem to achieve, "where no pervading and animating spirit transforms what is written into a quickening personal message . . . and where the element, however indefinable, which changes words into powers, and makes sentences surprise us with fine inspirations, is palpably wanting."¹² Nevertheless, Storrs was a "gentleman" in every way. He had been raised and steeped in the traditional orthodoxy of New England, yet had managed to adapt to the confusion of urban life with intelligent dignity. But it was increasingly frustrating to him that Beecher's vulgar emotionalism was what a large share of the Protestants of Brooklyn seemed to prefer. Apparently his parishioners shared his mixed feelings of revulsion and envy at the power commanded by popular demagoguery and money. From Storrs' perspective, those were the only two things Beecher and those like him had. The middle-aged men who gathered to hear Storrs every Sunday could only nod in agreement when their minister said, "We see . . . often and sadly . . . accomplished,

¹²Richard Salter Storrs, "Manliness in the Scholar," in Orations and Addresses (Chicago 1901), p. 346.

capable, perhaps brilliant men, who eagerly aspire, but who never achieve; whose influence is perceptibly limited and languid, as compared with their powers; from whom society, after a time, ceases to expect anything more than a transient entertainment; whose age is shadowed with the deepening sense of practical failure."¹³

The most succinct statement, however, of the objections to Beecher and Plymouth Church are to be found in the records of the Church Council called by the Church of the Pilgrims and the Clinton Avenue Congregational Church in March 1874. The Council was ostensibly a response to the action of Plymouth Church in dropping Theodore Tilton's name from the membership roll. Its purpose was to bring the Beecher scandal into the open by demanding that Plymouth Church investigate the adultery charges. Storrs contended that it was a violation of Congregational custom and principles to allow a member to be dropped without a full investigation. But observers in Brooklyn noted that if it had not been for the Council, the matter might have dropped out of the public mind altogether.

In a speech delivered to the Council, Storrs denied that his action was motivated by envy or jealousy by explaining that the issues at stake transcended the sordidness of the scandal. "The case itself was

¹³Ibid.

remarkable," he said, "but the principles involved in it are more remarkable still."¹⁴ In essence, Storrs contended, Congregationalism was a system which had to depend on historical tradition and mutual agreement in the form of a covenant. Its rules, usages, and laws had to be "believed, by those who live in it and love it."¹⁵

Although Plymouth Church called itself a Congregational church, it had not acted in accordance with Congregational principles in allowing one of its members, Tilton, to terminate his connection with the church by non-attendance and then dropping him from the roll after he had made serious allegations against the minister. If this was Congregationalism, said Storrs, then "that which our fathers knew, and loved, and honored, no more exists . . . the system has already gone to pieces."¹⁶

This rhetoric may seem excessive in terms of the single error on the part of Plymouth Church of dropping Tilton; yet it makes perfect sense when considered in the light of Beecher's rejection of all religious tradition, doctrine, and principle--and his reliance on his own personality to create a following. From Storrs'

¹⁴The Brooklyn Council of 1874 (New York 1874), p. 138.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 146.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 139.

perspective, Plymouth Church was in reality no church at all. Tilton's attorney thundered out what genteel Storrs could only hint at. What goes on at Plymouth Church, he charged,

. . . is not an orderly, spirit-broken, prayerful worship; it is not a service which holds up Christ and Him crucified; but it is a performance which exhibits Beecher and him glorified. Throughout all his sermons are scattered minutes of noisy applause and laughter.¹⁷

Beecher, according to Storrs, had already dissolved his church as an "organized body," making it into an "incoherent assembly in attendance upon a particular ministry."¹⁸

The leading Liberal Republicans of Brooklyn, who were also Church of the Pilgrims members must have whispered "amen" to this assertion, for, as we have seen, they were in the midst of a political struggle to rid the city of parties based on "bossism." And Storrs, aware of the political activities of many of his leading parishioners, did not stop at condemning Beecher's violation of the dignity and integrity of religious organizations. "The same principle [approach to social organization]," he

¹⁷William Beach summation, Trial, vol. III, p. 319.

¹⁸Brooklyn Council, p. 144.

continued, "applies everywhere, if it is admitted as proper anywhere."¹⁹ Thus, if Beecher's flouting of the rules, usages, and laws of Congregationalism were carried into other areas, "it would dissolve human society itself," and chaos would result.²⁰ Richard Salter Storrs and his parishioners must have felt, from their perspective in Brooklyn, that many of the most fundamental institutions of American society were on the road to disintegration!

Though he expressed things in rather sweeping and cosmic terms, what really lay behind Storrs' rhetorical

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid. The day after the Council's conclusion Beecher wrote the following letter to Moulton: "I am indignant beyond expression. Storrs' course has been an unspeakable outrage. After his pretended sympathy and friendship for Theodore he has turned against him in the most venomous manner--and it is not sincere. His professions of faith and affection for me are hollow and faithless. They are merely tactical. His object is plain. He is determined to force a conflict, and to use one of us to destroy the other if possible. That is his game. By stinging Theodore he believes that he will be driven into a course which he hopes will ruin me. If ever a man betrayed another he has. I am in hopes that Theodore, who has borne so much, will be unwilling to be a flail in Storrs' hand to strike at a friend. . . . At any rate, while the fury rages in Council, it is not wise to make any move that would be one among so many, as to lose effect in a degree, and after the battle is over one can more exactly see what ought to be done. Meantime I am patient as I know how to be, but pretty nearly used up with inward excitement, and must run away for a day or two and hide and sleep or there will be a funeral. . . . No one can tell, under first impressions, what the effect of such a speech [Storrs'] will be. It ought to damn Storrs." HWB to Frank Moulton, 25 March 1874, Marshall, pp. 367-368.

warnings of impending social and ecclesiastical collapse was a fear of loss of respect and status. Although Church of the Pilgrims members were not--like Tilton--in immediate danger of actual "ruin," they were feeling overwhelmed by a hostile social environment. Behind the talk of principles and moral standards was the fact that--from the Liberal Republican/Church of the Pilgrims perspective--Plymouth Church, as well as the men who had come to dominate Brooklyn politics, were of low, undisciplined, and uneducated social background--upstarts whose lack of education, refinement, and regard for tradition threatened to overwhelm the social order. While disturbed by the gains of immigrant politicians, the Liberals were even more directly threatened by those native-born Americans whose new wealth enabled them to pose a more immediate threat to the "gentlemen" of the old school.

In this context, Storrs' allusions to the lack of "discipline" and "standards" in Plymouth Church surely referred to fear of social amalgamation encouraged by the mixing of all social classes in Plymouth Church. The most flagrant example of this disregard for necessary social distinctions, many of Beecher's critics felt, was Plymouth Church's system of pew rental. The practice of assigned seats in church had a long history in New England. Throughout the colonial period the seat any individual

occupied in the church was a clear indication of his status within the community. Up to the Revolutionary period, seating was usually done by a committee appointed by the town or church; in the seventeenth century the committee simply assigned seats with no instructions or written criteria from the town--presumably everyone "knew" the social rank of every member. In the eighteenth century, however, when social status in New England was becoming somewhat more fluid, committees often wrote down their criteria in order of importance. The criteria usually included age, wealth, and the still undefined social rank. Even then, however, there were often arguments over whether to define social rank by birth or by wealth.²¹

Now, in Plymouth Church, there was again no more arguing over how to "seat" the church. Each year, during the first week in January, Plymouth Church held a "pew auction." A professional auctioneer was hired to make it an evening of entertainment as well as of church business. Anyone, church member or not, was eligible to bid for a pew--when the highest bid in each round was free to choose any pew in the church for the coming year. The front and center pews went for the highest premiums because they

²¹This information about seating in New England churches was gathered from a study of the colonial records of the towns of Northampton, Hadley, Amherst, Pelham, and Hatfield, Massachusetts.

were traditionally the most prestigious.²² In colonial New England, sitting in the front would indicate how highly one's townsmen thought of one; in Brooklyn, it indicated that one had a great deal of money.

There was wide criticism of this practice, not just from Storrs, but from many churches in Brooklyn. It was said to be the clearest indication that Plymouth Church had abandoned all spiritual standards. Money should not buy religion, status, power; that in itself was scandalous! Yet it was the openness with which Plymouth Church flaunted the power of money that was particularly revolting to the Church of the Pilgrims. They, too, had their own pew rental system in which higher prices were paid for the more prestigious pews, but it was done in private, discreetly.

In probing the divisions which emerged in the Beecher-Tilton scandal, one is increasingly struck by the degree to which it pitted against each other the two great Congregational churches of Brooklyn: Plymouth Church and

²² Descriptions of Plymouth Church pew rental auctions were published in the Brooklyn Eagle every January. These reports described the bidding, listed the pew purchasers, which pew they chose, and how much they paid. Beecher defended the practice, insisting it was "democratic" religion, allowing those who had worked their way to the top to reap the rewards they deserved.

the Church of the Pilgrims. Is it possible systematically to establish the underlying differences between these two groups, which, superficially, to a later generation, seemed so similar? Contemporary observers noted that the Church of the Pilgrims had a reputation for a membership of "marked intellectual ability, high social influence and financial strength."²³ In contrast, Plymouth Church was characterized as a "cross-section" of America, or the "great middle-class."²⁴ Were these contemporary impressions correct and did they, in reality, form the basis for social conflict in the scandal? Or, was it true as some recent historians have asserted, that Plymouth Church was the stronghold of wealth and status in Brooklyn Heights?²⁵

A comparison of the members of the Church of the Pilgrims and Plymouth Church does bear out the class differences described by contemporary observers. With the help of a group of undergraduates I was able to

²³Stiles, p. 1016.

²⁴Barrows, p. 78.

²⁵Most Beecher scholars, including Hibben and Shaplen, have assumed that his parishioners were upper- and upper-middle-class, more as Storrs' church actually was. This error stems from the fact that Beecher's more visible parishioners were wealthy merchants and professionals who lived on Brooklyn Heights. No one has made any effort to collect data on all the members.

locate approximately twenty-five percent of the members of both churches in the Brooklyn City Directories, and about thirty-five percent of both groups in the federal census schedules. The results of the comparison appear in Tables I-IV.²⁶

Table I compares the average value of real estate and personal property. It is apparent from this table that Storrs' church is far above Beecher's in both categories: the average real estate value of Storrs' members is triple that of Beecher's members and the average personal estate of the Church of the Pilgrims is quadruple that of Plymouth Church. This is not definitive evidence, however, since in urban areas in 1870 many people may have simply refused to state their property values at all. For example, some members of both churches whom other evidence shows to be wealthy have no property listing at all. This discrepancy is most likely explained by the fact that the higher one's social status the less one would feel compelled to reveal information to the census taker; this would explain why more of Beecher's parishioners had some property listing than Church of the Pilgrims members.

²⁶Lain's Brooklyn Street Directory and Buyer's Guide . . . 1870 (Brooklyn 1870); United States Census, Ninth Census (1870), Population Schedules, Brooklyn, Wards 1-7, 11, 20, 22.

Table I
Economic Status, 1870

	<u>Beecher</u>	<u>Storrs</u>
Number in sample	223	100
Percentage who had no property listing	58%	68%
Percentage who had some property listing	42%	32%
Average real estate value	\$19,000	\$ 77,000
Average personal property value	\$45,000	\$201,000

SOURCE: Ninth Census of United States,
1870, Brooklyn, New York, Wards 1-12.

Table II, which categorizes the occupations of church members, confirms the fact that Storrs' members were primarily from the upper class and the upper middle class of Brooklyn. Commercial merchants, retail merchants, and professionals such as lawyers and physicians make up seventy-three percent of the church. This is a remarkably homogeneous and stable group both in occupation and geographic location. Table III shows that fifty percent of Storrs' members lived in Brooklyn but actually worked in New York. (Small wonder they took so long to awaken to the necessity of assuming an active role in Brooklyn politics!) Table III also demonstrates that sixty percent of the members resided in the Brooklyn Heights section of the city. Not only were the members of the Church of the Pilgrims isolated by their connections with New York from their home city, they were insulated, as well, from the surrounding rings of lower-class and immigrant areas. (See map, page 229.)

In marked contrast to the wealth and homogeneity of the Storrs group were Beecher's parishioners. Here, there is a wide diversity of occupational levels, from commercial merchants to a large percentage of white-collar workers and artisans. The latter two groups, in fact, make up almost forty percent of the church. Far from being upper-class or even securely middle-class, these

Table II
Occupational Status, 1870

	<u>Beecher</u>		<u>Storrs</u>	
	<u>Number</u>	<u>Percent</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Commercial merchants and brokers	23	10%	30	30%
Retail merchants	58	26%	30	30%
Manufacturers	2	1%	1	1%
Professionals	29	13%	13	13%
White-collar clerks	40	18%	9	9%
Artisans	44	20%	8	8%
Unskilled workers and laborers	13	6%	3	3%
Widows	<u>14</u>	<u>6%</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>4%</u>
TOTAL	223	100%	100	100%

SOURCE: 1870 Census; Brooklyn
City Directory, 1869-1870.

Table III
Group Homogeneity, 1870

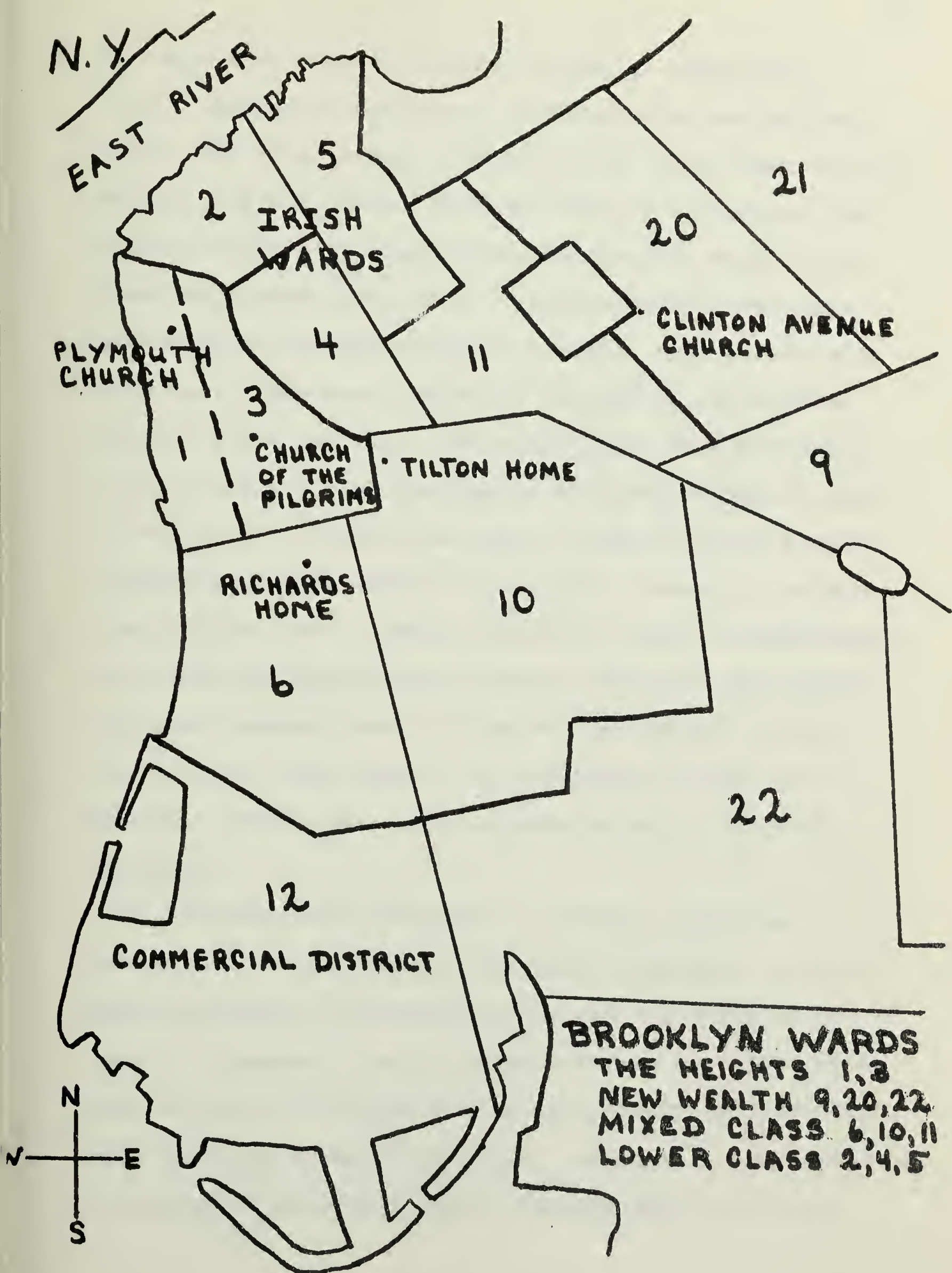
	<u>Beecher</u>	<u>Storrs</u>
Percentage who live on Brooklyn Heights (Wards 1 and 3)	28%	60%
Percentage who live in newer well-to-do wards (Wards 9, 11, 20, 22)	20%	14%
Total percentage living in wealthy wards	48%	74%
Percentage who live in middle-class, mixed, or lower-class wards	38%	22%
Percentage who live in Brooklyn and work in New York City	25%	50%

SOURCE: Brooklyn City Directory,
1869-1870.

Table IV
Geographic Origins, 1870

	<u>Beecher</u>	<u>Storrs</u>
New England and New York	64%	87%
Other states	1%	6%
British Isles	38%	6%

SOURCE: 1870 Census, Brooklyn.



men were closer to the lower fringes of the middle class. Not only were they a heterogeneous occupational group, but only twenty-five percent of them commuted from Brooklyn to New York. (Perhaps this is one reason that they provided more support for the regular Republicans than the Storrs group did.) Plymouth Church members generally lived and worked in Brooklyn itself; but more than that, they were scattered throughout the city as Storrs' group was not. Table III shows that more than a third (thirty-eight percent) of Plymouth members lived in middle- or lower-class wards. Most historians have treated Beecher's church as strictly a Brooklyn Heights institution, but, in fact, Table III shows a surprisingly low figure of twenty-eight percent lived on the Heights; while in contrast most of Storrs' parishioners (sixty percent) did live there. It is Storrs' church, not Beecher's, which was more representative of the elite Heights.

But while this portrait of the two groups is revealing, it can also be somewhat misleading. It is a static portrait, and Brooklyn society was anything but static. Beecher's parishioners may have been less elite than Storrs', but many of them were moving up--and they were doing so without any style. After all, approximately a quarter of Beecher's church members were rich--more

wealthy, in fact, than Storrs' members. One staunch Plymouthite, H. B. Claflin, received "a larger income from trade" than anyone else in Brooklyn; he also owned the "costliest" residence, having spent "more money than has ever before been expended on a private residence in Brooklyn." Henry Bowen had built a fine white mansion on Willow Street, importing Italian marble, and hiring a sculptor to carve the heads of his children on the furniture.²⁷ In contrast, a prominent member of Storrs' church and a Liberal Republican leader, Simeon B. Chittenden, was noted, according to a Brooklyn paper, for a "substantial, but rather old-fashioned house on Pierrepont Street."²⁸ Thus, the homes of Bowen and Claflin might be described as nouveau and ostentatious while Chittenden's was "substantial"--a graphic illustration of the difference between the contending groups in Brooklyn.

In addition, one occupational category--the professional--further emphasizes the fundamental differences between the two groups. Although the churches were equal in their percentage of professionals (thirteen percent apiece) the backgrounds of each group, in the way they had prepared for their professions, was very different. No quantitative comparison can be made because this

²⁷Brooklyn Sunday Sun, 14 June 1874.

²⁸Ibid.

kind of background information cannot be obtained from the census but must be located in city and county local histories. However, one indication that Storrs' professionals were of higher social status may be the very fact that more of his members than Beecher's have biographical sketches in Henry R. Stiles, History of Kings County (1884). Of those who are included, a few examples are revealing. Two Plymouth Church lawyers, Benjamin Tracy and Thomas Shearman, for example, came from relatively poor backgrounds--Tracy from a small upstate New York town and Shearman from England--and both entered their profession through apprenticeship rather than college training.

The professionals in Storrs' church, on the other hand, had the benefits of social advantage and education that Plymouth Church members lacked. One of the leading members of the Church of the Pilgrims was Lucien Birdseye, a lawyer who, according to Stiles, "entered life under auspicious circumstances."²⁹ Birdseye's father had also been a lawyer, was, in fact, a representative to Congress who was able to send his son to Yale, then set him up in practice in New York. Another member of the Church of the Pilgrims, Francis E. Dana, was the third generation of his family to become a lawyer. He had been born in

²⁹Stiles, p. 1281.

Brooklyn, attended private schools and Columbia College before studying law with his father. In 1869 Dana married the daughter of Rev. William Ives Budington, minister of one of the wealthiest Congregational churches in Brooklyn. His home in one of the newer "hill" suburbs, reports Stiles, was "the abode of refinement and culture."³⁰ Another Storrs member, a civil engineer, is also representative. Born in Brooklyn, he was educated in Switzerland and France and served as private secretary to Washington Irving in Spain. Upon his return he settled in Brooklyn to manage the estate of his father-in-law and act as president of the Long Island Historical Society.³¹ These were men who benefited from family influence and resources and, like Richard Salter Storrs himself, could treasure their heritage.

In the light of this information, Beecher's emphasis on rejection of family, religious, and social ties which might restrain mobility is understandable. His vindication of aggressive self-interest and forgiveness of occasional moral lapses was surely a comfort to men like Henry Bowen and Benjamin Tracy, whose survival depended upon shrewd calculation in daily business and political struggles. Beecher's parishioners had good reason to be

³⁰ Ibid., p. 1297.

³¹ "J. Carson Brevoort," Stiles, p. 1320.

attracted by the positive side of the Gospel of Love and the doctrine of "moral affinity" which rationalized their efforts to advance socially. In portraying "love" as a "social force" (rather than sexual attraction), Beecher was urging that all personal and social relations be based on the mutual emotional attraction of "like" natures. Theodore Tilton had done that by rejecting his ties with his wife and her family and establishing "affinities" with reformers and intellectuals--in this case, moral affinity was a mechanism for social advancement.

Indeed, Beecher's parishioners were mostly young men and women--their average age was thirty-four in 1870--who had migrated to Brooklyn from rural New England and upstate New York towns; the church records indicate a high turnover of membership as these young men came to the city, joined the church, then if they failed to "make it" (as many did), moved on. The wealthy segment, by and large, was the one that prospered in the city and stayed on to demonstrate their gratitude to Beecher. Thus, these were the men who were on the ascendant in Brooklyn society, or still had reason to hope they soon would be. They, most of all, could appreciate the social freedom

Beecher preached because for them, it meant improvement in their "place, business, and repute."³²

In stark contrast to the Plymouthites were the Liberal Republicans and members of the Church of the Pilgrims, for whom the fluidity of mid-nineteenth-century society was threatening. Men like Storrs and Chittenden could not claim the power which came from vast sums of money, but only a status rooted in family standing and history. But more and more this tradition was undermined by the power that wealth could buy. For example, many of the families of Storrs' church had been in Brooklyn Heights since the 1840s when the community was created. As Table III shows, sixty percent of them lived on the Heights; significantly, only fourteen percent had moved out to the newer, wealthier sections near Washington and Prospect Parks. Storrs' members were proud of their community--it was relatively cohesive and congenial (except for the tourists who gathered every Sunday at Plymouth Church!) and their preference was to keep it that way. However, as two Brooklyn newspapers noted in 1874, the Heights was beginning to decline as a neighborhood. Some commercial enterprises were invading the

³²The phrase "place, business, and repute" was used by Frank Moulton to describe what drove Tilton to prosecute Beecher. Tilton, like Church of the Pilgrims members, felt threatened by loss of social as well as economic status.

area and there was a "gradual exodus" of the residents to the new "hill" areas.³³ It was not Storrs' parishioners who were moving out, but rather Beecher's; Table III shows that a higher ratio--twenty percent--of Plymouthites had already moved to these newly developed areas. The "high intellectual achievement and social standing" of Church of the Pilgrims men was not preventing the gradual erosion of their community as well as their power and influence. The world, they must have thought, was being taken over by the likes of Benjamin Tracy, Boss McLoughlin, and Henry Ward Beecher.

"Moral affinity" and social freedom, to these men, then, smacked more of social humiliation and defeat than of opportunity. Therefore, their concern was in another area--that of finding a way to re-establish social order and social control. They hoped to restore a familiar order through education, rigid morality, professional standards, and the strengthening of social institutions. Beecher's doctrine of "affinity" could, they thought, only lead to social chaos.

The conflict between these two social groups in Brooklyn during the 1870s, then, was not so much conflict over a single issue but rather a much broader one, in

³³Brooklyn Eagle, 23 July 1872; Howard, The Eagle and Brooklyn, vol. 2, p. 304.

which each group failed to understand the goals and fears of the other. The irony is that Beecher and his parishioners never hoped to eclipse their friends and neighbors at the Church of the Pilgrims. Indeed, they hoped to become like them in respectability and refinement. For Storrs' threatened members, however, the challenge was to retain or recapture the influence they felt was due to their superior status and education.

The public scandal was the ultimate result of the social breakdown Church of the Pilgrims members felt so acutely and so personally. For them, Beecher's sexual violation of the Tilton home could have symbolized Plymouth Church's social adulteration of Brooklyn Heights. Henry Ward Beecher had invaded the home of his parishioner Theodore Tilton. Abusing the power of his popularity and sacred calling, he had corrupted the innocent Elizabeth Tilton, ruining her home and blighting her character and her proper role as a dutiful wife. Then, adding to the insult, he had had the audacity to denounce both Tilton and his wife as blackmailers and conspirators! Finally, and worst of all, he was supported by social upstarts who would not allow even gross immorality to dim their enthusiasm for one who Sunday after Sunday was not only justifying but extolling their social pretensions and aggressive pursuit of gain. Not only was this too great

a blow for the institution of the family to endure;
it was a dramatic microcosm of the plight of Richard
Salter Storrs and the members of the Church of the Pil-
grims in Brooklyn Heights.

P A R T I I I

THE SCANDAL AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

C H A P T E R V I I I

THE HIGHER SPHERE:

NESTING ON BROOKLYN HEIGHTS

When they became personally acquainted with Henry Ward Beecher, Elizabeth and Theodore Tilton began to confront aspects of the minister's beliefs which he kept carefully hidden from the public. Although Beecher preached often enough about "higher" and "lower" spheres, theorizing abstractly about the "unnecessary" restraints "conventional morality" imposed on those who were already on the "higher plane," the minister refused to acknowledge openly his belief in what were essentially the doctrines of Free Love. Even his secrecy, however, Beecher justified in a sermon in 1868:

Those who are on the lower plane--
namely the plane where they act from
rules--are strongly inclined to
believe that those who go higher and
act from principles are . . . abandon-
ing right and wrong.¹

Both Theodore and Elizabeth had to wrestle with this very problem. In a world in which traditional institutions and morality were being undermined, what was right and what was wrong? The changing nature of such social

¹HWB, "The Strong to Bear with the Weak,"
25 October 1868, Plymouth Pulpit, vol. 1, p. 118.

institutions as church and marriage had prepared the ground, and the Tiltons were about to confront the consequences in a personal struggle.

Not long after Theodore Tilton began working with Beecher at the Independent, he was introduced to what Beecher called the "higher sphere." As we have seen, it was Henry Bowen who in 1862 first informed Tilton of some of the activities going on in this sphere. According to Bowen, Beecher "was guilty of adultery, a practice begun in Indianapolis and continued in Brooklyn."² The effect of this information on the idealistic young editor was devastating. His own upbringing had been as uncompromisingly rigid in its moral standards as in its religious outlook; he recalled his father's counsel on the subject of the great dangers of "undue intercourse" with women.³ This knowledge of Beecher's indiscretions came to trouble Theodore more and more as time went on, especially as he faced his own weakness in resisting sexual temptation. Elizabeth later testified that her husband talked to her of "Mr. Beecher's wrong-doings with ladies . . .

²Theodore Tilton, "The True Story," December 1872, Trial, vol. I, p. 592.

³HWB testimony, Trial, vol. III, p. 795.

night after night, and day after day." He seemed, she said, "to be worried on that subject."⁴

Although shocked at Bowen's revelations about his idol, Tilton was not prepared to dismiss Beecher as a hypocritical sinner. After all, the minister had been a loving friend, almost a father. Moreover, he had been instrumental in persuading Theodore that many of the beliefs and institutions of his youth had been in error. Most Christian churches, for example, had supported slavery. Could the man who had done so much for the cause of anti-slavery and religious enlightenment be wrong? The conflict within Tilton manifested itself in 1865 when he let slip to a mutual friend that the minister had exhibited "certain loose conduct with women."⁵ When Beecher reproved him for this gossip, Tilton, full of regret, wrote a letter affirming his unshaken love and faith in his mentor.⁶

The internal ambivalence and conflict this situation brought about considerably aggravated Tilton's existing

⁴ET testimony, PCIC, Marshall, p. 193.

⁵HWB testimony, Trial, vol. III, p. 737.

⁶TT to HWB, 30 November 1865, Trial, vol. II, p. 738. This letter has been used by Hibben and Shaplen to demonstrate the closeness between the two men, ignoring the context in which Tilton wrote it--disillusionment with his idol.

anxiety over his precarious social and economic position. He desperately wanted to retain Beecher as his friend--it enhanced his own and the world's image of himself--and he wanted to believe in Beecher. Yet the unabated power of his old values caused fear and doubt. Thus, he behaved toward Beecher in vacillating fashion; he continued to urge the minister to make frequent visits to Elizabeth when he was away on lecture tours, but at the same time he began to fear the consequences of these calls.

Recognizing that Elizabeth would be overwhelmed, just as he had been, by the famous minister's attention, Theodore began to be suspicious. "If you should appear to me," he wrote his wife in 1866, "anything less than the ideal woman, the Christian saint that I know you to be, I shall not care to live a day longer!"⁷ The jealousy intensified as Elizabeth's letters were more and more filled with glowing references to Beecher. Rebuking her for not accompanying him on one of the lecture tours, Theodore admonished his wife in 1866, "Leave home, children, kith and kin, and cleave unto him to whom you originally promised to cleave. You promised the other

⁷TT to ET, 6 December 1866, Trial, vol. I, p. 494.

man to cleave to me and yet you leave me all alone and cleave to him."⁸

Yet there was a side of Theodore that found Beecher's sexual freedom worth emulating and the arguments for it compelling. The idea that love could not be bound by "mechanical" ties such as blood or marriage vows seemed appropriate to his own situation. A saint she might be, but Elizabeth's social and intellectual inferiority was still annoying. Much as Theodore tried to persuade himself that their "new marriage" was based on "soul-loving" and "affinity," it never seemed to become a reality. Was it right, Theodore began to wonder, to be legally "chained" to someone with whom one had no spiritual bond? What is to be the legal status and the social fate of persons, he questioned, "who find themselves married, but not mated."⁹

Thus it was that Theodore, with Beecher as his model, began to explore his emotional and sexual responses to other women. At the trial, Bessie Turner, a maid in the Tilton household, testified about an incident which demonstrates Tilton's attempts to imitate Beecher. When Elizabeth was away during the summer, she said,

⁸TT to ET, 27 December 1866, Trial, vol. I, pp. 494-495.

⁹TT, "Love, Marriage, and Divorce," Independent, 1 December 1870.

Theodore had come to her room at night and "stroked" her "forehead and hair . . . putting his hand in my neck."¹⁰ In an effort to quiet Bessie's resistance, Tilton argued, "Why, those caresses, those are all right; people in the best society do all those things, and it is perfectly proper."¹¹ When Bessie objected further, she later testified, Theodore went on to insist that an "affinity" between a man and a woman justified its "physical expression." Indeed, Tilton said, he himself knew of "ministers that caressed girls and married women--it was all perfectly right and proper and beautiful."¹²

It is possible that these arguments were intended as much to convince himself as Bessie, for many of his letters to Elizabeth indicate that as much as he tried, Theodore could not bring himself to accept his own

¹⁰Bessie Turner testimony, Trial, vol. II, p. 474. The testimony given by Elizabeth "Bessie" Turner was important in both the church and civil trials. Bessie was a teen-aged girl who lived in the Tilton household acting as a kind of "mother's helper." Her status was considerably above that of the other Irish servants--she was treated almost as an adopted child in the Tilton family. In her testimony, her gratitude to and affection for both the Tiltons are obvious. She was clearly torn between the two when the scandal became public--but, after some vacillation, demonstrated that her devotion to Elizabeth was strongest. She appeared genuinely mystified by Theodore's treatment of a woman Bessie regarded as almost a saint.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid.

rhetoric. The values of his youth could not be so easily put aside. When the lecture tours provided a great deal of time to contemplate his sexual infidelity, Theodore was overcome with guilt and remorse. "I once thought myself," he wrote, "a good, true, and upright man. But now . . . I find myself a constant sinner."¹³ Although Theodore could emulate Beecher's sexual adventures, he could not justify them with the minister's arguments. This ambivalent behavior soon became focused on Elizabeth.

While Tilton struggled with his confused attitudes toward sexuality, Beecher had begun in the fall of 1866 to call on Elizabeth. Because she was bewildered by her husband's alternately adoring worship and verbal abuse, and also suffering social isolation from her family, Elizabeth was flattered and reassured by the minister's friendship. In the years before her personal acquaintance with Beecher, Elizabeth recalled that at "the mention of his name . . . or better still, a visit from him, my cheek would flush with pleasure."¹⁴ It was, she said, a reaction common to "all his parishioners of both sexes."¹⁵

¹³TT to ET, 31 December 1866, Chicago Tribune.

¹⁴ET to TT, 28 December 1866, Trial, vol. I, p. 493.

¹⁵Ibid.

When he began visiting her, Beecher was writing his novel Norwood, and was in need of "uncritical praise."¹⁶ Thus Beecher took the chapters of Norwood to a "sympathetic" woman who he knew regarded him with "artless familiarity" and "entire confidence."¹⁷

At first Elizabeth believed that Beecher had come to her because he really respected her critical abilities. In sadly ironic fashion she later testified to the church committee, "He [Beecher] brought out that in me which Theodore never did . . . assertiveness . . . self-respect . . . I felt myself another woman."¹⁸ In the early months of their friendship, Elizabeth wrote guilelessly to her husband, "I have lived a richer, happier life since I have known him."¹⁹ Yet in this same letter one gets a hint that the real cause of the rise of Elizabeth's self-esteem was simply the attention of such a famous and respected man and the hope that his recognition of her would improve her position with her husband. "And have you not loved me

¹⁶HWB testimony, Trial, vol. II, p. 735.

¹⁷HWB testimony, PCIC, Marshall, p. 256;
TT testimony, Trial, vol. I, p. 619.

¹⁸ET testimony, PCIC, Marshall, p. 192.

¹⁹ET to TT, 28 December 1866, Trial, vol. I, p. 493.

more ardently," she asked Theodore, "since you saw another high nature appreciated me?"²⁰

As we have seen in her response to the "new marriage," Elizabeth was often more insightful than her husband. This quality was now evident in her relationship to Beecher. Although Elizabeth always contended that, unlike her husband, the minister "respected" her intellectually, she soon began to understand that the two men had something in common. "I realize that what attracts both of you to me," she wrote Theodore, "is a supposed purity of soul you find in me."²¹ Not her intellect or personality, then, but some innate "purity" was her unique attribute. What the basis was of that purity, Elizabeth was yet to discover.

Much as Henry Ward Beecher's attention flattered Elizabeth, even she was not entirely convinced he was wholly admirable. When Theodore related to her the stories of Beecher's looseness with women, she lamented the "lack of Christian manliness in this beloved man."²² Writing to Theodore in December 1867, Elizabeth proposed to use her newly discovered spiritual "purity" to help Beecher see through his "delusion" and rebuild his

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² ET to TT, 25 December 1867, Trial, vol. I, p. 499.

"Christian manliness." Admitting that as early as 1867 Beecher was making sexual advances, Elizabeth wrote Theodore, "If I, by God's grace, keep myself white, I may bless you both. I am striving."²³ Despite the minister's views, Elizabeth still saw sexual purity as defined by her marriage vows; whatever her feelings for Beecher, her duty to her husband required marital fidelity. Thus by neither according Beecher "silly flatteries" nor succumbing to his sexual advances, Elizabeth hoped to demonstrate "the honor and dignity of her sex."²⁴ In fact, for two years after the minister began to "solicit" her to be a "wife," Elizabeth refused, insisting that no amount of "fascinations" would cause her to "yield" her "womanhood."²⁵

However, as we have seen, when in the fall of 1868 Elizabeth and Theodore's "new marriage" collapsed in bitter arguments, Beecher's pursuit of Elizabeth was unwittingly reinforced by Theodore himself. It was he, after all, who had convinced Elizabeth of the importance of "soul-loving." Mutual "affinity" he had argued, should transcend legal sanctions, or indeed, any humanly conceived law. When love prevailed, he insisted, a

²³Ibid.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Ibid.

marriage existed; when love was gone, a divorce had taken place.²⁶ After the death of their child in August 1868, it was obvious that much as they might extol each other in letters, when they were together, there was neither love nor affinity. Rejected by her husband and sorrowing over the death of her child, Elizabeth turned increasingly to Beecher for solace and the bolstering of her "self-respect." It is not clear how much she confided to Beecher about the volatile state of her marriage, but it is likely that she did not hide very much. Indeed, her letters to Theodore often referred to conversations she and Beecher had concerning him. Beecher and Tilton both testified later that Elizabeth could always be depended upon for "truthfulness."²⁷ Elizabeth began to consider Beecher's sexual overtures and his justification for them.

In the context of Beecher's implicit "inner perfectionism," he could have readily justified the affair to Elizabeth as "high religious love" though it violated conventional morality.²⁸ For "morality," he said in a sermon in 1872, "is founded upon external convenience, and not upon the requirements of things relating to man's

²⁶TT, "Love, Marriage, and Divorce," Independent, 1 December 1870.

²⁷TT testimony, Trial, vol. I, p. 560; HWB testimony, Trial, vol. III, p. 21.

²⁸TT Statement, Marshall, pp. 116-117.

whole nature."²⁹ Beecher often stressed the necessary integration of man's physical and spiritual needs. "The abstract [i.e., platonic] doctrine of love would be well enough," he argued, "if men were nothing but spectators."³⁰ Obviously, Beecher did not intend to be a spectator in love; for its fullest and best expression, his spiritual love for Elizabeth needed to be accompanied by physical love.

Possibly he also used the same arguments to Elizabeth that he employed in a sermon in 1872. "God has never put a faculty into the mind of a man," he insisted, "which is not in its own sphere and degree, right."³¹ (And Beecher knew that his love for Elizabeth fell within the right sphere.) Further, he may have used an argument from another sermon of the same year: "Whoever loves rightly loves upward . . . and . . . loving that object, loves God."³² Beecher considered that his own spiritual nature was naturally drawn to Elizabeth's spiritual nature; this

²⁹HWB, "The True Value of Morality," 18 February 1872, Plymouth Pulpit, vol. 5, p. 47.

³⁰HWB, "Moral Honesty and Moral Earnestness," 20 October 1872, Plymouth Pulpit, vol. 5, p. 111.

³¹HWB, "Motives of Action," 20 November 1872, Plymouth Pulpit, vol. 5, p. 206.

³²HWB, "As to the Lord," 6 October 1872, Plymouth Pulpit, vol. 5, p. 83.

love--existing as it did in a "higher sphere"--should never be subject to mere human law. And undoubtedly, Beecher made the same specific argument to Elizabeth that he employed later on in justifying the affair to Frank Moulton: that their sexual intercourse was as "natural and sincere an expression of love . . . as words of endearment" and would be justified "on the ground of our love for each other." "God," the minister insisted, "would not blame them."³³ This was probably the explicit and personal manner in which he put it to Elizabeth rather than the general abstractions of his sermons. However, the ideas are essentially the same. In Beecher's private system, moral affinity or spiritual love had replaced institutional obligations as the basis for human relationships--at least for those on the "higher, nobler plane." The minister's ideas, then, were consistent toward all social institutions, whether social, religious, or political.

In short, Victoria Woodhull was entirely accurate when she claimed Beecher as a fellow believer in Free Love. Woodhull simply said that all individuals had the right to decide for themselves who they would love--that no laws should control such personal decisions. This

³³"Mr. Moulton's Last Statement," 11 September 1874, Marshall, p. 479.

belief coincided with Beecher's idea that morality, fear, or law had no place in the lives of those who have reached a "high religious sphere." The real difference between Woodhull and Beecher lay in a judgment about who was entitled to this freedom of choice. Woodhull was a radical because she advocated for everyone what Beecher allowed to a select few. Only in this way, Beecher seemed to think, could the "higher" as well as the "lower" spheres be protected.

Beecher carefully instructed Elizabeth that their affair would have to be concealed from everyone even though it had the sanction of God. According to Tilton, Beecher used the term "nest-hiding" in reference to the affair. In Norwood Beecher explained his concept of a nest:

It would seem as if, while her whole life centered upon his love, she would hide the precious secret by flinging over it vines and flowers, by mirth and raillery, as a bird hides its nest under tufts of grass, and behind leaves and vines, as a fence against prying eyes.³⁴

³⁴HWB, Norwood (1868), p. 74. One of Beecher's favorite images was that of a "nest" and he used it repeatedly in sermons and the novel. For example, in one of his sermons, he said: "The world is good for a nest, but it is bad for a flying place. It is a good place to be hatched in, but it is a bad place to practice one's wings in. If a man has power to fly, he does not want to be confined to a nest. The glory and power of the eagle

Beecher often referred to death as the event which would free man from confinement to the nest; he called dying "a breaking of the bonds which constrain us in this life."³⁵ But the preacher clearly believed that individuals of a higher nature ought to be free from social bonds in this life as well as the next--only an ignorant and misguided public opinion prevented it. Nest-hiding was his solution. The moral elite may break the "constraining bonds" but must carefully keep it hidden--those still in the "lower" spheres should not be allowed to get the wrong idea.

Elizabeth was finally persuaded. "She was an extremely sympathetic woman," Theodore said later, "taking the ideas of others readily."³⁶ Elizabeth's testimony that she felt free of sin even after the affair indicated an assimilation of these ideas. Refusing to admit that she had violated her marriage vows, she embraced Beecher's assurances that she remained "spotless and chaste."³⁷

is never known while he lives on his cliff--not till he has abandoned that and sought his new home." HWB, "What Is Salvation," 29 September 1872, Plymouth Pulpit, vol. 5, p. 70.

³⁵HWB, "On the Temporal Advantages of Religion," 6 July 1873, Plymouth Pulpit, vol. 5, p. 368.

³⁶TT testimony, Trial, vol. I, p. 619.

³⁷TT, "Sworn Statement," 20 July 1874, Marshall, p. 116.

Even at the trial, Tilton himself was convinced of his wife's sincerity, saying she would never have surrendered to anyone but Beecher.³⁸

Again, as in the affair with Lucy Bowen, the minister managed to place the blame on someone else and to transform his anxiety into an advantage. In a characteristic inversion of reality, Beecher considered Elizabeth the unwitting seducer. Her sexuality addressed the very needs that Beecher had never been able to suppress within himself. Later he indicated to Emma Moulton that he considered Elizabeth to blame for the adultery scandal--after all, she had sinned by confessing! "I don't understand how she could have done it to me," he said.³⁹

On November 11, 1868, a month after the relationship with Elizabeth began, Beecher delivered a sermon in Plymouth Church entitled "Love of Money." Its ostensible subject was the dangers to young men as their original simplicity and honesty were corrupted by the ease with

³⁸TT testimony, Trial, vol. II, p. 72.

³⁹Emma Moulton's testimony, Trial, vol. I, p. 725 (italics added). Apparently Beecher blamed Elizabeth for both the actual adultery and the scandal. He told Emma Moulton, "Poor child, she is trying to repair the wrong she has done in confessing it--in confessing her sin. But it is too late."

money could be accumulated. But--considering the timing of the sermon--it can also be read as a description of Beecher's own feelings about the plight of an innocent man confronted with sexual temptation.

Let us follow the young man into the market. He has simplicity, and beauty, and purity, and honorable intentions. He goes . . . without intention of harm.⁴⁰

But this "purity" soon changes when the young man begins to make "gain" unexpectedly fast. Then is when the danger becomes intense, argued Beecher, for "he has gone out into life a little way, and already the harpies are upon him."⁴¹ "Harpies" after all, are female--and represented a much greater danger to Beecher's career than the accumulation of money. And they are clearly employing worldly allurements to seduce the innocent into a life of vice, playing upon his simple trusting nature. For Beecher's congregation this temptation was money, while for the minister himself--in November 1868--it was sex. The injustice of these temptations inspired Beecher to a high emotional pitch. "And when I see young men surrounded by certain harpies," Beecher cried, "I do know

⁴⁰HWB, "Love of Money," 22 November 1868, Plymouth Pulpit, vol. 1, pp. 239-240.

⁴¹Ibid., pp. 242-243.

that . . . the fatal fire begins to burn within."

Beecher could speak with authority on the "fatal fire."⁴²

Not only did Beecher shift responsibility to the "harpies" with these arguments, but he went on to convince himself that his experiences enhanced his stature with God. In another sermon delivered two months after the affair began and named appropriately, "The Value of Deep Feelings," Beecher explained how a surrender to temptation could enrich God's grace. "If a man had had such a struggle with himself that he is profoundly impressed with the might of evil in him," Beecher said, and has experienced a "revelation" that he was "utterly undone" and "helpless," then the result would be to create "vividly and most powerfully" a sense of God's grace. More than that, however, the intensity of the suffering would further elevate the "gift of God's grace."⁴³

For Elizabeth, the year and a half of her affair with Beecher--before she confessed to her husband--was relatively happy. She basked in the great man's attentions and even acquired enough "will" and "self-respect" to engage in some new activities. She began to teach a Sunday School class of unwed mothers at a church mission

⁴²Ibid., pp. 239-240.

⁴³HWB, "The Value of Deep Feelings," 12 December 1868, Plymouth Pulpit, vol. 1, p. 312.

and became active--partly because of Theodore's involvement--in the Brooklyn Equal Rights Association. Her letters to Theodore became less frequent and more concerned with external activities than ever before. Writing of her class at the mission school, she said, "They all love me, I feel it--because I, too, love everyone."⁴⁴ "Already, in many things," she wrote with a new confidence in 1869, "I am a changed woman."⁴⁵

Indeed, there is evidence to support Elizabeth's hopeful self-assessment. Secure in the "self-respect" provided by Beecher's attention, Elizabeth's timidity gave way to a quiet confidence. In contrast to her previous and later disapproval of the "public men and women" Theodore cultivated, she became one of them, acting as corresponding secretary of the Equal Rights Association and editing the poetry column for the Revolution.⁴⁶ Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Laura Curtis Bullard, and other leaders of the women's movement often

⁴⁴ET to TT, 7 February 1869, Trial, vol. I, p. 491. Elizabeth wrote only seven letters to Theodore between October 1868 and July 1870. In a letter written March 18, 1869 she apologized for not writing more often. For her activities in the Equal Rights Association, see her letters of March 13 and 20, 1869, in the Chicago Tribune.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Revolution, vol. 3 (February-May 1870), Elizabeth Tilton listed as Editor of the Poetry Column.

met at her home when Theodore was away. Although Elizabeth insisted in letters to her husband that she was simply "representing" him, the tone of her correspondence makes it clear that this may have been the most rewarding period since her marriage.⁴⁷

Theodore, meanwhile knowing nothing of Elizabeth's affair with Beecher, seemed to sink more and more into a sea of emotional cross-currents. Guilty over his loss of occupation, his capitulation to the "mercantile world," and his own sexual infidelity, he alternately attempted to justify his actions with the radical ideas of Free Love and "affinity" and to castigate himself for lack of self-control. And he manifested his disillusionment with himself in an obsession with women and their superiority to men.

As early as May 1866, Theodore's belief in the "superiority" of women began to be evident in correspondence he carried on with the well known author and reformer, Lydia Maria Child. Apparently in response to a question from Tilton, Child tried to persuade him that women were not innately superior, only different. In fact, the real problem, she said, was that woman's nature

⁴⁷ET to TT, 13 March 1869, CT.

was "repressed" by "false customs."⁴⁸ Unconvinced, Theodore more and more wrote of women as almost a separate species of being. During his long "winter of meditation," as he pondered Beecher's "looseness" with women and his own lack of control over sexual excess, he feared that the unrepressible male sexual urge would automatically preclude spiritual perfection. Even Christ came under Theodore's scrutiny. Would it be "profane," Tilton asked, to wonder whether Jesus might have loved a woman, "perhaps passionately?"⁴⁹ Could a man--even Christ--love sexually and still be pure and noble? "I believe," Tilton concluded, "that this fact would have so completely humanized Him in the eyes of all the world that He never would have been regarded as God."⁵⁰ Consequently he wrote to Elizabeth that there were no "great men" as "good" as his own wife. "I see in you, and in a few women more greatness, such as Christ would have called great," Theodore said, "than in all the motley, rushing company of brave and hardy men whom I encounter day by day."⁵¹ Not only did

⁴⁸ Lydia Maria Child to TT, 27 May 1866, James Fraser Gluck Collection, Buffalo Public Library, Buffalo, New York.

⁴⁹ TT to ET, 14 February 1867, Trial, vol. I, p. 502.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ TT to ET, 7 December 1866, Trial, vol. I, p. 495.

Theodore begin to feel that women were "better" than men but that they should be set apart. He even suggested that it would be better if they could marry each other rather than having to be linked to corrupt men!⁵²

Increasingly expressing his desire to be more like Elizabeth or other "good" women, Theodore became more and more frustrated when he could not accomplish it. "I trust I am growing less and less selfish," he wrote from Ohio in March 1868, "for I wish to walk in the way in which you are going."⁵³ His envy of women's superior purity is even more apparent in the following letter:

But you and Mrs. Bradshaw [Elizabeth's closest friend] and the Saints, are far ahead of us all in the pilgrimage toward Zion. . . . Henceforth I wish to join you, and the company of the good, the pure, the prayerful, the self-denying, the Christ-loving.⁵⁴

What Theodore never seemed to realize was that it was Elizabeth's enforced confinement to her home that insulated and protected her from the competitive and threatening world in which he himself had to operate. Unlike her husband, she did not have to compete in the marketplace

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³TT to ET, 15 March 1868, CT.

⁵⁴TT to ET, 7 December 1866, Trial, vol. I, p. 495.

for money and status while at the same time remaining "pure" and "self-denying." All Theodore perceived was that she was removed from the world; he did not understand that this alone was the source of what he thought of as "purity." Indeed, it was without her consent that Elizabeth had been maneuvered into a position where she did not have to accomplish anything to command his love and respect. All she had to do was to continue to be removed from the world. It was a state which Theodore desired very much for himself but could not achieve--it caused him to be jealous and envious of his wife. Eventually the jealousy and the envy turned violent.

The spring and summer of 1870 were crucial to the development of Brooklyn's "higher sphere." Tilton's idealization of women had resulted in his and Elizabeth's active involvement in the women's movement. Since the split between the conservative and radical wings of the movement in the fall of 1869, Tilton had been lobbying to reunite the two groups; in the spring of 1870, with the support of Anthony and Stanton, he started the Union Suffrage Association and was himself elected its president. In numerous editorials in the Independent he argued that the more conservative Boston wing (with its president

Henry Ward Beecher) could now join his organization and forget its quarrels with the New York radicals.⁵⁵

Through Tilton's work with the suffrage associations, he had met the new editor of the Revolution, Laura Curtis Bullard. Bullard came from an upper-class Rhode Island family and had been chosen by Stanton to take over the editorship.⁵⁶ Tilton thought he had finally discovered a true "affinity" with a woman who was his equal in intellectual ability and social standing. With an arrogance he had already demonstrated in dealing with Elizabeth, Theodore now appropriated Bullard as his possession. Tilton actually considered himself the head of both the women's movement and the Revolution, especially when Bullard moved the editorial offices of the newspaper to Brooklyn to make them more convenient for Tilton. Writing to a friend, Tilton urged her to speak her "utmost" opinion on "Society business" or "any other movement of mine."⁵⁷

⁵⁵ TT to Anna Dickinson, [May or June] 1870, Dickinson Collection, Box 13, Library of Congress; Brooklyn Eagle, 7 April 1870.

⁵⁶ Laura Curtis Bullard to Anna Dickinson, 24 May 1870, Dickinson Collection, Box 6, Library of Congress.

⁵⁷ TT to Anna Dickinson, [May or June] 1870, Dickinson Collection, Box 13, Library of Congress.

Whether Tilton and Bullard ever had an affair is impossible to determine, but there were many rumors to that effect. In January 1871 the Brooklyn Eagle reported that the two had "eloped" to Europe. Also, though not conclusive, Theodore's lines to a friend are suggestive: "The Revolution is (as perhaps you have heard) in what is equivalent to my own hands, 'to have and to hold.'"⁵⁸ Further, evidence that Theodore had persuaded Elizabeth, at least for the moment, to accept this affinity is a letter she wrote to a friend (almost certainly Bullard) that same month. In this letter she expressed the hope that God would "perfect in us three the beautiful promise of our nature," but lamented how difficult it was "to bring out these blossoms of our heart's growth--God's gifts to us--to human eyes." "Our pearls and flowers," Elizabeth commented cryptically, "are caught up literally by vulgar and base minds that surround us on every side."⁵⁹ Elizabeth had learned her lessons on "nesting" from Beecher with some conviction and clarity!

⁵⁸ Ibid.; "Tilton Traduced," Brooklyn Eagle, 26 January 1871.

⁵⁹ ET to "My Dear Friend and Sister," 13 January 1871, Marshall, pp. 349-350. This letter refers to problems the "friend" was having with other members of her family--which indicates the letter was to Bullard.

During this same time, however, Tilton's suspicions that Elizabeth and Beecher were having an affair grew, and he began to insist that she confess. Elizabeth recalled in her testimony at the church trial that he became obsessed with the idea that things would improve between them if she would only admit that she was no better than he. It was almost as if he would hate her less if she were not so "pure." According to the servant girl Bessie, Tilton's attitude was one of jealousy; he seemed very upset when any of their friends, male or female, liked Elizabeth better than him.⁶⁰ Throughout the spring of 1870, Tilton persuaded, cajoled, and demanded that Elizabeth admit to adultery with Beecher. If she did so, he insisted, the slate would be wiped clean and they could begin their marriage again on equal footing.⁶¹ Finally, on the evening of July 3, 1870, Elizabeth made the trip from their summer home in Monticello, New York, to confess the affair.⁶²

Elizabeth's hopes that the confession would improve her relationship with Theodore were soon dashed. Their initial conversation, to be sure, was tender and loving,

⁶⁰Bessie Turner testimony, PCIC, Marshall, p. 392.

⁶¹HWB testimony, Trial, vol. III, p. 31.

⁶²TT Statement, Marshall, pp. 116-117; Trial, vol. I, pp. 396-397.

with Theodore promising to keep the secret and to help heal her "wounded spirit." He even encouraged his wife to continue her "affinity" with Beecher; a friend of Tilton's later reported that during the summer of 1870, the editor attempted to persuade his wife "to save her health and life by accepting some 'affinity' other than himself."⁶³ Beecher himself testified that on one occasion in the early summer of 1870 when he offered to take Elizabeth riding and she declined, Theodore "playfully reproached her" and thereupon she agreed to go.⁶⁴

At the same time, however, Theodore's antagonism toward Elizabeth emerged. Her surrender to Beecher, said Theodore, proved she had a "sensual" effect on men. He accused her of attempting to seduce every man who paid a social call at the house. In violent rages he claimed that only the first of their four children was his. Elizabeth was stunned by the intensity of his accusations:

He said I had a sensual influence;
I used to become impregnated with
this idea of his myself while under
his influence, and I wondered if it
was so, and would think it over and

⁶³Aurora Phelps to William Maxwell Evarts, circa 1875, Beecher Papers, Box 45, Folder 2007, Yale.

⁶⁴HWB testimony, Trial, vol. III, p. 743.

over; he would often talk to me in that way by the hour, and try to persuade me that it was true. . . . I was perfectly sure that no man ever felt that way toward me.⁶⁵

If this harassment was a "hard thing to live under," Elizabeth soon discovered that it could be worse. Theodore not only insisted that she had ceased to be his saint, but he began to insinuate to their friends that he had a "dreadful secret" concerning his wife and Beecher.⁶⁶ In September 1870 when Elizabeth could no longer endure the humiliation she escaped to the home of a friend in Ohio where she wrote pleading letters to her husband. "Oh, Theodore, Theodore! What shall I say to you? My tongue and pen are dumb and powerless, but I must force my aching heart to protest against your cruelty." In desperation she reminded her husband that he had guilty secrets as well: "Theodore, your past is safe with me, put away never to be opened--though it is big with stains of various hue."⁶⁷

But Theodore was not to be assuaged by such appeals. On the very day Elizabeth returned from Ohio, he renewed his harassment, according to Bessie Turner's testimony,

⁶⁵ET testimony, PCIC, Marshall, p. 197.

⁶⁶ET to TT, November 1870, Marshall, pp. 535-536.

⁶⁷Ibid.

with reminders of her infidelity with Beecher. Moreover, he said she was in the habit of "having her bosoms [sic] and legs fondled by many men."⁶⁸ The servant claimed that when she came to Mrs. Tilton's defense, Theodore, in a rage, knocked her down.

If it is difficult to understand such contradictory behavior in one person, it must be remembered that at this point--December 1870--Theodore was under severe pressure in his professional life. Just a week before this violent scene with his wife, Tilton had joined the Liberal Republicans in defiance of Bowen's desired policy for the Brooklyn Union. In consequence, the publisher was threatening to remove him as editor of the Independent and the Union. All this suggests that his attack of Elizabeth for her promiscuity and her inferior cultural attainments may have been intensified by guilt and anxiety in both personal and professional areas. No longer dealing with his wife as a real person, he had projected onto her all his own "passions whirling within."

Three years later Theodore Tilton described the situation with penetrating accuracy. He did so not in a letter or in trial testimony, but under cover of fiction--in a novel he wrote as the scandal was breaking, which appeared in 1874 under the title Tempest Tossed. The

⁶⁸Bessie Turner testimony, Trial, vol. II, p. 477.

principal characters are Anthony Cammeyer, a man once innocent and honest, but now corrupted by selfishness and greed, and Lucy, the woman who loves him faithfully and unfalteringly despite all his faults. One vivid scene, portraying a conversation between Anthony and Lucy, is so genuine and intense, and so reminiscent of Theodore's own long introspective letters to Elizabeth, that it was surely inspired by them. The young man is "violently seized by the wild feeling which, of late years, had many times mounted into horrible possession of his mind--the same unaccountable rage which had occasionally impelled him to pace up and down his solitary room--to gnash his teeth--to clench his hands--and to threaten violence, sometimes against others, oftener against himself."⁶⁹ All through this scene, the man is angered by Lucy's calm and loving forgiveness of the horrible sins he had committed. "The base trickster," wrote Theodore, "scowled at her like a madman--clenched his right hand--sprang toward her where she stood--and was about to fell her to the earth--but her calm, undaunted, and defiant look paralyzed his cowardly arm."⁷⁰

⁶⁹TT, Tempest Tossed (New York 1874), p. 553.

⁷⁰Ibid., p. 554.

At this point in the narrative, Theodore addressed his readers directly to explain such extreme behavior:

The close student of human nature will hardly need to be reminded in reviewing Cammeyer's apparently uncharacteristic behavior that the chief part which Lucy played in this drama of incipient madness was merely to be the mirror in which this defeated villain saw himself revealed in such hideous lineaments that he was now again unpoised at the self-contemplation--as he had often been before.⁷¹

Theodore had, in fact, once written to Elizabeth, "The more I compare myself to you, the worse I seem."⁷² She was, by Theodore's own admission, the mirror onto which he projected his own worst characteristics. In his confident moments, he praised her serenity and purity--just as he hoped people would praise these same traits in him. But in his anxiety-ridden states he saw in Elizabeth's calmness a facade for greedy sensuality. This was something he had already admitted hatred of in himself, the lack of control over his lust for money, fame, and sex. The inability, as he put it, to achieve "self-conquest." Theodore, like many other nineteenth-century men, had

⁷¹Ibid.

⁷²TT to ET, 7 December 1866, Trial, vol. I, p. 495.

invested women with the qualities of purity and self-sacrifice upon which he depended for stability. At the same time, he resented women for this automatically privileged status. It was something men could never hope to achieve.

Having been threatened with actual physical violence, Elizabeth at last had had enough. On the same day that she returned from Ohio--when Bessie was knocked down--she gathered up the four children and went home to her mother. Mrs. Richards innocently tried to help by requesting that Henry Ward Beecher pay a pastoral call!⁷³ The minister, understandably worried about becoming involved in the Tiltons' marital troubles--though he did not yet know Elizabeth had confessed to Theodore--sent his wife, the formidable Eunice Beecher to advise Elizabeth.⁷⁴ Despite

⁷³On the events surrounding the first time Elizabeth left Theodore, see: HWB testimony, Trial, vol. III, p. 12; Bessie Turner testimony, Trial, vol. II, p. 494; TT testimony, Trial, vol. I, pp. 558, 618.

⁷⁴Eunice Beecher advised Elizabeth to divorce Theodore "on the ground of his impurity, his bringing improper persons to the house, his abuse of her and the children, and his vulgarity and profanity." Eunice Beecher testimony, PCIC, 14 July 1874, Beecher Papers, Box 87, Folder 219, Yale.

Beecher agreed with his wife in the following note: "I incline to think that your view is right, that a separation and settlement of support will be wisest--and that in his present desperate state her presence near him is far more likely to produce hatred than her absence." HWB to Eunice Beecher, December 1870, Trial, vol. III, p. 132.

Mrs. Beecher's advice--and her husband's concurrence--that she divorce Theodore, Elizabeth--still convinced that his erratic behavior was a result of his loss of religious beliefs--decided that her duty required one more attempt to help him recover from his "morbid state of mind."⁷⁵

But her severest ordeal was only beginning. To be sure, she had for several years been subjected to increasingly intense emotional pressures--pressures related to Theodore's treatment of her; to her own inability to handle the situation; and, ultimately, to a conflict between the traditional morality in which she had been raised and the amorphous rhetoric of affinity and "soul-mating" to which she had recently become attached. But through all this, she had never concluded that her problems lay entirely within herself. Her relationship with Beecher had produced such positive results in her own life that she did not see how--provided it was kept from "vulgar and base minds"--it could possibly harm anyone, even her husband.

A month after she returned home, around Christmas 1870, however, a crisis arose that would leave Elizabeth feeling not only bewildered, but utterly crushed and guilty. The precipitating cause was Theodore's dismissal,

⁷⁵ET testimony, PCIC, Marshall, p. 212.

in late December, from his position as editor of the Independent. As we have seen, this prompted Theodore to insist on a written version of the confession Elizabeth had made six months before. Assuring her that he would not make use of it unless absolutely necessary, Theodore pointedly reminded her of her wifely duty to help him keep his job. Elizabeth, ill and "wearied by importunity," acquiesced in the request.⁷⁶

Learning of this development from Moulton that same evening, Beecher confronted Elizabeth with a demand for a written retraction. Her later description of this scene with Beecher conveys something of her anguish. When Beecher arrived, Elizabeth said, she was "lying very sick" (actually she was recovering from a miscarriage). He berated her, insisting that she had "ruined him." Why, he wanted to know, had she done such a thing? Guilt-stricken by her minister's accusations, Elizabeth agreed to sign a statement--composed for her by Beecher--which would clear him of the charges and he left in triumph. But even after this visit, her ordeal was not over.

Theodore, upon learning what Beecher had done, demanded a

⁷⁶For the circumstances surrounding Tilton's blaming Beecher for his loss of "place, business, and reputation," see: TT, "The True Story," Trial, vol. II, pp. 716-719; HWB testimony, Trial, vol. II, p. 868; Charles Storrs testimony, Trial, vol. II, p. 671; Samuel Wilkeson testimony, Trial, vol. II, p. 295.

recantation of the retraction she had given Beecher.

A weak and defeated Elizabeth signed this third statement, "in order to repair so cruel a blow" to her "long suffering husband."⁷⁷

Immediately following this night of confrontations, Beecher and Tilton--with the help of Frank Moulton--made a temporary reconciliation, agreeing to cover up the

⁷⁷ET to Dr. Storrs, 16 December 1872, Trial, vol. I, p. 137; HWB testimony, Trial, vol. III, p. 31. The original letter of confession has apparently been lost, but the following are the letters of retraction (dictated by Beecher) and recantation (dictated by Tilton):

"December 30, 1870--Wearied with importunity and weakened by sickness I gave a letter inculcating my friend Henry Ward Beecher under assurances that that would remove all difficulties between me and my husband. That letter I now revoke. I was persuaded to it--almost forced--when I was in a weakened state of mind. I regret it, and recall all its statements--E. R. Tilton. P.S. I desire to say explicitly that Mr. Beecher has never offered any improper solicitations, but has always treated me in a manner becoming a Christian and a gentleman. Elizabeth R. Tilton." Marshall, p. 317.

"December 30, 1870--Midnight; My Dear Husband--I desire to leave with you, before going to sleep, a statement that Mr. Henry Ward Beecher called upon me this evening, asked me if I would defend him against any accusation in a Council of Ministers, and I replied solemnly that I would in case the accuser was any other person than my husband. He (H.W.B.) dictated a letter, which I copied as my own, to be used by him as against any other accuser except my husband. This letter was designed to vindicate Mr. Beecher against all other persons save only yourself. I was ready to give him this letter because he said with pain that my letter in your hands addressed to him, dated December 29, 'had struck him dead, and ended his usefulness.'

"You and I both are pledged to do our best to avoid publicity. God grant a speedy end to all further anxieties. Affectionately, Elizabeth." Marshall, p. 318.

scandal. But on every occasion when Theodore's reputation was impugned or his finances met with a setback, he threatened to expose Beecher, leaving the minister in a constant state of anxiety and fear of public disgrace. Frightened of scandal, Beecher altered his earlier advice that Elizabeth divorce Theodore and now insisted that she must "do her part" in the policy of silence and make a happy home for Theodore. All other considerations were secondary, in other words, to the preservation of Henry Ward Beecher's reputation.⁷⁸

As for Elizabeth, although she bitterly protested that all these plans were being pursued without reference to her feelings, the somewhat comic maneuverings were less important than her desperate need to understand what had gone wrong. Her efforts to fulfill her duty to her husband in spite of his insults and accusations, while at the same time affirming her integrity through "affinity" with a man who revived her diminished self-respect, had ended in disaster. Consequently Elizabeth was driven to months of self-examination and soul-searching in an attempt to discover the cause.

⁷⁸Charles Storrs testimony, Trial, vol. II, p. 672; Emma Moulton testimony, Trial, vol. I, p. 721; HWB testimony, Trial, vol. II, p. 893; HWB to Frank Moulton, 1 June 1873, Trial, vol. II, p. 867.

Frustrated at the failure of either the moral injunctions of her youth or the nebulous guidelines of "affinity" to provide an explanation or solution to her suffering, Elizabeth turned to a new authority--a popular novel. Beecher had once said that had Elizabeth been a Catholic and lived in another age, she would have been given to ecstatic visions, and indeed, she now found the explanation for her plight in a "heavenly vision" which came to her as she read a sensational novel of the day, Griffith Gaunt (1866), by English author, Charles Reade.⁷⁹ In a letter to Theodore, she explained the novel's profound effect upon her. "Today through the ministry of Catherine Gaunt, a character of fiction, my eyes have been opened for the first time in my experience, so that I see clearly my sin."⁸⁰

⁷⁹On Reade and Griffith Gaunt: "Perhaps the most successful of all sensational novelists was Charles Reade . . . he determined to attract popular attention while at the same time writing novels with a social purpose. Griffith Gaunt, a highly colored story of bigamy, murder, and mistaken identity among eighteenth century gentry, was less significant for its attack upon a worldly clergy than for its almost pathological sensationalism . . . the work [was] a scandalous success." James D. Hart, The Popular Book (New York 1973), p. 123.

⁸⁰ET to TT, 29 June 1871, Trial, vol. I, pp. 540-541. Ann Douglas, in The Feminization of American Culture (New York 1977), uses Elizabeth Tilton (whom she calls "Libby") as a representative woman, demonstrating the shallow personalities of middle-class women who turned to sentimentalized fiction for a definition of their own roles. Douglas argues that "Libby" was a confused "non-entity" until fiction offered her a role to play--in short, she

It is easy to understand why Elizabeth identified so closely with the characters and events of the story. Catherine Gaunt, the fictional heroine with whom Elizabeth identified, is an eighteenth-century gentlewoman, beautiful, devout, and rigidly honest. She is married to Griffith Gaunt--a morbidly proud and jealous man, obviously similar to Theodore. Though she loves her husband, Catherine forms a close relationship with her priest--a man whose warm and sensitive nature is uncannily reminiscent of Elizabeth's descriptions of Henry Ward Beecher.

Catherine and the priest never become sexually intimate, but she spends a great deal of time in his company and Griffith becomes suspicious. At first, Catherine stubbornly defends her right to the priest's friendship. But in one scene which surely spoke directly to Elizabeth, Catherine and the priest walk in the garden discussing religious subjects with an emotional intensity which is innocent, yet guilty. Reade makes unmistakably clear

could not function as a genuine person, but only as an imitation of some external idealized model. This assessment of the middle-class woman has been common for some time--the tendency to dismiss her as a weak, simpering--indeed, almost worthless human being. Thus the resulting search for and concentration on female heroes such as Margaret Fuller, Susan B. Anthony, and Victoria Woodhull. However, if this thesis accomplishes anything, I hope it is to reveal the intense pressures which had to be exerted before Elizabeth Tilton, Eunice Beecher, and others like them were "domesticated." Simply because they failed in resisting dominant social currents does not mean they were unheroic in their opposition.

that, though their words and intentions are "pure," mutual sexual desire is the "real" level of communication. Here, in the guise of fiction, Elizabeth encountered precisely what Theodore had told her about herself!⁸¹

Elizabeth, then, was not so fortunate as Beecher in the lessons she learned from their relationship. While the minister's parishioners sanctioned his self-exoneration and thus unwittingly encouraged his lack of responsibility for his actions, Elizabeth had to face more severe consequences. From her experience with Beecher, she learned something that was implicit in the concept of the "new marriage" her husband had articulated, but which hitherto had not been clear to her: the spiritual influence that was now her exclusive "sphere" rested, in reality, on the power of sexuality. Elizabeth had finally internalized Theodore's conviction that all her relations with men must necessarily be founded upon an inviting sensuality. Catherine's repressed sexual desire for the priest, and Elizabeth's own warm response to Beecher, reinforced the notion that relations between men and women must, inevitably, be rooted in sexual attraction. Therefore, she concluded, "a virtuous woman should check

⁸¹Charles Reade, Griffith Gaunt or Jealousy (London 1866), p. 230.

instantly an absorbing love."⁸² Now it became clear that her own innate sensuality was the cause of all the recent troubles. It did not matter that she had been "misled" by her pastor, he was still a "good man." "I am the one that is to blame," she told a friend, "I invited it."⁸³ She had learned that for women at least, affinity was not a separate spiritual sphere but rather was firmly rooted in sexuality. There was no way to escape the implications. Elizabeth's identity was defined solely by her sexual nature.

Elizabeth's world was inexorably constricting. As a result of her "awakening," she had foregone the identity provided by her parental community. Now, she was driven to reject the many possibilities opened to her through the world of freedom and affinity. In essence, Elizabeth had retreated from her experiments with social freedom to an even more confining concept of marriage than any previous one. Not only must she now fulfill her duty to her husband, she had to somehow achieve a spiritually exclusive and perfect union as well. Yet Elizabeth embraced the new ideal as well as the revelation of her guilty sensuality with "profound thankfulness that I am come to this sure foundation, and that my feet are planted on the rock of

⁸²ET to TT, 29 June 1871, Trial, vol. I, pp. 540-541.

⁸³Emma Moulton testimony, Trial, vol. I, p. 722.

this great truth. . . . When you yearn toward me," she assured Theodore in June 1871, "be assured of the tried, purified, and restored love of Elizabeth."⁸⁴

Tragically, Elizabeth had finally been convinced that from her sexuality alone emanated her spiritual power. It must have been a thoroughly devastating discovery. Moreover, the only way for a woman to achieve social status and respect and influence was to manipulate that sexual power in such a way as to appear innocent of its presence. Only this can explain the elaborate etiquette of Victorian relationships between the sexes.

In many ways, Elizabeth, in her woman's sphere, had learned something that Theodore and the members of Plymouth Church had learned from Henry Ward Beecher in the economic and social spheres. Money, they were afraid, had become the real basis for power and influence in nineteenth-century America, but because they themselves desperately wanted to believe that success was not based on money, they vigorously denied its omnipotence. Men pretended they had no ambition to acquire money and status--just as Theodore did. Similarly, women rejected any hint of their sexuality--just when they had become convinced of its domination of their lives. But money and

⁸⁴ET to TT, 29 June 1871, Trial, vol. I, pp. 540-541.

sex were undeniably the driving forces in Victorian America. This was a paradox that was to shape the responses of the members of Plymouth Church to the individuals involved in the scandal.

C H A P T E R I X

THEODORE TILTON AS SCAPEGOAT:

PITFALLS OF THE GOSPEL OF LOVE

For Elizabeth Tilton, the ultimate meaning of the Gospel of Love was the narrowing of her social identity to a sexual one. She finally internalized what old-fashioned moralists like Storrs had argued all along, that the Gospel of Love was nothing more than a rationalization for selfish indulgence--whether in acquisition of power and money or sexual passion.

For most Plymouth Church members, however, the issues were not so clear. Like Tilton, they had benefited from the Gospel of Love--not been threatened by it as had many Church of the Pilgrims members. Therefore, when Beecher's case became public, their instincts were to defend their minister. Yet, like Tilton, too, they harbored mixed emotions and doubts about both Beecher and his "Gospel," feelings which became apparent as details of the scandal and cover-up emerged. In this chapter we return to the stormy December night when Beecher learned that Elizabeth had confessed, this time to follow the implications of Moulton, Tilton, and Beecher's attempts to conceal the affair and the reactions of Plymouth Church to it.

After the stormy night of confrontations, December 30, 1870--Theodore with Beecher, Beecher with Elizabeth, Theodore with Elizabeth--Moulton negotiated a peace between Beecher and Tilton. Beecher wrote a letter of apology which begged Tilton's forgiveness; later he entered into a "partnership" to recuperate and "restore" the "bankrupted" Tilton.¹ "We are all in the same boat together," Beecher said later at the trial: "He had his reasons why he did not want matters to come out about his family, and I had my reasons."² However, this agreement came too late to save Tilton's editorial career. Bowen, in a state of agitation over his failure to play off Tilton against Beecher, had summarily fired Tilton from both the Independent and the Union. Appeals to the embittered Bowen to rehire Tilton came to nothing.³

Moulton, as manager of the cover-up, now had two problems. One was to keep the sex scandal from becoming public. The other, more difficult, was to restore Tilton's economic security and professional career. The first clearly depended on the second, for if, as Moulton said, Tilton remained without "place, business, or repute," he would have nothing to lose in producing the

¹HWB testimony, Trial, vol. II, p. 868.

²Ibid.

³Ibid., pp. 792-793.

evidence that could ruin Beecher.⁴ For three and a half years--from January 1871 to June 1874--Moulton succeeded in keeping the scandal from widespread public knowledge.

What becomes remarkably clear in any examination of the cover-up is how completely it was motivated by the desire to preserve Henry Ward Beecher's public image--irrespective of his guilt or innocence. Ordinary people all over the country might have been shocked to learn of Beecher's sexual adventures, but those in the inner circle--whether Tilton's or Beecher's friends--were primarily interested in protecting his reputation. Both Moulton and his wife clearly knew of Beecher's guilt from the beginning, while Tilton had made use of Elizabeth's confession only to save his editorial career. The adulteries perpetrated by both Beecher and Tilton were known to friends, yet the strongest condemnation one intimate of both men could muster was that they had behaved in a "reckless" or "impulsive" way.⁵

⁴For evidence that Tilton attributed his loss of "place, business, and repute" to Beecher, see: TT, "True Story," Trial, vol. II, pp. 716-719; HWB testimony, Trial, vol. II, p. 868; Charles Storrs testimony, Trial, vol. II, p. 671; Samuel Wilkeson testimony, Trial, vol. II, p. 295; ET to Dr. Storrs, 16 December 1872, Trial, vol. I, p. 137.

⁵Oliver Johnson to Anna Dickinson, 17 August 1874, Dickinson Collection, Library of Congress.

This assumption that the public had no right to know of Beecher or Tilton's private exploits was the basis for what Beecher came to call the "policy of silence."⁶ In characteristic fashion, Beecher justified the concealment of these matters from his own church as well as the public by insisting that they were not able to "judge of the motives and influences which have acted at various stages of a history, essentially private and domestic . . . and which . . . should have had the privilege of seclusion."⁷ The public--like Beecher's father--was too quick to be judgmental and punitive. A change in public sentiment could rob men like Tilton or Beecher of their reputation and livelihood for no rational cause. Therefore they should be kept from knowing the actions of those on the "higher plane." "Public sentiment," said Beecher, "refuses to be just and earnest."⁸

⁶HWB testimony, Trial, vol. II, p. 893.

⁷Ibid. The idea that one's personal life should also be private was relatively new to those raised in New England communities. In such a setting, one's personal life was routinely subjected to public scrutiny. Indeed one of the themes Beecher stressed in many of his sermons was the novel idea that an individual's "hidden" self was not necessarily bad, but could, in fact, be good. See John Demos, A Little Commonwealth, for a discussion of privacy in colonial New England.

⁸HWB, "Abhorrence of Evil," 15 November 1868, Plymouth Pulpit, vol. 1, p. 199.

What this philosophy implied, however, was that there were no institutions or law to which such private disagreements could be safely appealed. Mere public suspicion could lead to ruin. Thus, both Beecher and Tilton turned to a "mutual friend," Frank Moulton, for private arbitration. Although recognizing Tilton's "impulsiveness" and Beecher's sometimes "morbid gloom," Moulton proceeded to bring everyone to amicable terms in a manner which had gained acceptance as traditional institutions became less effective. It was what Tilton later termed "social obligation."⁹ Thus Beecher agreed to help finance a newspaper, The Golden Age--a vehicle intended to restore the editor's professional standing.¹⁰ Moulton and Beecher also helped Tilton negotiate a settlement with Bowen which became known as the tripartite covenant; this was a three-way agreement in April 1872 between Bowen, Tilton, and Beecher in which Bowen paid Tilton \$7,000 compensation for breaking his contracts so abruptly, and all three promised not to spread further the rumors that were already circulating.¹¹

Indeed, this private method of stifling the rumors worked so well that Moulton, Tilton, and Beecher

⁹TT testimony, Trial, vol. I, p. 413.

¹⁰Francis Moulton testimony, Trial, vol. I, p. 222; HWB testimony, Trial, vol. II, p. 855.

¹¹Trial, vol. I, p. 237.

considered it the only way to deal with Victoria Woodhull when she threatened to expose the scandal. Woodhull first published hints in the New York World in May 1871, six months after Elizabeth's written confession, that she knew of the affair. Although she omitted names, Beecher and Tilton recognized themselves immediately. After hurried conferences at Moulton's house, Tilton was assigned to placate Woodhull. They agreed, Tilton testified later, that "as part of the method by which we should deal with Mrs. Woodhull . . . we would become personally acquainted with her; that we would treat her as a gentleman would treat a lady, and that we would in that manner put her under obligation to us--social obligation, kindly obligation."¹²

This emphasis on reciprocal obligation was, of course, similar to the way in which Plymouth members operated in both church and politics. Beecher had eroded the tenets of Congregationalism in favor of personal loyalty to himself, and "machine" politics had come to be based on personal loyalties and reciprocal obligations. Responsibility and morality were now defined by an individual's faithfulness to these personal obligations rather than an ideology or morality. Thus, the methods of the

¹²New York World, 22 May 1871. TT testimony, Trial, vol. I, p. 413.

cover-up were simply an extension of the way religious and political institutions had come to operate. These personal, private loyalties circumvented the older ideas of institutional duties. They were, indeed, the essence of the Gospel of Love.

Unfortunately for the cover-up, Victoria Woodhull had very little regard for the kind of "social obligations" which were the ideal in Beecher's circle. Tilton's friendship and support were successful in quieting her for only a short time. By the fall of 1872, Woodhull was angry that Beecher had not publicly endorsed her views; had refused, in fact, to have anything to do with her.¹³ Beecher was caught in a dilemma. The need to placate Woodhull conflicted with his need to retain public confidence. Any endorsement of her philosophy, he judged, would do just as much harm as public exposure of the scandal. The publication in September 1871 of Tilton's admiring biography could not make up for Beecher's dismissal of her pleas for support, and in retaliation, she

¹³In September 1871, Victoria Woodhull planned a speech on Social Freedom at Steinway Hall in New York. She insisted that Beecher introduce her or she would make the scandal public. But this Beecher could not bring himself to do; Woodhull later reported that "he said he agreed perfectly with what I was to say, but that he could not stand on the platform . . . and introduce me." At the last moment before Woodhull's speech, Tilton appeared on the platform to introduce her and she apparently decided not to carry out her threat. Woodhull & Claflin's Weekly, 2 November 1872, Marshall, pp. 28-30.

eventually published the "bombshell" article in November 1872.

Still, this alone would not have caused the scandal to become national news. Most of the daily newspapers read by "respectable" people regarded accusations made by Woodhull as unreliable and disreputable. It was the other social currents and countercurrents surrounding the controversial minister and his church which made exposure inevitable. Woodhull was merely the catalyst who sparked a highly volatile situation.

As we have seen, some members of the Examining Committee of Plymouth Church agitated to bring Theodore Tilton to trial for his association with Woodhull. Some of these members were zealous Beecher supporters who wanted to see their pastor's name cleared, but there are hints that a few were Bowen partisans who saw the investigation and trial of Tilton as a way to expose Beecher.¹⁴ Whatever the source of the move, Beecher quickly let his friends know that he wished the matter dropped. He was successful on this occasion, but two years later, when the Committee finally did drop Tilton from the membership roll, the other local Congregational churches--led by the

¹⁴For evidence that a small group led by William F. West actually wanted to get at Beecher through Tilton, see: TT testimony, Trial, vol. I, pp. 433-434; Leonard Bacon, "The Brooklyn Affair Once More," Independent, 8 October 1874, p. 1.

Church of the Pilgrims--at last had an excuse, if a flimsy one, to intervene. As we have seen, this was a thinly veiled attack on the increasingly threatening social and political success of Beecher and the kind of people who belonged to Plymouth Church.¹⁵

Ironically, Beecher was the victim of an unlikely convergence of outlook between social radicals and social conservatives. The radicals, led by Woodhull, recognizing

¹⁵The Examining Committee of Plymouth Church wrestled with the question of what to do about the "Bowen scandal" from 27 June 1873 to 1 December 1873. William West, who first raised the issue was instructed to come back later with "further and more complete specifications" (27 June 1873). As the meetings went on it became clear that there was a real power struggle within the Committee--with subcommittees being appointed to "confer" and the opposing group passing motions to limit what the subcommittee could confer on (14 July 1873)! Obviously the Committee members did not want all their deliberations to appear in the minutes--when things heated up it was usual to recess for an "informal conference" (9 October 1873). The crux of the stalemate was whether Bowen and Tilton should be accused of causing all the trouble or just Tilton. Everyone seemed willing to dismiss Tilton from the church but Bowen still had powerful friends on the Committee who blocked attempts to make any accusations against him. This group finally won out on October 16 when it voted down a motion to present Bowen with "grievances" and carried a motion to lay Bowen's case "on the table." At the next meeting on October 23, after some prodding from Beecher, Tilton was "dropped" rather than excommunicated. This ended Tilton's case, but by November 13, Bowen's enemies again raised the question of "taking charges to Bowen" which somehow passed (possibly because not all Bowen's supporters were present) but by 1 December 1873 the complaint against Bowen was "dismissed." This all seems to indicate that Bowen was still a very powerful figure in the church; it was not quite as easy to get rid of him as it was Tilton. Plymouth Church, Records of the Examining Committee 1871-1900, Book #40.

Beecher's covert radicalism and his influence with great numbers of middle-class Americans, were attempting to push him further to come out publicly for Free Love. The conservatives, on the other hand, fearing that even Beecher's covert support of social freedom was growing far too influential, were becoming more bellicose in their efforts to discredit the minister.

That these two widely divergent groups actually managed to bring Beecher to trial was due to Theodore Tilton. He was never as fully committed to personal blind loyalty and self-interest as Beecher and the members of the regular Republican Party. But because the Gospel of Love had originally served his needs, he had a difficult time rejecting it even when he began to sense hypocrisy. Tilton desperately needed some external principle on which to hinge his identity; Beecher's "higher sphere" with its internal self-sufficiency was not enough. He wanted to be right as well as popular. It was this tension between Tilton's loyalty to people and his need to be recognized publicly for his principles which provided the ammunition for Beecher's enemies. Confused by his changing values and conflicting loyalties, Tilton talked about them too

often and to too many people.¹⁶ Unlike Beecher, he could not separate so easily his private from his public life.

Once the cover-up had begun, Tilton reaffirmed to Beecher his eternal friendship and loyalty, saying that the only reason he would ever use the evidence against the minister was to retaliate in the event Beecher "betrayed" him first. Since this was well after Elizabeth's confession, Tilton was not referring here to Beecher's seduction of his wife, but rather to his possible betrayal of their friendship. In the novel he wrote in 1873, Tilton, in a character's comments on his fictional hero Rodney Vail, expressed his ideas about friendship--ideas he clearly learned from Beecher.

How often he and I talked of friendship and its obligations! How strenuously he maintained it to be a holy tie!--an unwritten oath!--an unsworn marriage of man with man! What a friend to his friends was Rodney Vail! He would have made any sacrifice for them--any sacrifice for me. I will be worthy of such a friendship, and reciprocate its obligations.¹⁷

¹⁶From the time Elizabeth first confessed in July 1870, Tilton seemed unable to keep quiet about the affair. Mattie Bradshaw, a close friend of the Tiltons, said he had told her by August 1870. Then in December 1872, after he had composed the "True Story" and had it bound in leather, he carried it around the streets, showing it to various friends he met. Plymouth Church, Records of the Examining Committee 1871-1900, Book #40.

¹⁷TT, Tempest Tossed (New York 1874), p. 67.

Indeed, when Beecher himself testified at the trial, he echoed these sentiments when he said that he knew of "no more horrible evil in this world than to betray or hurt a friend . . . in being unfaithful to the highest honor of obligations."¹⁸ He, too, was referring, not to the adultery with Elizabeth, but to Tilton's accusations that he (Beecher) had not done enough to restore his friend's career. What seems clear in all this is that both men considered their personal loyalty (i.e., "affinity") to each other far more important than observance of conventional morality.

If Tilton had been entirely persuaded of the necessity of hiding "affinity" the scandal might never have become public. But he was not fully convinced and his acquaintance with Woodhull further undermined Beecher's influence. As we have seen, Tilton had already adopted, at least superficially, some socially radical ideas in the areas of love, sex, and affinity, and he was far more willing than Beecher to admit them in public. Like Beecher, he used these ideas to justify behavior patterns that he could not control, but, unlike Beecher, he was driven to seek public approval for them as well. Thus after Tilton's initial reluctant contact with Woodhull, he began to be charmed by her personality and impressed

¹⁸HWB testimony, Trial, vol. II, p. 836.

with her dedication to social freedom. Through the summer and fall of 1871 Tilton spent several days a week with her, discussing her views and preparing to write the biography. In The Golden Age, the paper which had been established for him by Moulton and Beecher, he began to devote considerable space to her ideas on Free Love. More and more, Tilton came to feel that Woodhull's philosophy was similar to Beecher's; that Free Love, despite the public's conception of it as promiscuity, was nothing more than Beecher's concept of "moral affinity": both assumed that spiritual or platonic attraction, rather than law should determine sexual relations.¹⁹ The major difference was that Woodhull was willing admit to her beliefs publicly while Beecher was not. For Tilton, already troubled about Beecher's, and indeed, his own, hypocrisy, Woodhull seemed a courageous figure.

The admiring biography Tilton wrote clearly reflected his enthusiastic approval of Woodhull. When

¹⁹Beecher had an interesting answer when questioned about Free Love. The question was put: "Did you ever know anybody who took hold of it seriously [Free Love] who was not ruined by it?" Beecher's answer was: "No, sir; provided they were susceptible of ruin. I have had women write to me that if I did not send them \$10 they were ruined, and I wrote in reply that they were ruined before." HWB testimony, PCIC, Marshall, p. 297.

it was published in the fall of 1871 by The Golden Age, Moulton complained that Tilton had gone too far. "So many statements in it seemed extravagant," he later said, "that the effect . . . on the paper [The Golden Age] would be disastrous."²⁰ It soon became apparent that Moulton was right. Tilton's first lecture tour after the publication of this biography was not well received. Beecher described it this way:

The winter following [1871-1872]
Mr. Tilton returned from the lecture
field in despair. Engagements had
been cancelled, invitations withdrawn,
and he spoke of the prejudice and
repugnance with which he was every-
where met as indescribable.²¹

Tilton, however, believed that his unpopularity emanated not from the biography of Woodhull, but from the rumors of his personal immorality stemming from his dismissal from Bowen's newspapers,²² and he asked Bowen to write a public letter indicating that their differences did not involve morality but were only "political and

²⁰ Francis Moulton testimony, Trial, vol. I, p. 227.

²¹ HWB testimony, PCIC, Marshall, p. 274.

²² Charles Storrs testimony, Trial, vol. II, p. 672.

theological."²³ Bowen complied, but decline of The Golden Age--and of Tilton's career--continued.

Beecher, whose "policy of silence" depended on Tilton's prosperity, now switched tactics. He urged the editor to "make a prompt repudiation of these women and their doctrines." "I told him," Beecher testified at the trial, "that no man could rise against the public confidence with such a load."²⁴ As usual, Beecher was much keener than Tilton in his perception of the public temper. Tilton finally did break with Woodhull in the fall of 1872 when he realized that she would stop at nothing to get media attention. When Woodhull informed Tilton that she was considering fabricating embarrassing stories about leaders of the women's movement whom Tilton admired--including Susan Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton--he recoiled.²⁵ At the same time, Tilton was also campaigning for Horace Greeley, the Liberal Republican and Democratic candidate for President.²⁶ This too angered Woodhull since she had proclaimed herself to be a presidential

²³TT to Henry Bowen, 4 April 1872, Marshall, p. 326.

²⁴HWB testimony, PCIC, Marshall, p. 274.

²⁵TT testimony, Trial, vol. I, p. 570.

²⁶Tilton was, in fact, in New Hampshire campaigning for Greeley when the "bombshell" article appeared.

candidate. It was Tilton's and Beecher's rejection of her, along with the public attacks by the minister's sisters Catherine and Harriet, that finally persuaded Woodhull to expose the scandal.²⁷

Although the revelation caused something of a stir in the press, most newspapers dismissed the accusations as unfounded rumors and respected Beecher's condescending refusal to respond to the charges. Indeed it was Tilton who was penalized for his involvement with Woodhull. More lecturing engagements were canceled and some of the businessmen Moulton had persuaded to back The Golden Age withdrew their support.²⁸ As his position worsened, Tilton's resentment deepened: he was suffering for espousing Free Love, while Beecher's popularity increased! Tilton began to put together a document called the "True Story" which, he testified later, was intended for a few "personal friends" who wanted a "frank explanation" of what they had found "erratic" in his behavior for the past two years.²⁹

²⁷ Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel My Wife and I (New York 1871) was written to ridicule Victoria Woodhull.

²⁸ After Tilton published the biography of Woodhull, his backers decided to give him what they had already invested in order to be released from the rest of the commitment. Francis Moulton testimony, Trial, vol. I, p. 225.

²⁹ TT testimony, Trial, vol. I, p. 592, and vol. II, pp. 716-719.

Having provided the radical Woodhull with the details of the scandal, Tilton proceeded to give the same ammunition to Beecher's conservative enemies in Brooklyn. He showed his "True Story" to Richard Salter Storrs. Later, Tilton claimed that he went to Storrs because he considered him a friend of Beecher's who might be able to offer some advice, but given the long-standing animosity between the two ministers and their churches, it is difficult to believe that Tilton did not know exactly what he was doing.³⁰ When Beecher discovered what Tilton had done, he cried, "Oh Theodore, of all people, why did you go to him?"³¹

Storrs judiciously did not use the information until more evidence was forthcoming--and until some of Beecher's enemies in Plymouth Church had taken the first steps to investigate the whole matter. But Tilton continued to spread rumors about Beecher's involvement with Elizabeth, at the same time demanding that Beecher and Moulton do more to restore his faltering reputation and economic situation. When the other investors pulled out of The Golden Age, Beecher mortgaged his house to give

³⁰TT testimony, Trial, vol. I, p. 537.

³¹Ibid.

Tilton \$5,000.³² At the trial, Beecher explained it this way:

The situation was that of a man that had been bankrupted in every way, and whom we were endeavoring to recuperate and restore. The devices were, among others . . . soothing the prejudices against him and of preventing men's talking to his disadvantage, and everything else that would help him to become a man again--a man, I mean, that had overcome distrust and become apparently, again, a man.³³

Beecher, however, was to become more and more frustrated with Tilton's "inexplicable" and "uncontrollable" behavior.³⁴ Writing to Frank Moulton, Beecher complained that "with such a man as Theodore Tilton, there is no possible salvation for any that depend upon him."³⁵ Beecher had come to a point in his life where he might have regretted the part he had played in weakening social institutions. In this situation he had no other recourse than to plead with his former friend to

³²HWB testimony, Trial, vol. II, p. 855.

³³Ibid., p. 868.

³⁴HWB Statement, 13 August 1874, Marshall, p. 279.

³⁵HWB to Frank Moulton, 1 June 1873, Marshall, pp. 280-281.

be more prudent and to beg Frank Moulton to exercise more control over Tilton.

Tilton's prospects continued to decline. In the spring of 1874, just as the first Congregational Council was being held, Tilton was forced to sell The Golden Age.³⁶ Thus when one of Beecher's friends, Leonard Bacon, referred to Tilton as a "knave" and a "dog," he was in the worst possible mood to deal rationally with a public insult.³⁷ In spite of the fact that Beecher was just as appalled by the statement, Tilton published his response on June 21 in the "Bacon Letter."³⁸ In it, Tilton insisted that he had done everything possible to preserve Henry Ward Beecher's reputation, even after the dishonor brought by the minister upon his family. But now, however, he had no intention of "sacrificing" his own honor for the sake of Beecher's. "You have put me before my countrymen," he wrote Bacon, "in the character of a base and bad man."³⁹ It was an insult Tilton could not take.

³⁶TT testimony, Trial, vol. I, p. 612.

³⁷"Dr. Bacon's Speech," 2 April 1874, Marshall, pp. 40-42.

³⁸TT to Dr. Leonard Bacon, 21 June 1874, Marshall, pp. 42-63.

³⁹Ibid.

This letter initiated the long, hot "scandal summer" of 1874 when the bonds of "moral affinity" and social obligation which had formed the basis for the cover-up completely broke down. Beecher appointed a church investigating committee made up of his warmest supporters and denounced both Moulton and Tilton as blackmailers and conspirators.

The public response to the scandal gradually altered as more and more information became available--primarily the testimonies taken during the church investigation. At first, many in Brooklyn sympathized with Tilton, feeling that some of the documents he published were conclusive. Beecher's letter of apology of 1 January 1871, for example, asking Tilton's "forgiveness" and pleading that he would "humble" himself before the "wronged" husband, although not admitting guilt outright, made little sense if Tilton's charges were false. In the same letter, Beecher had further insisted that Elizabeth was "guiltless," and "bearing the transgressions of another." "I humbly pray," Beecher concluded, "that He [God] may put it in the heart of her husband to forgive me."⁴⁰ Later in the summer when Frank Moulton appeared before the Investigating Committee, he stated

⁴⁰HWB to Frank Moulton, 1 January 1871, Trial, vol. I, p. 65.

categorically, "Both Mrs. Tilton and Mr. Beecher admitted in language not to be mistaken that a continued sexual intimacy had existed between them, and asked advice as to the course to be taken because of it."⁴¹

However, as more of the testimony came out, particularly that of Elizabeth Tilton, it appeared that Tilton had not been the innocent victim he seemed. His wife claimed that he had abused her and had himself committed adultery on numerous occasions. This information along with evidence that Tilton had conspired with Beecher and Moulton to cover up the affair led significant segments of the public to condemn what the Chicago Tribune called the whole "Plymouth Church crowd."⁴² The Brooklyn Sunday Sun declared that it "believed in Mr. Beecher's guilt, in Mr. Tilton's guilt, in his meanness and cowardice; and it believes in Mrs. Tilton's guilt."⁴³ "The reasonings," editorialized the Sun at the end of the summer, "of a Tilton, of a Victoria Woodhull carried into practice would Bohemianize mankind."⁴⁴ "One by one the great newspapers

⁴¹Frank Moulton's Statement, Marshall, p. 479.

⁴²Chicago Tribune, 4 August 1874, p. 1, col. 6.

⁴³Brooklyn Sunday Sun, 26 August 1874.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 2 August 1874.

dropped from him [Beecher]," noted one observer, "not in hostility, but in sorrow."⁴⁵

Despite all this evidence, Plymouth Church, at the end of its investigation, declared in the official report:

We find nothing whatever in the evidence that should impair the perfect confidence of Plymouth Church or the world in the Christian character and integrity of Henry Ward Beecher.⁴⁶

Many people were puzzled by this determination to defend Beecher at any cost. However, Elizabeth Cady Stanton was probably right when she told the Chicago Tribune that many of the businessmen defending Beecher were doing so for economic reasons--to protect their financial investments in Plymouth Church, in the newspapers which published his sermons, and in the firm which produced his books.⁴⁷ Clearly Plymouth Church and Henry Ward Beecher were big business; but this willingness to allow the great man his "errors" was widespread, even among church members who had no direct or indirect

⁴⁵E. C. Stedman to Whitelaw Reid, n.d., quoted in Hibben, p. 243.

⁴⁶"Report of the Investigating Committee, Plymouth Church," 27 August 1874, Marshall, p. 432.

⁴⁷Chicago Tribune, 1 October 1874.

interest in marketing the Gospel of Love. For this reason, it becomes crucial to investigate the intense support for Beecher even in the light of a general conviction that he was guilty.

Indeed, it seems likely that most Plymouth Church members assumed Beecher's guilt. Yet only Tilton was denounced by the church for "monstrous perfidy." The remarkable point here is that this condemnation was not for adultery, but for betrayal of a friendship. In a confidential communication, Oliver Johnson, a close friend of both men, expressed Plymouth Church sentiment when he wrote that Tilton, "according to his own story" had "condoned" and "forgiven" the adultery and "passed his word that he would forever keep it secret from the world." Despite the willingness of Theodore's friends--including Beecher--to conceal from the world his own "reckless wickedness," Johnson went on, he had violated that trust and "took counsel of those who ministered to his vanity and inflamed his passions." Thus he was led to a betrayal of a "sacred" obligation which Johnson characterized as a "game of treachery, perfidy, and folly that is without parallel."⁴⁸

The issue, then, was not adulteration of a marriage, but adulteration of a "social obligation." Beecher had

⁴⁸ Oliver Johnson to Anna Dickinson, 17 August 1874, Dickinson Papers, Library of Congress.

pursued the "moral" course of keeping silent about an embarrassing domestic problem and by making every effort to shield both Tilton and his wife from public exposure. More than that, he had actively aided Tilton to find a new job, and loaned him money. Tilton, on the other hand, had betrayed his benefactor and violated a "moral obligation"; moreover, he had done so in the grip of anger, selfishness, and passion. Not only was he, said Oliver Johnson, a "knave" but he was a "fool" who could never be lifted from the "pit into which he has plunged headlong," even if he should win the court case.⁴⁹ For someone who had committed no greater sin than Beecher himself, that of adultery, it is ironic that Tilton was placed in the category of "monster," while Beecher's transgression was excused as due to a sympathetic and sensitive nature. Beecher could be forgiven, Tilton could not. Why?

Beecher had acted out of weakness, his lawyer admitted at the trial, but Tilton's behavior was a result of "a passionate love of self."⁵⁰ Beecher's lawyers, Evarts and Tracy, uniformly painted the results of this excessive self-love in terrifying colors. Evarts pointed

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰William Maxwell Evarts summation, Trial, vol. III, p. 663.

out that Tilton had started upon the "same career" as Beecher, in much the same way, "wrapped up in Christian faith and Christian duty" but gradually his "morbid self-worship" had caused his "alienation from faith and duty" and ended in the "evil" gratification of the selfish appetites, regardless of any disaster to those who were "nearest . . . and dearest."⁵¹

It is ironic that in Gilded Age America where individualism was the very foundation of success and virtue, a young man should be convicted of self-interest. Yet this outcome has its own logic, for selfishness is the other side of the coin of individualism. And in many ways, as we have seen, the Gospel of Love was a gospel of self-love and a justification for individual ambition. Indeed, was it because Plymouth Church members were apprehensive that the Gospel of Love must inevitably result in a selfish preoccupation of the kind Tilton exhibited? Did they see in him an exaggerated form of the "erratic" and "violent" behavior which they felt possible within themselves? Were they, in effect, projecting their fears about the Gospel of Love onto its most ardent disciple, Theodore Tilton?

The rhetoric of Beecher's lawyer, Benjamin Tracy, suggests that this analysis is a plausible one. Of all

⁵¹Ibid.

Beecher's legal advisers, Tracy--himself a Plymouth Church member--was most representative of the kind of person Beecher's preaching had done so much for. Of all the lawyers, he was closest to Beecher philosophically and personally; and he was eminently qualified to speak for the minister's staunchest followers. Tracy's speech which opened Beecher's defense in the civil trial reflected the general defense strategy: virtually to ignore the facts and evidence in the case, in favor of paeans to Beecher's nobility and concentration on fervent assaults on Tilton's "malicious" character. What makes the speech notable, however, is the presentation of Tilton's life story as a step-by-step descent into the maelstrom of "passionate egotism." Significantly, this descent is brought about by the very values which had been for twenty-five years the basis of the Gospel of Love. In Tracy's narrative, Tilton is described as a kind of mirror-image of the young men who followed the steps of Beecher's moral evolution to the "higher plane." This, he seemed to be saying, is what happens when individuals lose control of their own "moral evolution."

A staunch new vessel, launched upon
an honorable voyage, sailing with
prosperous winds over unruffled seas,
has been transformed into a pirate by
the wickedness of her commander, and

wrecked by his folly, and now
 lies a stranded and battered hulk,
 the object at once of the curiosity
 and abhorrence of mankind.⁵²

For middle-class Victorian Americans, ever-conscious of their status and appearance in society, the prospect of becoming the "object" of "curiosity" and "abhorrence" conjured up the worst possible horror. It was indeed the opposite of the universal admiration bestowed on Henry Ward Beecher.

The difference between Beecher and Tilton, Tracy said, was that although Beecher had become an eminent clergyman, he had "left neither his simplicity nor his independence behind." He was still, in fact, a "genuine, true-hearted, unaffected man," even in the "midst of all the refinements and luxuries of city life."⁵³ He had not been led astray by ambitious pursuit of success. Tilton, by contrast, as a boy was "bright and ambitious," said Tracy, and therefore he lacked the unselfish aims which were the "prime elements" of "noble manhood." Tilton, unlike Beecher, did not remain "unaffected" by the "gay, fascinating people" who surrounded him and "became

⁵² Benjamin Tracy's Opening Speech, Trial, vol. II, p. 9.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 6.

inflated with success, and fancied himself a monumental genius . . . the foremost man of his time."⁵⁴

This emphasis on the achievement of success without ambition as the key to noble manhood reveals the psychological tightrope upon which Beecher's aspiring middle-class church members had to walk. After all, one of the basic elements of the Gospel of Love was to accept self-interest as valid. "On one side," preached Beecher in a sermon in 1868, "we ought to be careful about our motives, and seek to act from high ones; but on the other side we ought not to be morbid and over-cautious in such a way as to take all satisfaction from human conduct."⁵⁵ "You must," he reiterated, "trust yourself." The point of the sermon on "Motives of Action" had been that self-interest was not necessarily wrong. Yet in Theodore Tilton, Beecher's parishioners perceived a case where the aggressive pursuit of self-interest had run ^{AMOK} amuck and resulted in the "master passion" of his own self-aggrandisement--which had led to his plunge to the "bottom of the abyss."⁵⁶

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 8.

⁵⁵HWB, "Motives of Action," 20 November 1872, Plymouth Pulpit, vol. 5, p. 212.

⁵⁶Tracy Opening, Trial, vol. II, p. 9.

At some fundamental level, Tracy and the parishioners he spoke for found the "master passion" image the most frightening. Self-interest might be acceptable, they and Beecher would say, as long as it did not turn into a self-centered obsession. This, in fact, was the point of Beecher's sermon on the "Love of Money," when he went to great lengths to explain that it was not the money itself that was evil. "Wealth is a great power and a great blessing," Beecher said, "when it is held in a truly manly--that is Christian way . . . we are not to understand that money is the root of all evil but the love of it . . . bestowing love idolatrously upon material gain." It is only, Beecher insisted, when men sacrifice every "virtue and scruple" for it (money), that it becomes dangerous--these men are likely to end their lives in suicide or insanity!⁵⁷ Thus Beecher justified the pursuit of fame, money, or material gain by reasoning that it was not those external goals which were evil, but simply the internal ambition for them. By denying that ambition--or in their terms, passion--Beecher's parishioners justified their hopes for, and for a few, the actual acquisition of money and power.

⁵⁷HWB, "Love of Money," 22 November 1868, Plymouth Pulpit, vol. 1, p. 254.

Thus once Tilton had been stigmatized as guilty of betraying a sacred obligation, the members of Plymouth Church could project upon him all their fears that it might be, in fact, selfish ambition which ruled their lives. "The plaintiff [Tilton]," exclaimed Tracy, "presents the most impressive instance that has ever come within my observation of the remorseless power and the destructive effect of a single absorbing master passion. An all-dominating, selfish egotism is the basis of his character."⁵⁸

In a sense, the trial offered Plymouthites the opportunity to express their fears of the Gospel of Love as it existed within each one of them. In spite of his "weakness" and errors in judgment, Henry Ward Beecher remained their idol because they believed that he had attained what they all wanted: he had achieved fame and fortune without losing his "simplicity," and integrity. This assessment, of course, had little to do with Beecher's real character, but rather with the idealized image he was so successful at projecting to his audiences. Beecher's very charm, boyishness, and lack of

⁵⁸Tracy Opening, Trial, vol. II, p. 8. This fear of overstimulation and passion running rampant, particularly when one is alone, probably had a great deal to do with the Victorian horror of masturbation. After all, this activity combined two things that were threatening--overexcitement and solitude.

sophistication which so horrified his ministerial colleagues, served to heighten the identification of these farmers' sons transplanted to the city.

Tilton, however, represented the darker side of the Gospel of Love. In his eagerness to achieve the same upward mobility as Beecher, he had, it seemed, forsaken friendship, loyalty, and simplicity. He had allowed his ambition for advancement virtually to erase the social ties of both friendship and marriage. Plymouthites were fearful that ambition and absorption with self would lead to terrifying loneliness--a severing of ties which bound them to humanity. For the young men of Tilton's generation, this dilemma was almost unbearable; as they adopted the Gospel of Love with its emphasis on aggressive self-interest as a necessary prerequisite to success, the deeply implanted values of their youth produced images of punishment and destruction. Yet one measure of how much these values still pervaded their inner lives, was their vehement denunciations of Theodore Tilton for wanting the things they wanted. In complaining that Plymouth Church had treated Tilton with "epithets and denunciation," his lawyer made a telling point when he cried, "If Henry Ward Beecher is innocent he needs no such clamorous and foul defense."⁵⁹

⁵⁹William Beach summation, Trial, vol. III, p. 816.

Perhaps the best evidence that Beecher's followers were actually convinced of his guilt was the quiet, almost subversive way in which the minister, after the trial, was eased from his pedestal. True, Plymouth Church members stood by him until his death in 1887, but his sermons and books declined in popularity. In fact, the Plymouth Church-owned firm of J. B. Ford went bankrupt after the trial, and Beecher's lectures were now often frequented by curiosity-seekers rather than admiring partisans.⁶⁰ Admiration was gradually converted to condescension. The change was subtle, but there was no mistaking it--Beecher could no longer--by the time of his death--be called a major social force in American life.

One might speculate that the Beecher-Tilton trial was symbolic of the time in American life when innocence and simplicity, although still valued, were being recognized as obsolete. What counted in the Gilded Age was shrewdness, opportunism, and ambition. It was this tension between these sets of values--essentially between the preindustrial past and the industrial present, which delineated the psychological conflicts in this aspiring and mobile generation. The Gospel of Love justified the

⁶⁰Hibben, p. 286.

present while continuing to idealize past values.

The paradoxes of Victorian America were reflected in the attitudes of Plymouthites when they condemned Tilton for exhibiting the very qualities of calculating self-interested ambition which they prized as essential to success.

But, it was already becoming clear that the two value systems could not coexist in one individual--Tilton's attempt to combine both innocence and ambition had led to self-destruction. Thus personal fragmentation and social polarization ensued. In general, men were expected to become shrewd and ruthless, while women were inculcated with the values of timidity and innocence. Certain categories of men were also identified with woman's social role--ministers, for example. Ironically, these preservers of the simpler, gentler values assumed the role at the cost of any real influence or power. Perceived as too sensitive to operate in the arbitrary and harsh public world, these guardians of virtue were relegated to the private, non-threatening world of church and home. Ultimately, then, it was Beecher--a minister, and Elizabeth--a woman, who were the real losers in the case--for their defense was based on the assumption that their admitted "weakness" was rooted in sensitivity, honesty, and trust. These were qualities which elicited a certain

admiration--but an admiration riddled with condescending protectiveness. Indeed, for many decades after the sensational events of 1874, women and ministers, while cherished for their spiritual sensitivity, would be excluded from the real world of political and economic decision-making. The Gospel of Love had proven too dangerous a doctrine for any but the powerless.

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A P P E N D I X I

CHRONOLOGY

- 1847 Plymouth Church established in Brooklyn. Beecher arrives from Indiana. He is thirty-four years old.
- 1848 Henry Bowen starts the Independent-- a religious newspaper devoted to anti-slavery. One editor is Richard Salter Storrs.
- 1851 Elizabeth Richards and her mother join Plymouth Church.
- 1853 Theodore Tilton joins Plymouth Church. He is eighteen years old.
- 1854 HWB sends rifles (Beecher Bibles) to Kansas.
- 1855 October 2: Elizabeth and Theodore married by HWB. She is twenty-two; he is twenty.
- 1856 Tilton becomes a clerk at the Independent. "Ghost-writes" for HWB.
Close friendship between Beecher and Bowen cools.
- 1857 Henry Bowen's silk business goes bankrupt.
- 1858 Great revival in Plymouth Church.
- 1859 Eunice Beecher publishes From Dawn to Daylight.
- 1860 Tilton and Beecher disagree over distribution of missionary funds. Tilton gains reputation as an abolitionist.
Spring: Theodore and Elizabeth move to their own house on Oxford Street.
- 1861 Bowen's silk business fails again.
December: The editors of the Independent resign. Beecher becomes the editor with Tilton as his assistant. Close friendship between Tilton and Beecher begins.

- 1863 April: Bowen and Beecher arbitrate their "business and personal difficulties." Bowen is awarded \$1,000.
- Spring: Theodore and Elizabeth return to live with her mother at the boardinghouse.
- May 2: Bowen's wife Lucy dies. Allegedly confesses to a sexual affair with HWB.
- June: HWB takes a trip to England.
- June: Henry Bowen writes "Woodstock" letter to Tilton; says Beecher should be driven from his pulpit.
- July: Bowen writes a friendly letter to Beecher; hopes their differences can be "buried."
- 1864 January 1: Tilton becomes editor of the Independent, but Beecher's name is still on the masthead.
- December: Tilton begins his annual lecture tours.
- 1865 Tilton becomes official editor of the Independent.
- November: Tilton writes letter of gratitude and love to HWB.
- 1866 Summer: Tiltons move into new house on Brooklyn Heights.
- August 30: Tilton and HWB argue over "Cleveland Letter." HWB withdraws his contributions from the Independent.
- Fall: Beecher begins visiting Elizabeth.
- Friendship between Beecher and Tilton cools. Tilton begins to question all his old values. "Winter of meditation."
- 1867 Elizabeth vows not to "yield" her "womanhood" to Beecher.

- 1868 Beecher publishes Norwood.
 January 26: Elizabeth and Theodore make "mutual confessions" to each other.
 March: Inward "awakening" and "new marriage."
 October 10: Affair between Elizabeth and HWB begins.
- 1869 Spring: Elizabeth teaches in Bethel, becomes active in the Equal Rights Association, and doesn't write Theodore very often.
 December: McFarland-Richardson marriage. Beecher widely criticized. Tilton says one should not be "chained" to marriage.
- 1870 January 1: Beecher's new religious paper Christian Union begins publication.
 February: Reconciliation between Beecher and Bowen.
 March-May: Elizabeth's affair with Beecher ends.
 July: Elizabeth confesses adultery to Theodore.
 July: President Grant visits Bowen in Woodstock, Connecticut. HWB invited.
 September-November: Elizabeth visits a friend in Ohio; writes a letter begging Theodore to keep quiet about the adultery.
 November: Bowen and Tilton argue over politics. Tilton has joined the Liberals.
 December 1: Tilton's article on "Love, Marriage, and Divorce" published in the Independent.
 December 10: Elizabeth returns from Ohio but confronted with Theodore's violence, goes home to her mother. HWB and Eunice advise divorce but Elizabeth finally goes back to Theodore.
 December 20: Bowen contracts with Tilton to continue to edit the Union but reduces him to a contributor on the Independent.
 December 24: Elizabeth has a miscarriage of a "love-babe."

1870

December 26: Bowen-Tilton-Johnson interview when Bowen threatens to fire Tilton. Tilton reveals Beecher's affair with Elizabeth. Bowen encourages Tilton to write a letter demanding that Beecher resign his pulpit. Bowen delivers the letter to Beecher.

December 27: Tilton informs Bowen that he will talk to Beecher and make peace. Bowen appears at Tilton's office and threatens to fire him if he (Tilton) tells HWB of Bowen's part in the threatening letter.

December 29: Theodore demands and gets a written confession of the adultery from Elizabeth.

December 30: Frank Moulton takes the confession to HWB who immediately goes to see Elizabeth, demanding a retraction of the confession. She complies. Later in the evening she writes a recantation of her retraction when demanded by an outraged Theodore.

December 31: Bowen fires Tilton from both newspapers.

December 31: The "pistol scene"--Moulton demands that HWB return Elizabeth's retraction; HWB complies.

1871

January 1: Henry Bowen informs HWB that he has fired Tilton.

January 1: Beecher dictates and Moulton writes the "Letter of Apology" to Tilton.

January: Bessie Turner is sent to school in Ohio; Beecher pays the bill.

February: Elizabeth writes "sisterly" letter to Laura Curtis Bullard.

Spring: Elizabeth and HWB carry on the "clandestine correspondence."

March 4: Tilton's Golden Age begins publication--largely financed by Beecher.

May 22: Victoria Woodhull insinuates in the New York World that there is scandal in Brooklyn. Tilton goes to talk with her.

June 29: Elizabeth writes "Catherine Gaunt" letter. Blames herself and begs Theodore's forgiveness.

- 1871 September: Tilton publishes laudatory biography of Woodhull. Beecher refuses to appear on a public platform with her.
 December 17: Tilton marches in a communist procession.
 Beecher's Life of Christ (vol. 1) is published.
- 1872 February: Beecher writes the "Ragged Edge" letter.
 April 2: "The Tri-partite Covenant" between Bowen, Beecher, and Tilton is signed. Bowen pays Tilton \$7,000 for breaking his contracts while all three agree not to spread rumors about the others.
 Spring: Tilton upset because his winter lecture tour has flopped.
 Summer: Tilton attends Liberal Republican convention and helps nominate Horace Greeley, then campaigns for him. Beecher campaigns for Grant. Woodhull runs for President.
 November 2: Woodhull's charges against Beecher appear in Woodhull & Claflin's Weekly.
 December: Tilton composes the "True Story." Shows it to Richard Salter Storrs and others. Also publishes the "Letter to a Complaining Friend" which revives speculation about the scandal.
- 1873 May: Beecher mortgages his house and contributes \$5,000 to the failing Golden Age.
 May 30: The tripartite covenant is published by a friend of Beecher's. Public interest in the scandal revives. The Brooklyn Eagle blames Henry Bowen for everything.
 June 1: Beecher writes the "beckoning glory" letter to Moulton. He threatens to commit suicide.
 June 2: Beecher confesses to Emma Moulton.
 July: Bowen sells the Brooklyn Union to Howard and Tracy.
 October 31: Tilton dropped from the membership roll of Plymouth Church for "slandering" the pastor.

1874

March 9-29: A Council of Congregational Churches meets in Brooklyn and censures Plymouth Church for dropping Tilton without investigating the scandal. Leaders in the movement are Richard Salter Storrs and William Ives Budington.

April 2: Rev. Bacon, a friend of Beecher's, publicly refers to Tilton as a "knave" and a "dog."

June 21: In the "Bacon Letter" Tilton accuses Beecher of adultery with his wife.

June 27: HWB appoints a Church Investigating Committee composed of prominent men who are also friends of his.

Summer: The Investigating Committee meets and questions witnesses.

July 11: Elizabeth leaves her husband; goes to live with friends of Beecher's.

July 12: Elizabeth testifies--she denies the adultery.

August 27: Official Report exonerates Beecher; Moulton protests and is threatened with violence.

Tilton publishes Tempest Tossed--he says the character of Mary Vail is Elizabeth.

1875

January 4: The Civil Trial begins in Brooklyn City Court.

July: The trial ends; Beecher acquitted because of hung jury--the vote is nine for Beecher and three for Tilton.

September: The Golden Age goes bankrupt.

Fall: J. B. Ford--Beecher's publishing firm--goes bankrupt.

- 1876 February-March: Plymouth Church calls a second Congregational Council composed of friendly churches. Despite Henry Bowen's testimony that he knows Beecher to be an "adulterer" the council exonerates Beecher.
- April: Plymouth Church excommunicates Henry Bowen, Emma Moulton, Martha Bradshaw, and George Bell--all those who had testified against Beecher.
- 1878 April 16: Elizabeth makes her final public confession. She, too, is excommunicated from Plymouth Church.

A P P E N D I X I I

WAS HE GUILTY?

Although "hard" evidence against Henry Ward Beecher (such as witnesses) is lacking, the circumstantial evidence does seem overwhelming. And the jury's indecisiveness notwithstanding, it is difficult to disagree with the majority of the newspaper editorials of the day, that he was indeed, guilty. Some of the most damaging evidence comes from Beecher's own letters, written to the mutual friend, Frank Moulton, Theodore Tilton, and Elizabeth. The famous "letter of apology" for example, written on January 1, the day after Tilton had informed Beecher of his wife's confession, does not make much sense if the charges of adultery were false. The letter was addressed to Frank Moulton:

I ask through you Theodore Tilton's forgiveness, and I humble myself before him as I do before my God. He would have been a better man in my circumstances than I have been. I can ask nothing except that he will remember all the other hearts that would ache. I will not plead for myself; I even wish that I were dead. But others must live and suffer. I will die before anyone but myself shall be inculpated. All my thoughts are running towards my friends, toward the poor child [Elizabeth] lying there and praying with her folded hands. She is guiltless, sinned against, bearing the transgressions of another. Her forgiveness I have. I humbly pray to God that He may put it in the heart of her husband to forgive me. I have trusted this to Moulton in confidence.¹

Beecher later claimed that although he had signed this letter, Moulton had composed it and therefore it did not accurately represent his thoughts. When questioned, however, Beecher admitted that it was "in substance" what he meant to say. He tried to claim that what he was so

¹Trial, vol. I, p. 65.

remorseful about was Mrs. Tilton's unrequited and "undue affection" for her pastor. Unwittingly, he said, he had caused friction in the Tilton family. This hardly seems reason enough for such a lavish display of grief, sorrow, and remorse--nor the elaborate cover-up which continued under Moulton's direction for three and a half years.

Frank Moulton, who had been a close friend of Tilton's since their school days became a friend of Beecher's only after he knew of the adultery. Beginning immediately after the stormy night of confrontations and Beecher's letter of apology, the minister became almost inseparable from Moulton, visiting him three and four times a week to discuss ways and means to cover up the scandal. This much even Beecher admitted, claiming variably that what was being covered up was Elizabeth's "undue affection" or that he had made "improper solicitations" to her. None of these explanations was convincing--especially in the light of some of his other letters.

When an agreement between Henry Bowen, Tilton, and Beecher was published on May 30, 1873, and the scandal threatened to erupt once again, Beecher wrote another letter to Moulton which he later had difficulty explaining:

The agreement was made after my letter [of apology] through you was written. He [Tilton] had had it a year. He had condoned his wife's fault. He had enjoined upon me with the utmost earnestness and solemnity not to betray his wife nor leave his children to a blight. I had honestly and earnestly joined in the purpose. . . . Dear good God, I thank Thee I am indeed beginning to see rest and triumph. The pain of life is but a moment; the glory of ever-lasting emancipation is wordless, inconceivable, full of beckoning glory.²

This was followed by a letter of resignation to Plymouth Church which was never delivered and a letter in which Beecher told Moulton he was living constantly on the "ragged edge of anxiety" and thinking about suicide.

²Trial, vol. II, p. 867.

Beecher, as his supporters maintained, may have possessed an excessively emotional temperament, but even taking that into account, these letters would be, to say the least, an overreaction to the charge that Mrs. Tilton had developed "undue affection" for the minister.

Then there is the matter of Beecher's financial help to Tilton. Though considered a charitable and magnanimous man, Beecher is not known to have generally lavished gifts and loans of money on his friends. At his trial, however, Beecher admitted to contributing considerable amounts of money to Tilton's financial support for no other reason than the desire to help a friend. It is particularly notable that the first installments of this charity went to pay the boarding school bills of Bessie Turner. Bessie was a teen-aged servant--a kind of mother's helper--in the Tilton household. She had on several occasions overheard conversations between Mr. and Mrs. Tilton about the adultery. Less than a month after the confrontation between Beecher and Tilton, Bessie was sent off to boarding school in Ohio--all paid for by Henry Ward Beecher.³

Since Tilton had been fired from the Independent and the Union, he had no means of support. By March 1871, Moulton had raised enough money from Beecher and others to set Tilton up with his own paper, The Golden Age. Because Tilton made this a politically and socially radical paper, it did not attract much circulation and was soon sinking financially. At this point, in May 1873, Henry Ward Beecher mortgaged his house in order to contribute \$5,000 to the failing paper. In explanation, he said, "It was a partnership . . . we were all in the same boat together. He [Tilton] had his reasons why he did not want matters to come out about his family, and I had my reasons."⁴

As if Beecher's own letters and actions were not damaging enough, both Frank Moulton and his wife Emma testified at the trial that Beecher had confessed the adultery to them. The Moultons, unlike Theodore and some others who testified against Beecher could not be considered radicals or Free Lovers. Moulton was a well-to-do respected Brooklyn businessman; his wife was a model of decorum and conservatism on the questions of women and

³HWB testimony, Trial, vol. III, pp. 105-106.

⁴Ibid., vol. II, p. 868.

marriage. The testimony of these two people, then, was the most difficult evidence that Beecher's lawyers had to refute. Even while accusing Moulton of blackmail and Emma of lying, however, Beecher undermined his own case by giving his two erstwhile conspirators character references. Although Moulton had betrayed him, Beecher insisted that he loved the man like a brother, and that "he did seem to me to have given a new meaning to friendship."⁵ Of Emma Moulton, Beecher said, "Her whole intercourse with me was such as to raise in me the greatest respect and esteem for her and I never knew her to do an unladylike thing."⁶ She always had a knack, he recalled, for "flattening" him with her "clear truthfulness."⁷

With that kind of reference, the press and the public listened closely when Mrs. Moulton testified that on June 2, 1873, Beecher had confessed to her his sexual intercourse with Elizabeth Tilton. He worried that if "that letter of apology is published I might as well go out of life, it is useless to try and live it down."⁸ She confirmed her husband's statement that Beecher's confessions, had at times, been very explicit:

Both Mrs. Tilton and Mr. Beecher admitted in language not to be mistaken that a continued sexual intimacy had existed between them, and asked advice as to the course to be taken because of it.⁹

The accumulation of evidence against Beecher was impressive during the trial and was augmented thereafter. At the second Congregational Council, Henry Bowen, whose silence at the trial had been disappointing but who was now angered by the attempts to excommunicate him from

⁵HWB testimony, Trial, vol. II, p. 837.

⁶Ibid., p. 858.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Trial, vol. I, p. 721.

⁹"Moulton's Statement," Marshall, p. 479.

Plymouth Church, read a statement to the Council in which he testified that he knew Beecher to be an "adulterer, perjurer, and hypocrite." He insisted that Beecher had confessed to him years before but had assured Bowen that he was a repentant man. With that assurance, Bowen said, he had helped Beecher cover up his illicit sexual adventures.

Moreover, Elizabeth Tilton's final word on the matter was that the adultery had, indeed, taken place. In April 1878, she addressed a letter to the public in which she confessed her guilt. All this evidence, taken together, does seem to confirm the minister's guilt.

Further, the evidence of Beecher's own temperament and personal philosophy which is explored in this thesis suggests, first, that he did, indeed, seduce Elizabeth Tilton, and second, that he was able to justify it to himself, if not to the world.

