CONTENTS

1

FROM HOME TO BOSTON

The first meeting I ever saw [Moody] was in a little old shanty abandoned by a saloon-keeper . . . I saw a man standing up, with a few tallow candles around him, holding a negro boy, and trying to read him the story of the Prodigal Son. A great many of the words he could not make out, and had to skip. I thought: "If the Lord can ever use such an instrument as that . . . it will astonish me." After that meeting was over, Moody said, "Reynolds, I have got only one talent: I have no education, but I love the Lord Jesus Christ, and I want to do something for Him."[1]

—William Reynolds

From the vantage point of history, 1837 was a year of portents. Queen Victoria ascended the throne of Britain. Charles Dickens began publishing *Oliver Twist* (in serial form). Across the ocean in America, an aspiring lawyer named Abraham Lincoln was admitted to the bar.

The world took little note that Dwight Lyman Moody was born on February 5, 1837, in Northfield, Massachusetts. But there were points of connection with the lives of his more famous contemporaries. For a start, his years on earth almost precisely mirrored the span of Victoria's reign. In his youth, Moody knew hardship on a Dickensian scale, and he knew the slums of the great city of the west: Chicago. It was here that Moody, when twenty-three, met Abraham Lincoln.

Still, when it came to his origins, Moody was in later life self-deprecating, and once marshaled a quip Mark Twain would have envied, protesting that his ancestry was of little importance. "Never mind the ancestry!" he said. "A man

I once heard of was ambitious to trace his family to *The Mayflower*—and he stumbled over a horse-thief! Never mind a man's ancestry."[2]

This flash of wit aside, Moody's family ties included some noteworthy relations. Among them were Jonathan Edwards, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and President Grover Cleveland. Moody was also related to Franklin Roosevelt—a descendant, as Moody was, of William Holton, who settled in Northfield in 1672.[3]

Moody was likely unaware of his kinship with these famous figures; yet it is certain that his origins, and the town of his birth, were in many ways the making of him. They are profoundly important. Before middle age, he would know international fame. But no one could have predicted that, given his start in life. It was anything but promising.

Dwight Moody was the sixth child of a large and growing family. His mother, Betsy Holton Moody, was a capable, caring woman descended from Puritan forbears who settled in Northfield in the late 1600s. His father, Edwin, was a tradesman skilled in masonry.

Family lore held that Edwin Moody was something of a rough, ready, loveable rogue. Tall and stocky, he had a strong physique that suited the mason's trade. He was genial, devoted to his wife, and said to be dashing.

Still, there were worrisome traits. By turns, Edwin was called a "shiftless, lazy fellow"—though one honestly adored by his wife, children, and neighbors. He was more fond of whiskey than was good for him. And he had little money saved at the time of his marriage. This meant he had to borrow money to buy a house and small parcel of land. Betsy's relations were none too impressed with what they considered a poor farm on "a regular sand heap," but it was a place the newlyweds could call their own and start a family.[4]

During their first ten years of marriage, Edwin's load of debt increased, and it was said he was "never more than a few steps away from his creditors." Still, by all accounts, his marriage was considered a happy union.[5]

Certainly, it was a fruitful one. For by 1841, when four-year-old Dwight began attending school, he was one of seven children in school, or soon to start. And at this time, his mother was once again pregnant.

The Moody family endured heartrending tragedy on May 28, 1841. Dwight was in the local schoolhouse with some of his siblings when a neighbor put his head in at the window, asking if any of Ed Moody's children were there. He bore terrible news: their father had just died.[6] He was only forty-one.

We have only a bare recital of how it all happened. An early biographer, W. H. Daniels, reports that on the morning of May 28, Edwin Moody was hard at work, "but feeling a pain in his side, caused by over-exertion, he went home to rest. At about one o'clock in the afternoon he felt the pain suddenly increasing, staggered to the bed, fell upon his knees beside it, and, in this posture, death seized him."[7] All circumstances pointed to a massive heart attack.

Little Dwight retained no memory of his father's funeral. But he did remember the desperate struggle that followed for his mother, left a widow with seven children. "It brings the tears to my eyes every time I think of it," he later said. "My father died before I can remember. There was a large family of us. Twins came after his death [now there were] nine of us in all. He died a bankrupt, and the creditors came in and took everything—as far as the law allowed. We had a hard struggle. Thank God for my mother! She never lost hope."[8]

Betsy Moody now had virtually no means of support. The family homestead was encumbered with a mortgage, and only "the merciful provision of the law securing dower rights" saved her from loss of the family home. As it was, she was left with only the roof over her head and her now fatherless children. The creditors had been heartless in the extreme, taking everything they could, even the kindling wood in the shed.[9]

One scene from this desperate time stayed with Dwight Moody all his life. Since the family's supply of firewood was now gone, Betsy told her children "they must stay in bed till school-time to keep warm." It was the only thing she could think of. Her relief must have been overwhelming when, soon after, she saw her brother Cyrus Holton drive up with a wagonload of wood, which he sawed and split for immediate use.

"I remember," said Moody later, "just as vividly as if it were yesterday, how I heard the sound of chips flying. I knew someone was chopping wood in our woodshed, and that we should soon have a fire. I shall never forget Uncle Cyrus

coming with what seemed to me the biggest pile of wood I ever saw in my life." Such memories, Moody's son Will would later say, "always made Father's heart vibrate with sympathy for those who were in want."[10]

Welcome as Cyrus Holton's kindness was, the pressures on Betsy Moody mounted steadily. She had two newborn children and seven others to try and provide for. In the face of such overwhelming odds, some of her neighbors pleaded with her to break up her home and place the older children in families where they might be better cared for.[11]

Betsy would have none of it. "Not as long as I have these two hands," she vowed.

Such resolve, her well-meaning neighbors felt, was foolhardy in the extreme. "You know," they insisted, "one woman can't bring up seven boys. They'll turn up in jail, or with a rope around their necks."[12]

This tough love, if what these neighbors intended, only burdened Betsy Moody further, as she later told Dwight. Through each day, she did everything she could to offer a brave face for her children, but "she cried herself to sleep at night." Looking back, Moody said: "We didn't know that, or it would have broken our hearts. We didn't know what trouble our mother was passing through."[13]

At times, Betsy was cruelly treated. Four days after she gave birth to the twins she'd been carrying, Ezra Purple, the wealthy landowner who held the mortgage on the Moody farm, came to collect his yearly payment. Betsy, still recovering, had to receive her insistent creditor in her bedroom. She said the only thing she could: she didn't have money just then, but would get it as soon as she might. With a severity Scrooge would have admired, Ezra Purple castigated Betsy in coarse language and stormed from the house. Getting into his carriage and setting the whip to his horse, the sudden jolt broke the harness, and he was pitched headlong to the ground, though he escaped injury. Outraged neighbors, when they heard of this, said: "A pity he didn't break his neck."

After the event, Uncle Cyrus and another Holton brother pooled their money and covered the mortgage. For one more year, at least, Betsy would be able to stay in her home. Years later, D. L. Moody would turn the tables on the family of Ezra Purple—but for very different reasons.[14]

Betsy Moody might have despaired, but an unlooked-for mercy arrived in the person of the Reverend Oliver Everett, the aging minister of the First Congregational Church.

His kindness was a sunshine of hope. Materially, he brought the Moody family food and other staples from his own home. He offered to help with the children's schooling and urged Betsy to keep the family together.[15] Aging though he was, he wasn't daunted by the prospect of spending hours in a home filled with active, energetic children. Some clergymen, as they grow older, become more quiet and retiring. Everett had a rare gift for expressing genuine, if modestly expressed, affection. Betsy Moody's children warmed to him. Young Dwight never forgot Everett's habit of placing an affectionate hand on his head, or saying a kind word.

For a fatherless boy, such things loom large, and linger in the memory. Dwight always recalled Everett's gift for homespun, simple kindness. His pastoral visits were frequent and welcomed. In addition to discreetly given gifts of money, he would very helpfully settle quarrels among the Moody boys. It was his habit as well "to give the little ones a bright piece of silver all round" and to encourage Betsy Moody by "telling her God would never forget her labor of love." At one time, he took young Dwight into his family "to do errands, and go to school."

This was saying something, for as Dwight grew older, he increasingly showed himself a headstrong, wild colt of a boy. As an old New England phrase had it, "no one could slap a saddle on him." More than once, Everett would scratch his head in perplexity. He meant to correct Dwight more often than he actually did. But the boy's pranks were disarmingly funny.[16]

Reverend Everett was singular in his kindness and singular in his faith commitment. The First Congregational Church may have turned Unitarian, as many Congregational churches throughout New England had done at this time, but Everett remained within a more orthodox wing of that body. He believed in the Bible as the inspired Word of God, in Christ as Savior, and in the church and her sacraments.[17]

So it was that in 1842, he "baptized the Moodys in one batch," invoking the

ancient—and Trinitarian—phrase, "in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost."[18] It was an earnest of his ministry among them. Coming alongside this needy family, the hope of heaven had drawn near, for hope was not least among the gifts Oliver Everett shared with them.

Surviving accounts indicate that from his earliest years, Dwight Moody was headstrong, resolute, and not easily turned from something once he'd set his mind on it.

Around harvesttime, Dwight once wished to visit his grandmother Holton, who lived about four miles away. He was just five years old, and so long a journey seemed insurmountable.

Someone had given him five cents earlier, half the required amount for a child's fare to cover that distance. Still, he refused to admit defeat. When the passing stage stopped, he pleaded with the driver to accept the five cents for his fare.

The stage was already full inside, but at last, the driver consented "to take him as baggage" and placed him on top of the coach, within the rack that guarded the trunks.

So it was that he arrived at his grandmother's, to everyone's great surprise, and spent much of the day at their old farm. His relatives thoroughly enjoyed his visit but urged him to make an early start for home. They thought he would have to walk the distance, but Dwight had other ideas. A coach ride would do, and nothing else.

So he went out into the fields, picked a clutch of wildflowers, another of caraway, and once more hailed the coach—offering the flowers and caraway in exchange for a return fare. Something about the little boy's sturdy determination won the driver over again, and Dwight returned home in triumph perched on the stage box.[19]

Other Tom Sawyer-like incidents took place in Moody's younger years. One was an instance of Yankee grit and shrewd dealing, if not stubborn determination. At the close of one summer's work, when Dwight was perhaps ten or twelve years old, he found an old horse on the home farm, which his elder brother thought not worth keeping over winter, as he had no use for him. All

attempts to sell the poor creature had proved fruitless.

"I can sell that horse," said Dwight confidently. With that, he mounted the horse, and set off to find a buyer.

After a while he came upon an old farmer who, unknown to Dwight, was fond of a joke. It tickled the farmer's fancy to see "such a little chap peddling a horse." So the farmer said he would trade for the horse and, in return, give Dwight a sleigh and a wagon.

Dwight couldn't believe his good fortune, and quickly dismounted to go see what he'd acquired. Soon enough, he found the sleigh and wagon—buried under a mountain of hay in the mow of the farmer's barn. One can well imagine the farmer saying with a laugh, "Good luck, son," and handing him a pitchfork.

But Dwight refused to be beat. With boyish bravado, he said he thought the whole thing a bargain and set to work removing the huge pile of hay, one pitchfork-full at a time.

It took him two days to finish. But when he did, he had a sleigh and wagon to take home to his family. It was hard to say who was more surprised—the farmer or the rest of the Moody family.[20]

"In those younger days," Will Moody would say of his father, "he seemed to love the excitement of a crowd." One uneventful winter prompted a decision that "something must be done" to liven things up.

So telling no one, Dwight took great pains to write out an announcement for a temperance meeting, "to be addressed by an out-of-town lecturer," and posted it on the district schoolhouse door. On the evening announced, a large crowd gathered in the schoolhouse, which was warmed and lighted for the occasion.

But no speaker came, and Dwight was first among those who roundly condemned the practical joker who put over the hoax. Years went by before anyone discovered it was he.[21]

The district schoolhouse was the setting for more than one well-remembered Moody prank. As it happened, local citizens set great store by the "Closing Exercises" held at the school each year. For younger students especially, it was a chance to show what they'd learned in a public setting. Parents had a chance to be proud of their children.

One year, Dwight, already a town character, had been asked to give a recitation—some lines from Mark Antony's oration over Julius Caesar. Given prior behavior, he was an unlikely choice. Nevertheless, to heighten the dramatic effect, a small box, representing a coffin, was placed on the teacher's desk, which became a makeshift funeral bier.

How Dwight managed to smuggle a tomcat into that small box, much less keep it quiet, remains a mystery. But as he reached the close of his recitation, he knocked the lid off the box, and out jumped one very loud and very frightened cat. The cat's cries weren't the only screams that followed. One can only imagine what Betsy Moody thought.[22]

Meanwhile, notwithstanding Reverend Everett's assistance early on, provision for the Moody family remained a continuing challenge. Dwight, as he grew older, often found temporary employment, as his elder brothers did, in neighboring towns.

He never forgot his first experience of this, which dates to 1847: "There were nine of us children," he said, "and my mother had great difficulty in keeping the wolf from the door. My next older brother, Luther, had found a place for me to work during the winter months in Greenfield, a neighboring village about thirteen miles away, and early one November morning we started out together on our dismal journey.

"Do you know, November has been a dreary month to me ever since. As we passed over the river and up the opposite side of the valley, we turned to look back for a last view of home. It was to be my last, for weeks, for months perhaps, and my heart well nigh broke at the thought. That was the longest journey I ever took, for thirteen miles was more to me at ten years old than the world's circumference."[23]

How vivid this memory was can be seen in the balance of Moody's recollection. Fifty years on, it still held power and meaning.

"When at last we arrived in the town," he remembered, "I had hard work to keep back my tears, and my brother had to do his best to cheer me. Suddenly he pointed to someone and said: 'There's a man that'll give you a cent; he gives one to every new boy that comes to town.'

"He was a feeble, old, white-haired man, and I was so afraid that he would pass me by that I planted myself directly in his path. As he came up to us, my brother spoke to him, and he stopped and looked at me.

"'Why, I've never seen you before. You must be a new boy,' he said.

"He asked me about my home, and then, laying his trembling hand upon my head, he told me that, although I had no earthly father, my Heavenly Father loved me, and then he gave me a bright new cent."

Dwight concluded: "I don't remember what became of that cent, but that old man's blessing has followed me for over fifty years; and to my dying day I shall feel the kindly pressure of that hand upon my head."[24]

The place of that penny in Moody's young life has a more somber counterpart. For bright as the close of that memory was, another memory associated with the earning of a penny showed just how vital his childhood earnings were for his needy family. Well before he was ten years old, he went to work. That memory lingered too and was one Moody shared at his mother's funeral.

"I recall when I first earned any money," he said then. "It was one cent a week for tending cows. It went into the common treasury. Every penny was needed, and was put to the best purpose."[25]

With what free time he had, Dwight seemed always on the move, whether swimming in the Connecticut River or running in the hills around his home. "And I could run like a deer," he remembered.[26]

One can well understand why he loved to run the hills around his home. Northfield is one of the most beautiful rural towns in New England, with mountains and wooded ridges that ring the fertile Connecticut River Valley. In all seasons of the year, especially autumn, the countryside is stunning, particularly when morning mist gilds the mountains, and they seem crowned with an otherworldly beauty.

And what of his education? Always, it had to be balanced with the need for him to generate income, however slight. The vignettes given above show that he was bright, resourceful, and determined—yet when it came to his schooling,

the stories become haphazard and worrisome.

It wasn't that he hadn't the capacity to have been a good student. Subsequent events in Moody's life would show he had a keen intellect, and that he, like Abraham Lincoln, had many of the gifts of one both self-taught and independent. Yet, in his youth, the ungovernable sides of his nature, coupled with sporadic attendance at school, militated against his success as a student.

The limited time of his formal education was notably described by W. H. Daniels, who learned firsthand from Betsy Moody what those years were like. "Dwight," Daniels wrote, "went through as many as a dozen terms at the little district schoolhouse; but very little of the schools ever went through him."[27]

Moody would soon leave Northfield to make a life for himself. But before he did, and before his days at school were over, the picture that emerges is that of a hard-to-handle young man chafing to get away—with only his mother's most earnest pleas to keep him from giving free rein to the roustabout sides of his nature.

Though he did attend church with his siblings when a youngster, and was grateful in later life for Oliver Everett's example, as he grew older, Moody eventually came to resent going to church. The departure of Everett—as much of a surrogate father as he ever had, or might have accepted—was marked by the arrival of a pastor whose cold indifference sapped any appeal there might have been for Sunday services.

This new pastor was a forbidding man personally and had a dour pulpit presence. When Sunday in those less happy days arrived, and the Moody children, tired from a week's work, filed into their pew, little that was desirable awaited them.

"I don't know that the new minister ever said a kind thing to me," Moody remembered, "or even once put his hand on my head. I don't know that he ever noticed me, unless it was when I was asleep in the gallery, and he woke me up. That kind of thing won't do; we must make Sunday the most attractive day of the week; not a day to be dreaded, but a day of happiness."[28]

One reads Moody's last recollections of this dour clergyman with real regret. "When I was a boy," he said, "I used to look upon Sunday with a kind of

dread. Very few kind words were associated with that day."[29]

Absent the fatherly presence of someone like Oliver Everett, Dwight would now barely brook authority. In four sentences, Daniels described the teen Moody had become: "His pride," Daniels wrote, "was all the time leading him to undertake things far beyond his years. His mother said, 'He used to think himself a man when he was only a boy.' The fatherly authority was wanting, and he soon came to feel himself his own master. Anything was easier than submission."[30]

Coarse habits began to rear their head. "I'm ashamed to tell it," Moody later remembered, "but I got so I could swear, and it didn't trouble my conscience."[31] To the dismay of family and friends, "passionate outbursts of temper," and fistfights with other boys became common.[32]

Instances of delinquency began to occur. Dwight thought nothing of leading a group of boys in stampeding a neighbor's cattle, done by quietly climbing into the empty rafters of the man's barn, then suddenly raising loud whoops and yells, while jumping about on the loose planks. Frightened young steers broke through barnyard fences and scattered to the winds.

That someone could have been seriously hurt seems to have escaped him, even as he'd crossed the line over into vandalism and could have been prosecuted for damages (worse yet, his mother might have been), had he and his friends been caught.

Given all this, it's not surprising that during the limited time of Moody's formal schooling, battles with his teacher were common. In speaking of it, he recalled: "At the school I used to go to when I was a boy, we had a teacher who used to keep a rattan in his desk." Just the thought of it, he said, brought memories of painful punishment. "My back tingles now as I think of it."[33]

In such circumstances, "a smattering of 'the three R's,' a little geography, and the practice of declamation" were the sum of Dwight's learning. His reading was described as "outlandish beyond description." He never stopped to spell out an unfamiliar word "but mouthed his sense of it," or made up a new word that sounded to his ear as suitable as the original.[34]

"How do you spell 'Philadelphia?'" he once asked, wishing to post a letter;

but before anyone had time to answer his question, he gave two options: "F-i-l, or F-e-l? Well, never mind; I'll write it so that they can't tell which it is—*e* or *i*."[35]

As for Moody's handwriting, or tendency to scrawl across a page, hieroglyphics might have proved more legible to his early correspondents. Punctuation was optional, and his letters were full of words creatively rendered. "Sure" was spelled *shure*, "believe," *beleave*, and "clerk" was closer to "cluck," spelled *clurk*.

Well into his forties, such phonetic spelling persisted. A letter to his mother, written in 1879, presented the word "bed" as though it were the word "bread" with the "r" left out. Asked about this time why he did not write letters more often himself, rather than use a stenographer, he offered a one-word explanation: *spelling*. Perhaps laughing a bit at himself, he continued, "but I'm getting over the difficulty. I'm always sure of the first letter, and the last—and anywhere between may be upstairs or downstairs!"[36]

Dwight's last term of school was in the winter of his seventeenth year. He was then a student in name only, leading other boys into so much trouble that at length his teacher was in despair and threatened to turn him out.

At this, Betsy Moody was sorely grieved. She was ashamed that one of her sons might be turned out of school. For once, Dwight was contrite over his behavior and heeded his mother's wish that he go to the teacher, ask forgiveness for bad conduct, and "try to be a credit to his mother, rather than a disgrace." This he did and for the rest of the term, to everyone's surprise, applied himself faithfully to study. But in truth it was too late, really, to make up for lost ground,[37] biographer Daniels concludes. Soon after, this new resolve was followed by an attempt to strike out on his own.

It was then Dwight left the family farm for a job in Clinton, Massachusetts, finding work with a printer. Newly hired, his first task was to address by hand, from a mailing list, the wrappers of a local paper. As a country boy who knew nothing of crowded streets or houses containing several tenements, the half-numbers of some of the addresses had no meaning, and such a street address he set down to the next number beyond. This naturally caused great confusion, and when the mistake was traced to him, he was fired.[38]

Returning home, he worked for a time on neighboring farms. But his ambition had been roused. He could only think of greater possibilities and opportunities beyond Northfield. He would bide his time.[39]

It came one day in the early spring of 1854. Dwight had just turned seventeen and was cutting and hauling logs on a mountainside with his brother Edwin. Suddenly he stopped and said with loud frustration: *"I'm tired of this! I'm not going to stay here, I'm going to the city."*

His family naturally objected and used every reason they knew of to get him to stay. He had no qualification for a career in the city, they said. The cities were full of young men looking for work. In Northfield, at least, he could find steady work on the farms.

But Dwight was adamant. He was certain the one thing for him to do was to go to Boston. So, saying goodbye to his mother and the rest of the family, he started from home—though he had no definite plans for how to get to Boston. He didn't care. He would go, even if he had to walk every step of the one hundred miles.

Then, halfway between his home and the train depot, he met his elder brother George, who hadn't been home for several days.

"Where are you going?" George asked.

"Boston," Dwight said, "to make my living in whatever business I can find."

Straightaway, George could see that it was useless to try and dissuade him. And with a brotherly kindness Dwight never forgot, George handed him five dollars, just enough for a one-way trip to Boston. What he would do when he got there, no one knew.[40]