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CHAPTER ONE

NORTHFIELD, MASSACHUSETTS 1837–1854

“I’m Tired of This—I’m Going to the City”

It was not easy to make a living in northwestern Massachusetts in the early and middle 1800s. Nevertheless, the people who settled the hilly and mountainous slopes along the Connecticut River Valley were strong and resilient. They possessed an inner strength equal to those stubborn gray stones that jutted out of the thin topsoil and made farming so difficult. Hardworking and frugal people—the offspring of families who knew hardship and deprivation—these descendants of early colonists could make a living in northern New England if anyone could.

This region’s marginally productive soil provides a thin covering to some of the most beautiful land in North America. Northfield, Massachusetts, where Dwight Lyman Moody was born, is situated on a lovely mountain just south of the New Hampshire border. The Connecticut River separates Vermont from New Hampshire, allowing Northfield residents a panoramic view of the river with the Green Mountains of Vermont on one side and New Hampshire’s White Mountains on the other.

The earth is richest and most profitable for cultivation along the riverbanks and floodplain. But the parents of Dwight L. Moody were not prosperous, even by the modest circumstances of most western Massachusetts farmers and small-town people. Consequently, they lived up the mountain on the eastern side of the river where land was rocky, poor, and least expensive.

The homestead of the Moody family was comprised of a white clapboard house with a gray slate roof, green shutters, and two red brick fireplaces. Built in 1823, the two-story building sat on firm

stone slabs native to the local land. This typical New England farmhouse was bordered on two sides by an unpaved road, and it was graced on the other two approaches by land that measured out to nearly two acres. The soil was reddish brown and rocky, but it was enough to support a large garden, two horses, a sturdy milk cow, and a few chickens.

DWIGHT LYMAN MOODY'S FAMILY

Edwin Moody, Dwight's father, was born on November 1, 1800. Like his father, he made a living as a brick and stone mason in the Northfield township of Franklin County, Massachusetts. Edwin's family had been in the region for several generations when he courted and married Betsy Holton. She descended from an old Massachusetts Bay Colony family that traced themselves back to the 1630s in the eastern coastal areas.¹

The Holtons were a rung above the Moodys on the social ladder. Although the Moody clan could be traced to New England in the 1630s, the Holtons had a bit more schooling, more land, and a firmer foothold in the choicest Connecticut River Valley land. Nevertheless, Edwin and Betsy showed little concern for class consciousness. Their son Dwight grew up with such disdain for pedigrees that in later years, when asked about his family heritage, he always said, "Never mind the ancestry! 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!" Not all Americans would have agreed with Moody, especially those with colonial and revolutionary period ancestors. But years later Dwight Moody's son said his father was influenced by a "democratic spirit." He said Moody "disposed of the history of past generations, taking no credit to himself for their achievements, and feeling in no way responsible for their failings."²

Betsy Holton wed Edwin Moody on January 3, 1828, one month before her twenty-third birthday. Born February 5, 1805, she was five years younger than her husband. Silhouette portraits of the couple taken around the time of their wedding show Betsy to be fine-featured and petite next to Edwin, who was obviously large-boned, stocky, and more coarse-featured.³

Edwin maintained a reputation for being carefree and dashing. Some people said he was irresponsible and given to strong drink. Whatever the reason, he had little savings by the time of his marriage, so he was forced to borrow money to purchase a house and small parcel of land. During their first decade together, he went fur-

ther into debt and was never able to stay more than a few steps away from his creditors.

Evidently the Moodys were more adept at raising a family than Edwin was at supporting one. By planting time in 1841, thirteen years after their wedding, there were seven children and Betsy was pregnant again. Among the children was Dwight Lyman, born on February 5 (his mother's birthdate), 1837. He was the sixth child from this reportedly happy union.

Family Tragedy

Tragedy struck the Moodys on Friday, May 28, 1841. While Edwin was out doing construction work, a severe pain in his side caused him to return home at midday. About one in the afternoon the pain grew worse. He moved toward the bed, collapsed on his knees, and fell dead before his wife sensed the seriousness of the illness.

Betsy Moody, eight months pregnant, immediately reacted with her motherly instinct to protect her economically vulnerable family. She sent her oldest son, Isaiah, to recover and hide his father's trunk-sized box of masonry tools while she hid their cow's young calf. Before anything else could be hidden, several creditors invaded the farm and took the horses, buggy, cow, and everything else of value, including a stack of firewood, and even the kindling in the shed.⁴

Fifty-nine years later William R. Moody said that his widowed grandmother lost everything except the children and the house. "The homestead itself was encumbered with a mortgage," according to Moody, "and but for the merciful provision of the law securing dower rights, the widow would have been left without even a shelter for the family." Although Betsy Moody was by law allowed to retain the property, she remained responsible for the mortgage payments agreed upon by her husband.⁵

A month after Edwin's death, Betsy gave birth to twins—a boy and a girl. She now had nine children (seven boys and two girls) under the age of thirteen. With regular mortgage payments due, no livestock, and no apparent source of income, she received counsel from family and friends to break up the family and place the older children with families or institutions that could properly care for them.

With Yankee ingenuity and uncommon determination, the widow Moody resolved to hold onto her family and homestead at any cost. A few neighbors came to her aid until the twins were born and weaned. Her brothers who lived in the vicinity were also quite helpful.

A generation after Edwin's death the family was still talking about their uncle's concern for their warmth the first morning after their father was buried. The children woke up to a cold house. Their mother told them to remain in bed and stay warm until it was time for school. There was no firewood in the shed. Although Dwight Moody had few memories of these very early years, many decades later he did recall: "I remember just as vividly as if it were yesterday, how I heard the sound of chips flying, and I knew some one was chopping wood in our wood-shed, and that we should soon have fire. I shall never forget Uncle Cyrus coming with what seemed to me the biggest pile of wood I ever saw in my life."⁶

Religious Interest

Besides her relatives, Betsy Moody was helped by the Reverend Oliver Everett, pastor of the Northfield Unitarian Church. According to W. H. Daniels, a Moody family friend, Pastor Everett was one of the few people who encouraged Betsy Moody "not to part with the children but keep them together as best she could[,] to trust in God, and to bring them up for Him." He also promised to help her with the children's educations and general necessities.⁷ Years later the family looked back with gratitude to the generous pastor who helped them both by counsel and material assistance.⁸

The evidence is sketchy, but it appears that the Moody family had little interest in organized religion prior to Edwin's death. Once he was dead, however, Betsy found herself in a woefully precarious spot, so she accepted help from the only pastor who befriended her, and he pointed her to God. Soon after Edwin's burial the older children became members of the Sunday school. A few weeks later the entire family—mother and children—were baptized, according to William Moody, "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost." Then on January 1, 1843, a year and a half after her husband's passing and two days before what would have been her fifteenth wedding anniversary, Betsy Moody became a member of the Reverend Everett's Unitarian church.⁹

Both William Moody and the family friend, W. H. Daniels, suggest that the Reverend Everett was really a Christian even though he was a Unitarian. William cited the Trinitarian baptisms as proof, and Daniels argued, "It must be however born in mind that, in those days, the name [Unitarian] had not become associated with all sorts of heresies, as at present [1875]. His differences with his orthodox neighbors were mostly concerning certain points of speculative the-



Moody's birthplace at Northfield



Mrs. Moody with her children in 1862. D. L. Moody is directly behind his mother.

ology. He believed in the Bible as the inspired word of God, in Jesus Christ as the saviour. . . .”¹⁰

The truth is Mrs. Moody neither understood nor cared much about theology. What she found appealing about Pastor Everett was that he eschewed the predestinarian controversies which she found “peculiarly distasteful.” According to Daniels, Dwight Moody’s friend in Chicago from about 1868, Mrs. Moody found the strict Calvinism, especially the double predestinarianism that spread throughout much

of their region, to be particularly odious. Pastor Everett, to her mind, whatever his theological shortcomings, did not embrace what had earlier driven her from the Christian community. Daniels says that when she made this move to institutional religion, “her Calvinistic friends reproved her for her rebellion against the divine decrees,” but she paid them no mind. Indeed, the widow Moody became a loyal ally of the Good Samaritan pastor and his little village church.¹¹

Dwight L. Moody maintained that he did not become a true Christian until he was nineteen years old. “I was born of the flesh in 1837. I was born of the Spirit in 1856,” he emphasized on many occasions.¹² Nevertheless, Pastor Oliver Everett certainly had a profound impact on the boy in several marked ways. First of all, except for the Holton brothers, no one else seems to have supported the family materially and personally. Everett not only gave provisions from his meager larder, but he also offered invaluable personal support by encouraging the widow to stay the course and trust God to help her keep the family together. Over the years Dwight Moody celebrated his mother’s faithfulness to the children, and he attributed many of his own achievements to her love, support, and prayerful reliance upon God. It is doubtful that she could have achieved her faith and maintained the support without the assistance of Pastor Everett.

The future preacher owed an enormous debt to the old Unitarian divine. Not only did he help keep the family intact, but he also pointed the mother and children to God, and he taught them that the heavenly Father’s attributes include mercy, compassion, and love. Besides charity and these sound points of doctrine, the aged preacher gave little Dwight his first practical application of Luke 14:23, “Go out to the roads and country lanes and make them come in.” Indeed, Pastor Everett taught his Sunday school flock to comb the neighborhood of East Northfield each Sunday morning for every child they could find for a time of teaching, fellowship, and praise.¹³

The Moody children were enthusiastic about their church until Reverend Everett was replaced by a younger man. The new pastor was “the worst of the rationalistic school,” and when Moody became a preacher, he sometimes quoted “his sayings with horror.”¹⁴ Moody recalled that he began “to look upon Sunday with a kind of dread. Very few kind words were associated with that day. I don’t know that the minister ever said a kind thing to me, or ever once put his hand on my head. I don’t know that he ever noticed me. . . .”¹⁵

It is significant that decades later D. L. Moody still remembered the absence of kind words and affectionate touches. Moody had

been an impoverished, love-starved little boy. To be sure, his mother loved him as dearly as she did his eight siblings. But how much time can a single parent of nine devote to each one? To make matters even more difficult, her oldest son, Isaiah—the one she depended upon most for help—deserted the family in 1843 when Dwight was seven. Isaiah, age fifteen, nearly devastated his poor mother. He never said good-bye or even hinted that he was preparing to leave. Her hair turned gray over a few weeks. Nothing was heard of him until he appeared at the door thirteen years later.¹⁶

D. L. MOODY'S CHILDHOOD MEMORIES

Dwight Moody passed on few childhood reminiscences, but those that have survived are revealing. He sometimes mentioned a childhood fear of death—not surprising, given what happened to his father and the subsequent mysterious disappearance of Isaiah. On the other hand, he never looked back with bitterness about their poverty. On the contrary, he frequently said he was glad he had had so little because it made him appreciative of what he did have, and the lack of resources made the family learn to depend on God. Moody never wallowed in self-pity over being fatherless, and he never mentioned that his mother's attentions were necessarily sparse. What he did do, however, was celebrate incidents of tenderness that he experienced during childhood that children from less deprived backgrounds take for granted. For example, a new teacher came to the one-room schoolhouse where the Moody children put in sporadic attendance. On her first day she did two things that astounded the pupils. First, she opened class with a prayer—an exercise that the man who preceded her had obviously ignored. Second, she announced that she was keen on discipline, but it would not be enforced by traditional whippings. Within a few days Dwight Moody had breached the rules. Years later in one of his sermons, he recalled the incident this way:

I was told to stay after school. I told the boys if she tried the rattan on me there would be music. What do you think that teacher did? She sat down and told me that she loved every one of the boys, and that she wasn't going to use the rattan on any one of them. If she couldn't teach school without whipping the boys she would resign. She spoke most lovingly and wept while talking. That broke me all up. I would rather have had a rattan used on me than to see her cry. I said: "You will never have any more trouble with me, and the first boy that makes trouble, I will settle him." The woman won me by grace. The

next day one of the boys cut up, and I whacked him. I whacked him so much that the teacher told me that was not the way to win the boys.¹⁷

This brilliant woman won the fatherless boy's heart. He never forgot her compassion, and he told the story often.

Not long after his experience with the teacher, another encounter took place that marked little Moody for life. In later years, whenever Moody preached on the Good Samaritan, he told of this time from childhood:

It brings the tears to my eyes every time I think of it. My father died before I can remember. There was a large family of us. The little twins came after his death,—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. She told me some years after that she kept bright and sunny all through the day and cried herself to sleep at night. We didn't know that as it would have broken our hearts.¹⁸

Moody went on to say that his brother Luther,

a year and a half older, had gone to Greenfield, and had done "chores," and he was so homesick that he was constantly writing for me to come. He wanted me so much that he wrote that he would come home for me. I said I wouldn't go. But one cold day in November,—I have never liked November, my brother came home, and said he had found a good place for me, and I must go down and spend the winter in Greenfield. I said I wouldn't go. But as my mother and I sat by the fire she said:

"Dwight, I think you will have to go. I don't think I shall be able to keep the family together this winter."

It was a dark night for me. But mother's wish was enough. If she said I ought to that settled it. I didn't sleep much that night. I cried a great deal. The next morning after breakfast I took my little bundle and started. I was about ten years old.¹⁹

Dwight Moody and his brother trudged thirteen miles over frozen ground to Greenfield, the county seat. When he met the childless husband and wife he was to live with all winter, he found them kind enough but not particularly understanding of children. After a week of milking their cows and doing their chores, the ten-year-old boy was overcome with homesickness. One afternoon he sought his brother at the home where Luther roomed, boarded, and did chores.

Moody recalled the afternoon this way:

“Brother, I’m going home.”

“What are you going home for?”

“I’m homesick.”

“You’ll get over it if you stick it out.”

“No, I won’t. I don’t want to get over it. I can’t stand it. I don’t like those people here, anyway.”

“Dwight, come out and take a walk with me,” my brother said.

He took me out near the courthouse square, led me to some shop windows, and showed me some jackknives. What’s the use of looking at jackknives if a fellow hasn’t any money to buy them with? My eyes were full of tears. I didn’t care for these things.

“I’m going home,” I said. . . .

All at once my brother, who was looking ahead, brightened up and said:

“There comes a man that will give you a cent.”

“How do you know?”

“Why,” he said, “he gives a brand-new cent to every new boy that comes to town, and he will give you one.”

My tears went away as I saw the old man come tottering along the sidewalk, his face all lighted up. He reached me just in the nick of time and, looking down, he said: “Why this is a new boy, isn’t it?” My brother straightened up and said: “Yes, sir, he is my brother, just come to town.”

And the old man put his trembling hand on my head and looked down upon me. He got hold of my heart, and as he held my hand he told me that God had an only Son in Heaven, and that He loved this world so much He died for it. He went on talking about Heaven, and told how the Father loved me, and how my father on earth was lifted up, and how I had a Saviour up there, and he told me the story of the Cross in about five minutes. Then he put his hand in his pocket, and he gave me a brand-new cent. I had never seen such a bright and beautiful cent before, and I almost thought it was gold. He put it in my hand, and I never felt as I did then before or since. That act of kindness took the “homesickness” out of me. I felt that from that hour that I had a friend. I thought that man was God, almost.²⁰

During the next seven years Dwight, like his brothers, spent most winters away, helping other families with chores. When they were close enough to Northfield, their mother liked to get them all together for Sundays. She took them to church and then put on the best meal she could afford for the entire family. These times together were precious and fondly remembered in the years ahead.²¹

In total Dwight Moody had, at the most, four years of formal schooling. Like the other boys, he went to the local school periodically from about age six to ten. From then on, he was considered old



D. L. Moody, age 17 (1854)

enough to work and help the family. In any case he had as much schooling as most people received in northern New England during the mid 1800s. The quality of his schooling, or at least his attentiveness to what was available, is open to question. The earliest of his letters that have survived date back to 1854 when he was seventeen. His spelling was phonetic. Punctuation was omitted from most early letters. (I have added periods in some places for clarity, but other punctuation and spelling retains the original errors.) Capitalization was randomly applied. If there were new paragraphs they must have been related to when he dipped his pen for more ink.²² In brief, his spelling, grammar, and usage were surpassed in inferiority only by his penmanship. All of these skills improved over the years, but the crudeness of his early writing makes one certain that his formal schooling never totaled more than three or four years.

Unquestionably, young Dwight Moody could have mastered English if he had taken an interest in it. From his earliest years the boy demonstrated a clever mind and remarkable determination. His

inclinations, in any case, flowed in other directions. Growing up in a house that boasted only three books—a cumbersome Bible that was used more for recording family marriages and births than for study, a catechism, and a small volume of personal devotions—his ambitions naturally turned to the practical rather than the academic. His father’s tools were still on the premises, but none of the Moodys prospered in the stone and brick trade. Some of the Holtons, on the other hand, were doing quite well in retail business down in the thriving city of Boston.²³

Betsy Moody told a friend in the 1870s that Dwight “used to think himself a man when he was only a boy.”²⁴ Therefore, she was not surprised when he announced one evening in 1854, just a few weeks after his seventeenth birthday, while he was cutting and hauling logs on a neighbor’s farm, “I’m tired of this! I’m not going to stay around here any longer. I’m going to the city.”²⁵