

X

“NO SHADING OFF . . . FROM RIGHT TO WRONG”

PRESIDENT SIMPSON'S subtle participation in the Bigger campaign angered the Whig politicians; but it in no way impaired his standing among the Methodist preachers. The Indiana annual conference in the fall of 1843 elected him on the first ballot to head its delegation to the quadrennial general conference of the church in New York City the following May.

The general conference was the supreme legislative and judicial body of the church; it elected bishops, editors, and other officers, served as the final court of appeals in ecclesiastical cases, and enacted the laws by which the denomination was governed. The Indiana annual conference of two hundred preachers was entitled to only eight delegates. Election therefore was a signal honor, the highest in the power of the conference—enhanced in Simpson's case by the fact that he was but thirty-two years old and had lived in Indiana only four years.

He made careful preparation for the trip and the conference. Feeling, in the Wesley tradition, the weight of his responsibility, he solemnly set down in his memorandum book several “projects” to propose to the general conference. All had to do with church polity: fixing the time of annual conferences, giving the bishops power to make interim appointments to the offices of the general conference, and permitting editors and other officers of the church to hold membership in the conference of their choice.¹

To the details of the trip East, Simpson gave much more attention. He was young, there was a world to see, and he must see it. He carefully laid out his itinerary, jotting down the items which he wished to see: the statehouse at Harrisburg, Pool's farm at Hagerstown, Harpers Ferry. At Washington he would visit Joe

Wright, see the Patent Office, the President's house, examine the census return for possible advantages to Asbury. At Baltimore he would see the Washington Monument and the Eutaw Street church where Bishop Asbury was buried; at Philadelphia, the water works and Girard College.²

He held a certificate from Governor James Whitcomb stating that he was a trustee of the state asylum for the education of the deaf and dumb, and requesting officials of other states to permit him to visit their institutions, and to look particularly at the "*internal economy . . . and upon those minute practical details.*" There were also items to be bought in New York: a watch and key, a shawl, a skirt, print and gingham, alpaca, and gloves, for Ellen; books for himself; and favors for the children.³

In the middle of March, six weeks before the conference, Simpson and E. R. Ames, who was also a delegate, set out for New York City. Mrs. Simpson and four-year-old Charles and little Anna traveled with them to Pittsburgh and two young women went along as far as Cincinnati. The weather was crisp, and the roads muddy; but the company were in fine spirits, and the gay and lively conversation was punctuated now and then by the protests and screams of the ladies as the wagon plunged into a deep hole or hit a slippery spot.

On the fourth day out Brother Ames discovered that his carpet-bag had come loose from the side of the wagon and dropped along the way. Already delayed by mud and snow and the rough road, they could not lose more time if they were to make their train connection at Columbus, Indiana. Ames came to the rescue. Sending the wagoner back to hunt for the bag, he himself turned teamster. Mounting the saddle horse, which had no saddle and had a back "as sharp as a Nor'wester," he rested his feet on the trace chains, gathered the reins in one hand, and held a large beech stick erect over his shoulder for a whip. When he shouted to the horses they tugged at the traces, and the large red wagon with the white muslin cover began to roll. "All together," wrote Simpson, "not a bad subject for a Cruikshank or a Chapman."

The wagoner recovered the bag and overtook the party at Columbus, and they reached the "cars" with only minutes to spare. They rode the train to Madison, where they took a steamboat up the Ohio to Cincinnati, docking at daybreak on Sunday.

They had three busy days in Cincinnati—visiting Simpson's mother and Uncle Matthew, his sister Hetty and her husband George McCullough, letting the children run and play and stretch their legs from the long ride, going to church on Sunday morning and evening, and hearing their old friend Charles Elliott preach.

On Monday morning Simpson began to pay his bills: \$26.25 to George McCullough; interest payments of \$22 to his mother and \$6.85 to Uncle Matthew for money he had borrowed; \$70 to Moore & Co. for books for the university. He and Ellen went shopping, too: silk and laces, edgings, corsets, and side combs for Ellen; shoes and stockings, candy, nuts, and apples for the children.

At the Methodist bookstore he found a number of preachers en route to the conference who, stopping over the Sabbath in Cincinnati, congregated now at the western headquarters to catch up on the news. Around the fire and at the book counters, they boasted of the gains on their circuits and speculated about the candidates for bishop. The Ohio delegates thought that Elliott would run strongly—both Ohio and Kentucky would go for him. There was a little talk about slavery, but no one was greatly concerned.*

On Tuesday afternoon Simpson's mother and Uncle Matthew joined the travelers for the trip up the river as far as Wheeling. Although the *Majestic* plowed very creditably ten to twelve miles an hour against the stream, it was a long, slow trip of more than four hundred miles to Pittsburgh, with many stops.

Matthew Simpson rose early at Wheeling to help his mother and Uncle Matthew onto the gangplank, on their way to Cadiz. It was three o'clock in the morning. There on the dark, cold deck he slipped and fell, striking his leg against an iron bar, and bruising and tearing the flesh. When the boat reached Pittsburgh on Friday evening the leg was badly swollen. The doctor ordered him to bed, insisted that he cancel his Sabbath preaching engagements and postpone the continuation of his trip. On Monday, Ames went on without him.

The delay was not altogether unpleasant. In the comfortable home of Ellen's father, he journalized and read, and received a steady stream of old Pittsburgh friends. They begged him to return to the conference. They needed an editor for the Pittsburgh *Christian Advocate*. The recent election of delegates to the general conference had aroused a good deal of dissension, which the editor

could not quiet. The former editor, Will Hunter, perhaps could be persuaded to accept the office again, but Matthew Simpson was the man they needed. He was pleased by the suggestion, but demurred. His work in Indiana was not done.

After a week in bed he was able to get around, and to make his final preparations for the trip. Accompanied by little Charles, he went downtown, purchased a penknife and a pencil for himself, a twenty-five-cent hat for Charles, and two volumes for travel reading: Bishop Emory's compact little history of the discipline of the Methodist Church, and the account of an English Methodist preacher's impression of American Methodism and the general conference of 1836.⁵ On Sunday he preached at Liberty and Smithfield churches, and noted that the congregations were smaller than they had been in his time. On Monday he left Pittsburgh on the canal boat *Kentucky* for Baltimore and Washington.

He was much impressed by the "grand and magnificent scenery" of the Alleghenies: the summits rising 1,150 feet above Johnstown and 1,400 above Hollidaysburg; the winding valley of the Juniata; the perpendicular strata of limestone which seemed to have been thrown up by some great convulsion, and now and then resembled mighty cathedrals. He had a fright at Hollidaysburg when on a downgrade the brakes failed to hold and the cars rushed down the incline with increasing momentum until they were brought to a stop just short of the canal.

At Baltimore, where he stopped for the Sabbath, he tramped the streets that Bishop Asbury had trod, and visited the Eutaw Street church where the great bishop was buried, musing the while on the humble beginnings and the magnificent achievements of American Methodism.

He stayed a week at Washington, saw Joe Wright, visited the Capitol, the White House, the Patent Office, Mount Vernon, and the shad fishery at Alexandria. He met President Tyler: "a very plain man, affable and courteous, but sufficiently dignified." He was "mortified" at the "exhibition of decay" in the White House furniture. The chairs were covered with linen to hide the ragged seats, and the window curtains were "much the worse for wear."

On the front steps of the Capitol his attention was drawn to a group of statuary, the figures of nude women, commemorating the services and death of Richard Somers, a United States naval

hero. He thought the work of art "fine"; but he thought also that "different views might be entertained as to the propriety of presenting the figures in a state of nudity or nearly so." The matter seemed to have been decided by an "ancient taste" which modern sculptors were fond of copying. But of one thing he was certain: "the present State of Society would not allow such exhibitions of the female form as would be necessary to give artists proper models for such statuary." The fact that the Greeks were not so "sensitive" gave modern sculptors "fine opportunities of studying their models." ⁶

II

Not until they approached New York did many of the delegates, including Simpson, have any foreboding that tragedy awaited the church. Their talk had been mostly of church politics—the election of bishops and editors. The conference itself, they believed, would be quiet; but there might be an exciting race for bishop, and Ames might be a candidate. Then just before they reached New York came the rumor, spreading like fire in prairie grass, that Bishop Andrew had become the owner of slaves through marriage. Simpson trusted and loved Andrew, the bishop who had ordained him, and who only the previous fall, on a visit to the Indiana Asbury campus, had prophesied a great future for the school. He therefore dismissed the evil word as only a rumor. If the bishop had married a slave-owning lady, he must have made some satisfactory arrangement for the slaves. ⁷

The slavery problem had not troubled Simpson greatly since leaving the Pittsburgh conference. The subject was not much agitated in Indiana. Even the Quakers forbade the use of their meetinghouses for antislavery lectures. ⁸

Uncle Matthew, it was true, had continued to prod him gently. Down in Cincinnati he had aroused the wrath and "Patriarchal temper" of good Methodists, some of whom lived in Ohio and held slaves in Kentucky. A few leaders of the church, officers of the Western Book Concern, had denounced his opinions as those of "Mobocrats, disorganizers," and "rebels against the laws of the land," which his "sensible" young nephew would certainly condemn.

However keen the conflict in Cincinnati, Uncle Matthew did not choose to involve that sensible young nephew in his own quarrels, and therefore had declined his invitation to visit the Indiana annual conference. Some one might "speak evil" in his presence, and he would feel obliged to defend his principles, even though it "mortified" his nephew. He would, therefore, remain at home.⁹

For half a dozen years the bishops had suppressed the abolitionist movement among the Methodists in New England. They had not succeeded, however, in extinguishing the antislavery fire. Smoldering in the majority of northern conferences, abolitionism broke out in the early 1840's in a score of places and its flames threatened material damage to institutional Methodism. By 1843 between six and eight thousand laymen and about one hundred and fifty ministers, under Orange Scott, had seceded to organize the antislavery Wesleyan Methodist Church.

The whole church was alarmed by this exodus. The bishops relaxed their rule over the annual conferences, permitted members to talk against slavery, and even appointed some abolitionist preachers. Several conferences introduced resolutions to strengthen the general rule of the discipline on slavery. The Indiana conference, presided over by James Andrew, endorsed one of these resolutions by the overwhelming vote of 91 to 11.¹⁰

The changed attitude of the bishops and the vigorous proposals of the northern conferences, although arousing the suspicions of the South, checked the exodus of the abolitionists. Many of them elected to stay with the "old church." Thomas E. Bond, editor of the New York *Christian Advocate*, pronounced the threats of further secession to be the "harmless puffings of an extinct volcano."¹¹ With that view Simpson was in complete accord. Somewhat apprehensive about the Andrew rumor, he was still confident that the matter could be adjusted, and that the session would be short and uneventful. So he turned his attention to the more exciting prospect of seeing New York.

Simpson's train reached the Jersey City terminus on April 30, the day before the general conference, and he took the ferry for New York. The exciting metropolis of America had a buzzing population of 300,000. To the passengers looking out from the rail of the ferryboat across the wide expanse of river and bay, the mass of ruddy brickwork soon developed the firm outlines of a great

city. Innumerable spires and cupolas, small, trim white wooden steeples rose above the brickwork. Visitors who were acquainted with the city pointed out the wall along the bay at the southern tip of the island, and the green bank of trees behind it. That, they said, was the Battery, and from it reached the great thoroughfare Broadway, eighty feet wide and three miles long.

Carts and carriages, vehicles of all kinds, filled the streets of Manhattan. Drivers shouted to prospective riders, to their horses, and to one another, twisted about in the traffic, shot into this opening or that to secure the most strategic spot, and, once having obtained passengers, maneuvered to get clear.

Simpson hailed a carriage and ordered the driver to take him the short distance to Harper & Brothers. There he went at once to the business office to pay the \$81.85 that Indiana Asbury University owed to the firm, and was warmly welcomed. To his surprise, he learned that he was to enjoy the hospitality during the conference of the senior member of the firm: James Harper, who had just been elected mayor of New York on the ticket of the Native American party.¹²

III

The general conference opened on Wednesday May 1. The delegates gathered early that day at the Greene Street Church, eager to talk to old friends. They clustered on the steps that led up abruptly from the sidewalk to the door, leaned against the iron picket fence, or met inside.¹³

It was immediately apparent that the slavery question would not down. Some said that the bishop would resign; others, that he owned no slaves, that they belonged to his wife's children; still others, that the South would not let him resign, that there had even been a caucus the night before, and that the southern delegates had threatened to secede to a man if the bishop resigned or were censured.

Simpson found his way into the auditorium, sat down among his Indiana colleagues, and looked around. The building was long and narrow like a warehouse: at the front was the platform with chairs and tables for the bishops and the secretaries; at the rear, a balcony, to which a considerable number of visitors had been

admitted. Already one hundred and fifty delegates were present for the first roll call.

Promptly at nine o'clock the senior bishop, Joshua Soule, called the conference to order. Tall, slender, gray-haired, but muscular and commanding, he was iron-willed—a Westerner by residence but still possessed of the New England austerity of his youth. He read the Scripture, announced the hymn, and called upon George Pickering of New England and William Capers of South Carolina to pray.¹⁴

The first business of the conference was routine but brisk: the election of secretaries and reporters, the ordering of standing committees, and fixing the hours of the general session, which were set to begin at half past eight and end at one o'clock. On the second day the conference named its committees. Simpson, entitled as chairman of the Indiana delegation to first choice, coveted appointment to the special committee on the episcopacy: if rumor were correct, it should have a lively part in the deliberations. But he was young, this was his first general conference, and the older men of his delegation thought that he, as president of the college, ought to be on the education committee. He yielded graciously if a little unhappily, and Augustus Eddy received the assignment to the committee on the episcopacy.¹⁵

In the regular order of business, following roll call, the delegates presented resolutions from their respective annual conferences. When on the third day the secretary called for Indiana, Simpson presented a resolution calling for the division of the conference, another praying for a reduction in the price of Methodist books, and a third on German missions, all of which were referred to committees.¹⁶

The following day, having found his conference legs, he presented his first motion, a question of privilege. Conditions for the conducting of business were not ideal. A few delegates, never able to settle down to the routine of the conference, scurried busily in or out, a few were more or less regularly engaged in whispered conversation. The room was hot, and the doors were open to let in the least stir of air. Over and above the noise of the conference room, the rattle and clatter of passing vehicles and the drumming of hoofs sometimes drowned out the speakers' voices.

Calling for a suspension of the order of the day, Simpson moved that the conference instruct the Book Agents, with permis-

sion from the city authorities, to have the street covered with tanbark. After a lively and entertaining discussion on street noises, loud speaking, and Methodist preachers, the motion prevailed, and Simpson settled back, more an observer than a participant.¹⁷

The conference was less than a week old when the delegates had an opportunity to preview the case of Bishop Andrew. F. A. Harding, a minister of the Baltimore conference who had been suspended because of his refusal to manumit slaves, petitioned the general conference to reinstate him. He had come into possession of his slaves by marriage in a manner remarkably parallel to that which was rumored of the bishop.

The debate on the appeal was highly dramatic and divisive. Many preachers in the deep South, yielding to state laws which forbade manumission, continued to hold slaves, men and women and children, who had come into their possession through marriage or bequest, and the last general conference had guaranteed them the privileges of the church. In the Baltimore conference, however, no preacher yet had been allowed to remain in the conference and hold slaves. William A. Smith of Randolph-Macon College in Virginia defended Harding. Tall, dark, and balding, with a fine physique and a magnificent voice, he argued that Harding had no control over the slaves, who really belonged to his wife, that Maryland forbade emancipation, and that the church at the last general conference in 1840, had approved the admitting of slaveholders to "all grades of the ministry."¹⁸

Smith's real problem was to win the border conferences and the conservative North, which heretofore had allied themselves with the South against the New England abolitionists. But the Baltimore conference had never had a slaveholding preacher, and the Harding case threatened to upset the status quo, to enlarge the slave power. Baltimore resisted, but at the same time disdained any open alliance with the abolitionists. It took a conservative, "middle ground" position between the abolitionists who felt that slavery was a sin under any circumstance and the extremists of the South who maintained that slavery was a national blessing.

Every southerner could see that the Baltimore doctrine, if maintained, would shift the balance of power from the South to the border and to New England. Smith therefore rejected indignantly the definition of "middle ground" conservatives. He

himself and his brethren were the real conservatives of the discipline. All others were abolitionists. Men of the South stood upon the principle that slavery was "a great evil" but "not necessarily a sin." Thoroughly aroused and well practiced in the art that a principle is never so effectively comprehended by an audience as when it is reenforced with loud tones and vigorous action, he spoke with a "voice of thunder" and struck the table violently with his copy of the discipline. The professed conservatism of the Baltimore conference, he said, was not a balance between North and South; rather, it was like one of New York City's two-wheeled cabs: remove the horse, and it would let down on one side. The caricature evoked laughter from the southern men. To the Baltimore conference he must say there was no middle ground between the South and the abolitionists. Where the brethren stood, if not with the "ultra abolitionists," he could not say. There was "no shading off . . . at the margin of guilt, but the bold and abrupt step from right to wrong."¹⁹

John G. Collins, who presented the case against Harding and for the Baltimore conference, was no match for Smith in appearance and oratory. Smaller, dark, sharp-featured, he was "rapid in his movements and style of speaking"; and his voice soon became hoarse. But he had some of the arts of argument. His rebukes were "withering," and his strong conviction, bluntly expressed, gave him the role of champion and served to solidify the North.²⁰ Smith, interrupting to call him a "gladiator," well characterized the whole contest. There was conflict, showmanship, verbal thrust and parry, and a sharp division of interested spectators whose partisanship grew intense as the struggle approached its climax.

Collins charged Harding with violation of the discipline—he could have freed his slaves but would not. He denounced him for making himself unavailable to the non-slaveholding circuits of the Baltimore conference; he rebuked him for becoming involved with slavery. "He knew all these things," shouted Collins, lashing out at Harding and striking the bishop as well, "and with his eyes open, he married these slaves!" He would not have the Baltimore conference weighed down with the "dark subject" or besmirched with the "dark stain" which encumbered and disfigured the South.²¹

Smith in turn was furious as he reviewed Collins's argument. "His eyes flashed fire. With flushed cheek and a voice of thunder,"

he looked at Collins and shouted, "What 'dark subject,' sir, do you know of, connected with my Conference? What 'foul stain' is found upon the pages of its history?" And what did the speaker mean in begging the conference "for God's sake not to drive the Baltimore Conference to take rank with a slaveholding conference"? "*Take rank!*" . . . What do you mean, sir, by this insinuation? '*Take rank*' with Virginia!"²²

The conference was reduced to pandemonium. The bishop pounded with his gavel but was unable to quiet the "multitude of voices." Those acknowledged by the chair were scarcely able to speak until Peter Cartwright, rustic from Illinois, gained the floor. Brethren professed that they were keeping "very cool," he said, once more admonishing them to be patient; but if they were "iron instead of flesh and blood," and if they were thrown into water, "they would fiz-z-z a good deal!"²³

Shortly the confusion was interrupted by the ordering of the yeas and nays. The cleavage wrought by the debaters was sharp and clear. Heretofore at general conferences a large block of northern delegates, recognizing the unity of the church as of first importance, had rallied to the support of the South on the slavery question. But now the line of difference ran along the jagged edge of the border conferences. The vote was 56 for Harding, 117 against him. Only two southerners voted against Harding, only nine delegates from the border conferences voted for him. The split was sharply and clearly geographical.²⁴

XI

THE CHURCH DIVIDED

DESPONDENCY hung over the conference. It lingered until the Andrew case was disposed of, breaking now and then to let in some bright new hope, but only to thicken again into deeper gloom. Fearing that disaster would follow the action on Harding, the conference ordered a special committee on pacification and set aside an hour for prayer. The southerners in a closed session resolved to withdraw from the church with Andrew if any measures were taken against him.¹

The northerners also met together in caucus and named a committee of one from each conference, Matthew Simpson representing Indiana, to deal with Bishop Andrew. The committee met once only, called the venerable Nathan Bangs of New York to the chair and Simpson to the secretary's desk. It then conducted but one item of business, the naming of five of its members to confer with Andrew. The bishop would not receive the committee. He had heard of the caucus. There was no point in talking, he said, when it was known all over the city that his "degradation" was resolved on. The same day the special committee on pacification reported that it was unable to agree on any plan of compromise. And that night Matthew wrote to Ellen: "I think it possible that we shall split."²

With the delegates thus busy in special caucuses, sidewalk and parlor deliberations, and the framing of proposals and counter-proposals, the conference itself was officially and ominously silent on the Andrew case. While it dawdled over routine business Simpson had but little to do. Standing committees met in the afternoon, when the conference was not in session; but the committee on education, on which he served, scarcely met after the early days of the conference, because its chairman, Dr. Henry Bascom, was so fully occupied by the very important committee on the episcopacy of

which he was also a member. Twice the presiding bishop called on Simpson to open the session with Scripture reading and prayer.

On such afternoons as he was not busy, Simpson saw the wonders of the city: the Astor House, an enormous pile of granite facing City Hall Park; the City Hall, a handsome edifice in white marble with an entrance flight of white marble steps, a first floor of Ionic and the whole surmounted by a lofty cupola from which the fire watcher had a view of the entire city; the great fountain with water gushing thirty feet into the air and falling in a large cloud of cooling spray; the shops along Broadway and the business center where he purchased Irish linen, the watch and key, and a dozen smaller items for Ellen; the handsome new Customhouse, done in white marble like a Greek temple of the Doric order; the even more imposing blue granite temple of the Merchants' Exchange; and at the very end of Wall Street, competing with the shrines of Mammon, old Trinity, its spire rising 300 feet heavenward. He viewed with particular interest the old John Street Church, where American Methodism had begun less than a hundred years earlier in a structure built to resemble a house and so to deceive the local defenders of the state-supported church. He visited the museums and was especially interested in the new eccaleobion, that ingenious invention which would hatch eggs without the assistance of a hen. He took the ferry across to Brooklyn. Mayor Harper drove him into the country, past the great reservoir of Eighty-sixth Street, some thirty-five acres of water brought into the city nearly forty miles from the Croton River. On Broadway he looked with amazement at the fashionable people, at the close of a hot afternoon, promenading up and down from the Battery to the Park, the men in the newest cuts and the women in fashions direct from Paris.³ In response to Ellen's teasing letter he protested, however, that his acquaintance with "the ladies of the city" was "small." Of those he had met, some were "handsome," some "ugly," many "very amiable and accomplished"; but all in all, "*I wad'na gie my ain wife for ony wife I see.*"⁴

As the conference approached the end of its third week, and the caucuses and informal negotiations proved unproductive, John Collins of Baltimore brought the issue to the floor by calling for the facts in the Andrew case. The bishop admitted that he was in

truth the legal owner of two slaves, both of whom had been bequeathed to him some years past. The one had refused exportation to Liberia, the other was only a child, not old enough to be placed on his own responsibility. Only a few months before the conference, he, a widower, had taken a second wife who had a number of slaves. Because it was not possible to emancipate them in Georgia and he was "unwilling to become their owner," he had secured them to his wife by a deed of trust, and therefore had "no legal responsibility in the premises."⁵

The debate which followed centered chiefly on the issue of expediency. The preachers were deeply moved as they argued. They wept over the old church, expressed their pride in its achievement, their indebtedness to it, vowed affection for one another, and affirmed their intention to preserve it if possible.

Stephen Olin, president of Wesleyan University, represented the northern view in a conciliatory and moving speech. He was a sick man, and his brethren knew that he ought not make the effort to speak. His great frame shook with emotion, and tears coursed down his cheeks. A New Englander by birth, he had taught in the South as a youth and had lived in the home of Bishop Andrew. He had talked with the bishop only the night before; and he felt that if they could adopt some measure which would not censure Andrew, and yet would meet the needs of the North, they might avoid the rock on which the church seemed likely to split.⁶

Others of the North were less conciliatory. Seymour Coleman of the Troy conference avowed his opposition to abolitionism but bluntly warned: "Give us a slaveholding Bishop, and the whole North will be gunpowder, and there are those who will apply the match; it will make abolitionists of hundreds of the preachers and thousands of the people."⁷

William Winans, "tall, thin, weatherworn" circuit rider of the old frontier in Mississippi, asked: Was it expedient to cut off, as they would by their action, thirteen hundred preachers and four hundred and fifty thousand members "against whom lies no allegation of having departed from the principles of your book of Discipline"? In asking this of his brethren in the North he would not leave out of consideration "the spiritual welfare of thousands of those poor oppressed people for whose interests and welfare you

profess so much solicitation—the bleeding slave himself.” Already the abolition excitement had hedged in the poor Negro, and “shut the mouth of the minister.” Would the North by its vote “throw the blackness and darkness of death over him”?⁸

The South was most aroused over the incongruity of the northern position—the North sought to depose Andrew without a trial and yet admitted that he was “pure and spotless” and in “every way qualified for the Christian ministry.” Asked the young George Pierce, a firebrand of Georgia, “Are they heaping garlands upon the victim before they have bound him for the sacrifice?”⁹

The North, hard put to meet this argument, answered through Leonidas L. Hamline of Ohio who insisted that the question of first importance was, “Has the General Conference constitutional authority to pass this resolution?”¹⁰ The “genius” of the Methodist Church, he argued, was “strict amenability in Church officers, subordinate and superior.” The presiding elder, the itinerant minister, the exhorter and the unordained local preacher, the class leader, all were subject to removal by the bishop, without cause save that they were “unpopular” and ineffective with the people. There was reason for such administrative policy. It promoted religion. It bound the church “in a strong and almost indissoluble unity.” All Methodism knew and understood these words. How often had the preachers defended the administrative system on this very point against assaults from without the denomination and revolt from within. A bishop, Hamline said, was a minister no higher in the orders of the church than any elder, distinguished only by the fact that he had been elected to an administrative office. The general conference was the supreme legislative, judicial, and executive body of the church and had the power to expel a bishop for “improper conduct if it seem necessary.”

The argument dragged on for more than a week. On three days there were afternoon sessions to allow extra time for the debate. Simpson was deeply moved by Olin’s plea for the unity of the church and was impressed with the ability of young Pierce from Georgia; but he was thoroughly convinced by the inexorable logic of Hamline. From that point on the debates were over, so far as he was concerned. The conference had jurisdiction over Andrew; it ought to act for the good of the church, and the bishop, who was an itinerant, need only move to a free state and liberate his slaves. He

did not see any merit in the expediency argument of the southerners: they threatened grave consequences in order to get their way, but he did not believe that they would act to divide the church.¹¹

He found most of the argument tedious. Old men, long in the service of the church, wept over the good old days. They talked endlessly—the conference having suspended the fifteen-minute rule on debate—pronounced encomiums to the past, and recited in detail the exploits of their youth. He squirmed uncomfortably in his place in the hot auditorium, exhausted by the tension, the heat, and the long speeches. A month more, he wrote home, “would destroy my health.”¹²

Only once did he participate briefly in the debate. A northerner who followed Hamline, much impressed by the argument and convinced that division was inevitable, began to discuss the conditions of separation. Simpson immediately called him to order. There need be no division of the church, the resolution before the house had nothing to do with division, he said, and the speaker was out of order in discussing it.¹³

Bishop Soule, in the chair, wryly observed that the speaker was “not more out of order than others had been.”¹⁴

Simpson appealed to the assembly from the decision of the chair. Soule asked him to present his point of order in writing. The debate was suspended while the young man strode down the aisle to write out and present his statement. The bishop with practiced skill then ruled that the point of order, as restated in writing, was such that he must rule favorably upon it. The speaker might resume, but he must confine his argument to expediency.¹⁵

It was rumored that the representatives of the two factions had devised a compromise resolution, milder in form, which would be satisfactory to both parties; but support collapsed before the resolution could be introduced. There was nothing to do but vote on the suspension of Andrew. The conference sat in deep and oppressive silence as the secretary called the roll. The division, as in the Harding case, was sharply sectional. Of the affirmative votes, only one was from the South, and that was cast by a New Yorker temporarily stationed in Texas. Only seventeen northern delegates, all but two of them from border conferences, allied themselves with the South. The vote stood 110 for the resolution to suspend Andrew, 68 opposed.¹⁶

II

Once the northern delegates had taken the decisive step against Bishop Andrew, they were overcome by a spirit of conciliation. Although they declined to take the initiative in dividing the church, a number of them let it be known that they would not oppose such division if the South could not bear the action against Andrew.

Simpson, not at all pleased with such talk, drafted a statement calling for the postponement of action; but before he could introduce his resolution a special committee reported favorably on a plan of separation.¹⁷

Charles Elliott thought division necessary because the church had become too large and unwieldy. L. L. Hamline, who was a member of the special committee, believed the plan was constitutional and fraternal: if the brethren found that they must go, they could go peaceably, and not "as an arm torn out of the body, leaving the point of junction all gory and ghastly."¹⁸ In vain Dr. Thomas E. Bond, editor of the New York *Christian Advocate*, argued that the plan was unconstitutional and warned that it would result in bitter warfare along the border. The delegates adopted the plan overwhelmingly, with only eighteen dissenting votes.¹⁹

The unity was short-lived. The South, in a summary which raked over and exposed the still live coals of the Andrew controversy, entered a long and solemn protest against the majority action against the bishop. The North, on motion of Matthew Simpson, immediately named a committee to reply to the protest. An excited southerner denounced the reply as "an insult to the whole South." Great disaster would result from its publication, and he would "not be surprised at its leading to a civil war, so utterly did it deny the rights and trample upon the feelings of all the slaveholding states."²⁰

Immediately upon adjournment of the general conference, the southern delegates convened in a rump session and called upon their several conferences to send representatives to Louisville, Kentucky, on May 1, 1845, to consider the question of dividing the church.

The northern delegates had not believed that the South would act so precipitately. As Peter Cartwright put it, they had seen the lightning and heard the thunder before; and therefore they had not been unduly alarmed by the threats of the southern delegates. Before

they left New York they had begun to regret their approval of the plan of separation.

As they returned to their homes they found their fellow ministers and the people aggrieved and shocked at the thought of the split in the church. Methodism had weathered many another storm and had come through with colors flying and hull undamaged. There was no institution like it in all Protestantism. Youngest of the major American churches, it had more than a million members in 1844—which was considerably above the combined membership of the Presbyterians, the Congregationalists, and the Episcopalians. Methodism was the religious sensation of the century. Its growth was a source of pride to the members, especially to the preachers. More than 400,000 members lived south of the Mason-Dixon line. To permit them to withdraw was to rend the church in two, to destroy its strength and its glory. The prospect was too grim to endure.

Why, the preachers of Indiana wanted to know, did Simpson and the other delegates favor a plan of separation? Why didn't they postpone action for another four years? Was there still some way of avoiding the catastrophe? ²¹

In this new climate of opinion, the returning delegates found their regrets over the plan of separation quickly ripening to censure of the South. Overlooking the South's argument that the necessity for division existed "even now," they remembered only the assurance that the southern conferences could not act in less than a year or eighteen months. That, thought the North, would allow time for southern tempers to cool. The plan of separation had clearly stated that the general conference approved the withdrawal of the South, if the action against Andrew made division necessary. Why, then, had the southern delegates, without demonstrating necessity, met in New York immediately after the general conference to issue a call for the Louisville convention? To Simpson the answer was clear. The men of the South had acted hastily and not in good faith. Without consulting their people, they had "acted on the premises," and so had violated the spirit and intent of the measure adopted by the general conference. ²²

The ensuing strife between the sections centered on the issue of separation, not of slavery. The North, having no desire to drive Baltimore and the border conferences to the South, appealed to the discipline and tradition of the church. Even if the South should

withdraw, the position of the "Old Church" would remain unchanged. Had it not always denounced the evil of slavery? And yet, had it not left the institution alone when state laws protected it? It was the South, with its acquisition of a slaveholding bishop, that had changed, not the "Old Church."

However, the argument was two-edged, and the church editors used it not only to soothe the border but to placate New England. Proud of the stand the conference had taken against slavery, the editors held up the Andrew case to repudiate the taunts of William Lloyd Garrison and the abolitionists. The people at home who had censured the delegates for the plan of separation quite as heartily praised them for their deposition of Andrew. Even in southern Indiana, where there had been little sympathy with abolitionists, the annual conference in the fall of 1844 voted overwhelming approval to their delegates for deposing Andrew.²³

Simpson, tortured by the thought of the division of his beloved Zion, and quick to blame those whom he believed responsible, moved steadily forward in his antislavery views, and became increasingly perceptive to the antislavery opinions of others. In the spring of 1845, attracted to the Louisville convention of the southern conferences, he traveled leisurely through southwestern Indiana to Cincinnati, and thence down the Ohio to Louisville. Everywhere men were talking about the southern convention and the determination of the South to split the church. Everywhere he found the antislavery feeling "deepening and widening." Even the men who had migrated from Virginia and Kentucky, and who a year before had bitterly condemned the abolitionists, were now speaking up against slavery "in the most decided manner." Destruction of the old church had become associated in men's minds with slavery. Aggrieved by the one, they blamed the other as the cause of the approaching disaster. So, twelve months had produced "a wonderful revolution" in public opinion. He had no doubt that in two or three years the "line of feeling" between the North and the South would be "deep and broad."²⁴

At Louisville, Simpson and several of his Indiana colleagues made their way to the Fourth Street Methodist Episcopal Church, where the convention was held. They found seats in the gallery where they could look down at the delegates, on the main floor. William Winans was there, tough old circuit rider from Mississippi; the fiery

young George Pierce from Georgia and his father, Dr. Lovick Pierce; influential William Capers of South Carolina; ponderous William A. Smith of Virginia; and the judicious Robert Paine of Tennessee, chairman of the general conference committee which had brought in the plan of separation.

The delegates proceeded at once to the business of dividing the church. It was impossible to maintain unity, said Winans, without "the ruin of Southern Methodism." "Agitation" was the watchword of the North, and they had even consecrated religion to their evil purpose. The South could outspoke the North in the general conference, but could not outvote it. The only way to stop the agitation was by separation, and he would favor disunion even if it brought political disunion—"for with me principle outweighs expediency."²⁵

Simpson was most impressed and angered by the outburst of George Pierce: Reconciliation was hopeless and impossible because the North would make no concessions, he said. He charged, not without warrant, that the abolitionists were ignorant of the Bible, and that they appealed not to the Holy Scriptures for "the justice of their cause but to the writings of Jefferson." The northern Methodists had become radical—they had introduced pews, organs, fiddles into their churches; they stood up to pray, they no longer used bread and water in their love feasts, and their exhortations sounded like Fourth of July toasts. In ten years "there would not be a vestige of the peculiarities of Methodism among them."²⁶

While the delegates of the deep South thus railed at the North, they were careful to appease the border, for they had no intention of losing the Kentucky conference. They therefore shouted down the suggestion of a Mississippian that they alter the discipline to protect the institution of slavery. They would stand by the constitution of the "old church" without change. And they would keep the door open for fraternal relations and even for reunion when, as young Pierce said, the North "are convinced of their sins."

When the resolution to form a new church was put 94 delegates voted aye, only 3, all from Kentucky, voted nay.²⁷

Simpson had no doubt that the whole South would go *en masse* to the new church. Division was inevitable, and slavery was the cause. And it would be the cause, ultimately, of "severing the Union as well as the Church." His pessimism deepened with the passage of time. Six months after the convention he saw the South "rushing

towards ruin." The spirit of slavery was "so tyrannical and ungovernable" that it would respect no regulations. He foresaw the rapid deterioration of the relations between the two bodies of Methodism. The South could not be expected to obey the plan of separation. Even worse, he saw slavery so blasting the hopes of political unity that only foreign war or Providence could save the Union. And then the annexation of Texas and probably California, and possibly even Cuba would strengthen and perpetuate slavery. He desired no communion with the southern church that would in any way identify the North with "their views of slavery."²⁸

Only one thing saved him from radicalism. All along the border the jurisdiction of the Methodist Episcopal Church extended into slave territory. The plan of separation provided that the border conferences and societies should choose whether to adhere to the North or the South; but, once the line was drawn, neither branch of the church was to invade the territory of the other. The Baltimore conference, which was still allied with the old church, was wholly in slave territory, and its boundaries and those of the Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and Ohio conferences cut deeply into Maryland and Virginia from the Eastern Shore to Wheeling. Who could best serve Methodism in these border regions? The old church, with its avowed antislavery views, or the new southern church with its increasingly proslavery bias? Simpson had no doubt that his own church ought to maintain its hold on the border. Furthermore, there seemed to be little doubt that the South, made fanatically aggressive by slavery, would, as William Hunter said, violate the plan of separation, and thus open up even more territory to the northern church. But the border societies could not endure any ultraism, and therefore the church ought not to agitate the question. Already Baltimore was worrying lest it be driven out of the church by the antislavery agitation and a slaveholding ministry be forced on it.²⁹

The formation of the southern general conference had not solved the slavery problem for the Methodist Episcopal Church.

XII

"SON OF MAN, PROPHECY"

WHILE President Simpson was thus concerned with the problems of the church, affairs at Indiana Asbury University were in good order. The student body, 177 in 1844, gave promise of exceeding 200 in the fall of 1846. The youngest college in the State, Indiana Asbury stood in enrollment "proudly at the head of all of the Institutions."¹

In 1842 Simpson had appointed John Wheeler, his friend and protégé, and a member of the first graduating class, to the chair of Latin languages and literature; and a year later he had strengthened the faculty by naming Benjamin Tefft, two years younger than himself, professor of Greek and Hebrew. Tefft, reserved and polished in dress and manner, was unrestrained to the point of boastfulness in his admiration of Methodism. He was a graduate of Wesleyan University in Connecticut, the strongest of the Methodist colleges, and had served in New England and New York as pastor and teacher. Wheeler, Tefft, William Larrabee, and Charles Downey—also a graduate of Wesleyan and the tutor in natural sciences—constituted a respectable faculty.²

By the fall of 1845 the board of trustees was planning the establishment of a law school in Indianapolis, and John Wheeler was beginning to think about a department of normal training at Greencastle. Some friends of the university were insisting upon departments of agriculture and medicine. Indiana Asbury was on the way to becoming a real university.

Financial conditions were much improved, too, after the adoption of the new scholarship plan in 1844, and the appointment of Isaac Owen as agent. An unlettered young itinerant of Simpson's age, Owen eagerly sought the assistance of the professors at Indiana Asbury, and even learned to read a little from his Greek New Testa-

ment. As agent for the university he exhibited a boyish enthusiasm and a remarkable ability to raise funds. Reporting to Simpson about his success in the field during the summer of 1846, he begged him to keep his report a secret. He hoped to collect a good deal more before conference, and he wanted to see how the treasurer would look, "counting a thousand or two thousand dollars all at wonce." In two years Owen sold the greater portion of \$84,000 worth of scholarships and raised funds to endow a chair for Simpson and some of his faculty.³

Once in 1845, when the financial pinch was severe, Simpson was tempted to resign. Woodward College, a new institution in Cincinnati, had elected him to its presidency. The advantages of the new school were considerable. Woodward, the officials assured him, was the best endowed and, "in all human judgment," "the most permanent institution of learning in the West." Many times Simpson himself had complained to others that the Methodists were not properly represented in nonsectarian institutions. Woodward officials used his own protest as leverage to move him. He ought to accept the position as an "honor and obligation" to Methodism.⁴ He need not sever his connection with the ministry, for he could at the same time pastor a Methodist chapel in Cincinnati and preside over the destinies of Woodward. There were the further advantages that Cincinnati was not only the cultural and commercial center of the West, but the very heart of western Methodism. The *Western Christian Advocate* and the *Ladies' Repository*, Methodist journals, were published there, along with a considerable number of books and tracts put out by the Western Book Concern of the church.

In Cincinnati on business, Simpson looked into the matter and wrote to John Wheeler at Greencastle suggesting that he quietly give out the news to the rest of the faculty and determine what they would think of his leaving Indiana Asbury.

The reaction of the faculty was immediate and decided. Wheeler answered that they would consider his resignation as "one of the greatest misfortunes that can happen to us an Institution": They knew no man "North, South, East or West that they would be willing to see president"; Larrabee and Tefft would begin immediately to look for other jobs—they had suffered long enough from unpaid salaries, and were unwilling to face the collapse of the endowment plan, which they believed would follow his resignation.⁵

For a month Simpson dallied. Word got out to the students, and they added their protest to that of the faculty but named Tefft as their choice to succeed him. Heartened by the response of students and faculty, Simpson turned down the Woodward offer and went back to Indiana Asbury. However, John Wheeler had observed enough in that month of uncertainty to know that the day was not far distant when both the demands of the church and Simpson's own inclination would impel him into "a wider field of operation."⁶

Simpson had, in fact, never been more popular in Indiana than in the months following the general conference of 1844. Although all the delegates from that state had held together on the critical issues before the conference, and none had taken part in the debates on Andrew, he was the one who had demanded on the conference floor that the majority reply formally to the written protest of the South. Likewise, he had objected in writing to a discussion of the division of the church and had been sustained by the reluctant Bishop Soule. His strong opposition to the tactics of the South since his return home had further enhanced his standing.

Edward R. Ames was his only rival for honors among Methodists. Five years older, Ames was a robust-looking man who stood six feet tall and weighed 200 pounds. His hair was black; his head, large; his cheeks, full and florid; his eyes, small and light blue. He was commanding and yet conciliatory in manner, with the reputation of a diplomat and a politician. The councils of the church listened to him and knew that he was in the inner Democratic circle which advised Governor Whitcomb and Congressman Joe Wright. He had served two years as agent for the Preachers' Aid Society before Simpson came to Indiana, had been secretary of the Indiana annual conference in 1839 and 1840, a delegate to the general conference in 1840, one of three general secretaries of the Missionary Society from 1840 to 1844, and a leading candidate for bishop in 1844.

Simpson soon began to rival Ames's popularity. Both were able preachers, but Simpson was more eloquent and more profound. The 1841 annual conference elected him secretary in the absence of Ames, who had been elected by earlier conferences; and succeeding annual conferences kept him in that office. Both men were delegates to the 1844 general conference, Simpson being head of the delegation, and Ames third on the list. Ames lost a little prestige at the general conference when he was shunted aside in the race for the epis-

copy; and in the sectional strife his fellow Methodists, the majority of whom were Whigs, suspected him as a Democrat of being soft on the question of slavery and the division of the church.

The relations between the two men were for the most part warm and friendly. Ames was a strong supporter of Indiana Asbury and was delighted, when enrollment increased, to see "the tide of popular favor setting toward Greencastle with such strength." As a presiding elder he got behind the endowment and scholarship plans, determined that his district should do its share. He visited the president often, and urged the Simpson family to come to his new home for a month's visit. They loved to talk politics as well as church, and when Polk was elected Ames chided Simpson about the defeat of the Whigs: Hard times would be over, once Polk got into office; until then, he hoped the president would bear with patience the financial disappointments he must experience under the Whig administration. Once, after being urged by Bishop Hamline to go to China as one of two missionaries, he wrote impulsively to Simpson, "I will say explicitly if you will be one of the men I will be the other."

There were also strained relations between them, induced in part by the ardor of their followers, and in part by their unspoken awareness that they were rivals for the favors of Indiana Methodism. In 1846 their differences ignited and burst into flame.

The churchmen of Scotland had issued a call to Evangelical Christians all over the world to meet at Liverpool for a consideration of their joint interests. Early in 1846 friends of Simpson at Greencastle began a movement to name him a delegate to the Liverpool convention. Other Indiana circuits and stations took up the cry and passed resolutions requesting him to go.⁸

After two months of discussion and agitation, Simpson called his trustees and his board of visitors together. In explaining the opportunity not only to represent Methodism but to purchase books and apparatus long needed by the university, he alluded to the offer from Woodward College and his reluctance in turning it down.

With two exceptions the trustees and visitors were unanimous in the recommendation that Simpson attend the convention. The two were Allen Wiley and Ames. Ames, who had also been mentioned as a possible delegate, was cynical about the allusion to Woodward College and intimated that Simpson was trying to produce a demonstration of esteem. Lucien Berry, who was passionately determined

that Simpson should make the trip, felt from Ames's manner that he looked upon the Woodward affair as a ruse. He seemed to be saying of Simpson: "He cannot leave. There is no danger. It is all for effect."⁹

However, the trustees and visitors appointed a committee to raise funds. The committee hastily directed a circular to the Methodists of the state: If each district in the two conferences would raise about forty dollars, the five or six hundred dollars necessary to meet the delegate's expenses would be supplied.¹⁰

Thus assured of support, Simpson began immediately to plan his itinerary and to study the countries he hoped to visit. He would go first to Liverpool for the convention in August and then travel through the Mediterranean to Egypt, Palestine, Greece, and thence up the Danube into central Europe. He would be absent ten months. He wrote to Stephen Olin, president of Wesleyan University and a delegate elect, to ask if he might join him as a traveling companion. Olin had visited Europe and the eastern Mediterranean countries some years before and had written a popular account of his journey.¹¹

The opposition of Ames and Wiley, however, did not cease. Wiley refused to raise funds in his district, and Ames was outspoken in his disapproval. Earlier in the year Ames's support of Professor Tefft for the editorship of the *Ladies' Repository* in Cincinnati had drawn a sharp reproof from Simpson for deliberately weakening the staff of Indiana Asbury. Ames now turned the argument on Simpson. The college could ill afford to get along without any one of its staff members, and Tefft was leaving. How could it also dispense with its president for a full year? Even more important, the success of the endowment plan was dependent upon him. In his absence the people would not contribute. Furthermore, the university was too hard pressed financially to attempt the raising of funds to send a delegate to Europe.¹²

Simpson's close friends Lucien Berry and William Daily were outraged by the conduct and arguments of Ames and Wiley. Berry thought the reasons they assigned for opposing the trip "absolutely unendurable." After all of the sacrifices of personal interests Simpson had made for years together for the university, to be told that the preachers would not continue the collection of funds was "actually insufferable."¹³ Daily was sure that either Ames or Wiley would have

gone quickly enough. So far as he could see, their action was only an expression of their littleness. Afraid that he might be the next victim of the turn of their wheel, he begged Simpson to keep his confidence. He had already suffered at the hands of both, and he thought he had cause to "dread the ire of some."¹⁴

Other friends, however, saw the force of the argument. Simpson announced therefore that he must decline the kind offer of his friends to send him to Liverpool. He was keenly disappointed; but, as Ames shrewdly anticipated, he suffered no loss of prestige.

That summer, after the long exercises of commencement day, Simpson and John L. Smith, one of the college agents, went for a long walk through the fields. Stopping at the edge of the woods, they sat down in the shade of a large tree. Smith was a fiery preacher of the president's own age, self-educated, who had had little sympathy with colleges and seminaries until he fell under the spell of Simpson's discourse on education and straightway became a disciple. There were two giants in Indiana Methodism whom he greatly admired: Matthew Simpson and Edward R. Ames. He thought Ames was on the way to becoming the greatest statesman in the church and could have risen to the top in politics and government; but, of the two, he favored Simpson.

That afternoon, Smith and Simpson indulged in a good deal of "free talk," reviewing the events of commencement and the deliberations of the board of trustees.

In an impish mood, Smith broke a long silence by saying, "The spirit of prophecy has come upon me."

Simpson replied in kind, "Son of man, prophesy."

"Two years hence, you will be a member of the general conference which is to meet in Pittsburgh."

Simpson demurred, expressing doubt that Indiana Methodists generally were well pleased with the general conference delegates of 1844 who had approved the division of the church.

Brushing his objections aside, Smith continued. "In 1852 you will lead the delegation of the Indiana conference; and at that conference from two to four bishops will be elected, and Matthew Simpson will be one of that number."¹⁵

XIII

WAR ON THE BORDER

AS a prophet John L. Smith had read well the crystal ball. In the fall of 1847 the Indiana conference named Matthew Simpson to head its delegation to the Pittsburgh general conference—the only one of the eight men who had represented Indiana in 1844 to be elected again. Revulsion against the plan for dividing the church had swept the northern Methodists. Indiana, determined to send no one to Pittsburgh unless he was “unwavering” in his opposition to the division of the church, rejected even the popular E. R. Ames. Simpson’s friend Lucien Berry was elected, but not William Daily, who like Ames was a Democrat and a temporizer; in addition, he was still regarded by some as an impertinent young upstart. The Indiana pattern prevailed throughout the church. Of the more than 150 delegates sent to Pittsburgh only 30 had voted at New York for the plan of separation.¹

The years between the general conferences had been bitter with conflict. There was misunderstanding over the line of separation. Most of the warfare, however, was at the local level. The membership of many border societies was almost evenly divided between northern and southern sympathizers, and the adherents of one party or the other sometimes seized the property. At Parkersburg, (West) Virginia, a station seventy-five miles within the bounds of the Ohio conference and therefore, according to the northern interpretation, not a border society, the southerners ran the northern preacher out of town and took over the property. Likewise, in Cincinnati, at the very heart of western Methodism, Bishop Joshua Soule of the southern church organized two chapels—one named for himself, the other for Bishop Andrew. On the other hand, a small band of northern sympathizers in St. Louis refused to leave the “old

church," organized their own society, and called upon the North for recognition.

In preparation for the conference Simpson reviewed and discussed these events with Berry, Daily, and other associates. He deplored the state of affairs but saw no easy remedy. He doubted that it would do any good to declare the plan of separation null and void. No declaration could make it null: the work was done for weal or woe. They must look to the future, but how and where to find the remedy he did not know.²

He was determined to propose a compromise. Let the church recognize the *de facto* division, and then in the spirit of Christian brotherhood submit the question of the property to legal arbitrators, each segment of the church agreeing to abide by the recommendation. Daily was enthusiastic about the idea. It ought to pacify all claimants, North and South.³

II

When the general conference convened on May 1 Simpson was ready with a general plan of action. At the opening session he called for a committee on the state of the church, composed of two members from each of the annual conferences, to be charged with consulting "privately on the business of Church difficulties." ⁴ If the jurisdictional conflict could be channeled through a committee, it might prove much less explosive when it reached the floor of the conference.

The committee was quickly authorized. It met on the afternoon of the first day and made George Peck, editor of the *Methodist Quarterly Review*, its chairman and Matthew Simpson its secretary. Peck requested the members to state briefly the attitudes of their respective conferences toward the plan of separation. They were overwhelmingly in favor of repudiating the plan. The westerners had been incensed by the conduct of Bishop Soule. New England and Providence surprised Simpson by their calmness. Where Illinois and Ohio treated every suggestion of compromise with contempt, New England was willing to retain the line where possible. Baltimore was distraught, believing that if the line were given up it would lose the whole slaveholding territory to the southern church. The Philadelphia men said the same.⁵

Having canvassed its members, the committee began a systematic

collection of data. Day by day it received complaints against the plan, and charges of southern aggression. Elliott and others presented petitions from Kentucky, Missouri, Arkansas, and western Virginia, signed by 3,000 persons who had been forced out of the Methodist Episcopal Church against their wishes. The bishops reported innumerable "violations" of the plan—preachers whom the southern bishops had "deliberately" sent across the line. In an effort to winnow out every grievance, the committee threshed over again all the famous cases: the Soule and Andrew chapels in Cincinnati; Parkersburg, Virginia; the plea of the beleaguered antislavery group in St. Louis. It reviewed again the history of the plan of separation; it repeated the charges of the northern press that the southern delegates at New York had not acted in good faith, that they had preached not peace but rebellion, that they had acted without determining any need for division.⁶

Simpson had gone into the committee hearings able to name many grievances against the South; but they assumed no clearly rational pattern. Now as he listened to the reports of grievances and studied the violations of the plan he perceived the great design. He was like a child on a hillside at night, searching the stars for the Big Dipper—finding at first only the pointers, moving from them to the North Star and back, and fixing his eyes at last upon the flickering stars of the bowl and the broken handle until at last the whole cluster took shape and meaning. So, he isolated the more significant facts and noted how they clustered and revolved about secession and slavery. There was the troublesome line, with the southern aggression above it for the obvious purpose of extending the boundaries of the proslavery church (had he not remarked before how aggressive was the spirit of slavery?). There were the two publishing houses, New York and Cincinnati, based upon the legitimate claims of the southern preachers, but desired as well for their value in promoting the proslavery institution. There was the problem of fraternal relations between the two churches, important in establishing legal separation. There was the new and inviting missionary territory on the Pacific coast, an opportunity for the further aggrandizement of the southern church. And there was the matter of local church property: deeds poorly drawn, churches seized, rightful owners driven out or denied any share in the chapels and parsonages to which they had contributed. Viewing these facts, Matthew Simpson felt the spirit

of compromise drain out of him. He was ready and willing not merely to accept the repudiation of the South but to advocate it.⁷

The issues came in quick succession. Dr. Lovick Pierce of Georgia asked to be recognized as a fraternal delegate from the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. Although it was a common practice among Methodist bodies to recognize such delegates the conference refused to receive him and thus, implicitly, to recognize the southern church. It was not "proper," said Matthew Simpson from the floor, "to enter into fraternal relations with the Methodist Episcopal Church, South," when there were "serious questions and difficulties existing between the two bodies." Pierce, denied recognition as a fraternal delegate, refused to attend the conference as a visitor. Assuming the role of a champion, he threw down a challenge: his was the final communication from the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. "She can never renew the offer of fraternal relations between the two great bodies of Wesleyan Methodists in the United States."⁸

Simpson himself took the lead in calling for the organization of a mission conference in California and New Mexico to embrace the territory seized from Mexico. There were smiles and laughter, and even a shout or two of derision, when he introduced the measure; but, dead in earnest, he quickly checked the laughter and brushed away the smiles. He did not offer the resolution in order that it "become a matter of amusement." The territory was large, people were pouring in by thousands, and the Methodist Episcopal Church ought to make some provision to occupy it. "Our people are going there," he said, "and our ministers will soon be on the ground, and it will be in the power of our people to occupy it." George Gary, who had been three years in Oregon, made the matter more explicit. Describing the wonders of the Willamette valley, he warned his brethren that some ministers of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, had recently entered Oregon with a company of three to five thousand emigrants.⁹ The delegates quickly altered the resolution so that the new conference embraced Oregon and California, and passed it without dissent, although some regarded it as premature.

Simpson was also deeply concerned about deeds to property. Men and women along the border, and even in the South, had contributed liberally from their frugal means to the erection of a chapel for worship or a parsonage for the minister, only to see them seized by the proslavery element, which in some instances was in the minor-

ity. The crux of the problem was in defective titles, deeds made out often to local trustees, rather than to the church, or not made out at all. He proposed, therefore, that responsible officials of the church ascertain the provisions of the various states and have deeds drawn that should then be printed in quantity by the book concern and distributed to presiding elders and through them to the local churches. His resolution, laid over for later action,¹⁰ was never acted upon. However, he did not forget it. The sense of injustice, the grievance over property stolen, he believed, from the members of the old church, pricked and irritated him like a festering thorn. Some day he would manage to pluck it out.

Altogether, Simpson made a deep impression on the conference. He rarely engaged in debate or parliamentary tactics, but when he took the floor he spoke impressively and pertinently on key questions. It was known that he was chairman of the subcommittee charged with phrasing the committee's recommendation on the plan of separation. Easterners, who had scarcely noticed him in 1844, now not only recognized him as a leader but discovered that he was a "very popular preacher in the west."¹¹ His Indiana friend William Daily, in Baltimore to attend the Democratic National Convention, heard that he was "the leading spirit of the General Conference." The people there, Daily wrote, approved of his plan of arbitration of the book concern claim (which they undoubtedly heard of, greatly embellished, from Daily himself), and if he could carry the plan through he would "immortalize" his name.¹² W. C. Larrabee, in Indiana, heard that he was to be elected bishop. "Is it true?" he asked.¹³

Abel Stevens, the young editor of *Zion's Herald* at Boston, was especially attracted to Simpson. He thought his depressed and contracted forehead "very unhandsomely obscured by shaggy locks." He observed that Simpson was tall and stooped, that his eyes were small and keen, and that his cheekbones were prominent with "a sort of Indian breadth" which gave a triangular outline to his face. And yet the Indianan was already known as a great preacher marked by strength of thought. Moreover, he was the author of conference resolutions on the plan of separation. Certainly this man's appearance was "altogether 'dumbfumbling.'"¹⁴

The resolutions on the plan of separation constituted the most important business of the conference. The temper of the delegates was for repudiation; but simple repudiation would fix the blame

for separation on the North and not on the South. Simpson saw the point. A repudiation that fixed the blame on the South would at least strengthen his church's claim to certain properties and to southern members who sympathized with the North—in short, would assert the church's right to extend its boundaries.

The portion of the report which declared the plan of separation null and void had been amended several times in the committee on the state of the church, and therefore came to the conference floor poorly written and ambiguous. "Prolix and confused," Norval Wilson of Baltimore said of it.¹⁵ The delegates agreed, and proceeded to offer a number of substitutes, one of which was a simple statement of nullification of the plan. Simpson, alarmed at the prospect that his carefully worked-out statement of reasons for declaring the plan null and void would be tabled, with loss of the advantage of fixing culpability on the South, offered another substitute. For support he called on Daniel Curry, a preacher of his own age from the New York conference. Curry had already spoken in favor of the third resolution on the right of trial. Tall, with a rugged form and somber face, he had a square jaw and thin firm lips well suited to the utterance of caustic phrases and positive opinions.¹⁶

Simpson's substitute declared that the plan of separation was intended to meet a necessity which might arise, that it was dependent upon a three-fourths vote of the annual conferences, and upon the observance of a boundary line; that the South had not waited for the necessity to be demonstrated but had acted "in the premises"; that the annual conferences had refused to concur as required; and, finally, that the South had violated the boundary line. Therefore the Methodist Episcopal Church had no obligation to observe the plan, and it was null and void.¹⁷

He argued the merits of his resolution and moved to lay the simple null-and-void declaration on the table. The conference concurred, 83 to 36, approved the previous question, and proceeded at once to adopt, seriatim, the Simpson-Curry resolution.¹⁸ The most important action of the conference was then concluded. To the Church, South, the Simpson resolutions were a declaration of war; to Simpson and the Methodist Episcopal Church they constituted a philosophy of action, a platform for the long struggle with the southern body which lay ahead.

On the book concern Simpson was much more conciliatory. He thought that the property should be divided, but that the conference should act through its agents. He and Curry, once more acting together, moved to authorize the agents of the church to arbitrate, if legal counsel advised them that they had the constitutional authority to do so. If not, the bishops were to refer the issue to the annual conferences.

But even in this compromise measure the rights of the South, as stated in the resolution, were placed on moral and not on legal grounds. The South perceived the point and felt that it was being patronized—perhaps, even worse, that the entire action was an empty gesture “to propitiate common scorn and public indignation,” a delaying tactic to make it possible for the North to steal the property of the South by indirection.¹⁹ Bishop Soule immediately called a meeting at Louisville of the southern bishops and commissioners to determine a course of action.²⁰

III

Simpson's active leadership in the conference, his youthfulness, his modesty, and his homely and friendly manner, together with the strong support he could expect from the Indiana and Pittsburgh conferences, made him a likely candidate for one of the church appointments. Of these there were but few: two book agents—one stationed at New York, the other at Cincinnati—and two assistant agents; a missionary secretary; editors of a half-dozen papers, two quarterly reviews, and the Sunday-school and tract publications.

A caucus of the western delegates on May 21 put Simpson down as assistant editor of the New York *Christian Advocate and Journal*, the church's leading weekly paper.²¹ William Daily at the Democratic convention in Baltimore heard the rumor that he was wanted for the editorship of the New York journal, and thought that the *Western Christian Advocate* at Cincinnati would be much better.²²

Simpson had gone to the conference not unaware of the possibility that he would be urged to take some other position. His old friend William Hunter had already begged him to return to Pittsburgh to edit the *Advocate*, and he was ready to welcome some sort of change. As John Wheeler had seen, he was troubled in spirit and

determined to leave Indiana Asbury. The business of the English conference still rankled in his breast, with Ames's insinuation that he could not leave, that his bringing of the invitation to Woodward had been a ruse, a play for favorable response from the people.²³ He had declined somewhat reluctantly to consider the presidency of Dickinson College.²⁴ But while he desired to go he hesitated to take any initiative. As in his younger days, the great decisions of his life must rest upon Providence and not upon ambition. He could admit no personal consideration, save one—health. In an age when good health was so transient a possession, that one consideration would suffice, both for himself and for his friends.

In the summer before, he had suffered a severe attack of typhoid fever, following chills and fever. His Indiana doctor told him plainly that he was working too hard, and that he must change his manner of living. At Pittsburgh he again consulted physicians, old friends, who were even more emphatic. It would be good, they said, for him to return to the Pittsburgh area where he had had good health. Thus advised, he toyed with the idea of resigning from Indiana Asbury and of returning to the itinerancy in the Pittsburgh conference.²⁵

Now he kept his own counsel until the results of the caucus of the western delegates, proposing him as assistant editor at New York, forced the issue. His Indiana brethren gathered eagerly, wanting to know what he would do. Recounting to them the advice of his physicians, he admitted that if Providence gave him the position he would feel obliged to accept it. Only to John L. Smith and one or two other close friends did he explain, afterward, that there were other reasons.²⁶ The Indiana delegation would have none of his going East. He must remain in the West. If he must leave Asbury they would make him editor of the *Western Christian Advocate*.

For Simpson that introduced another problem—his old friend and guardian angel, Charles Elliott, was editor of the Cincinnati paper and had been renominated at the western caucus. He demurred at the suggestion of displacing the older man. He would be pleased, he said, to be Dr. Elliott's assistant. It was only a polite gesture, for the conference had refused to allow an assistant editor at either New York or Cincinnati.

The ways of Providence and of Methodism were inexorable. Simpson was nominated by an Indiana colleague and elected on the

first ballot with 80 votes to his friend's 57. Elliott was then placed in competition with William Hunter, the other lad whom he had helped to bring up at Pittsburgh, for the editorship of the Pittsburgh *Christian Advocate*, and again he lost, 70 to 66. Remorseful, Simpson begged the old man to remain at Cincinnati on full salary until the end of the summer term at Asbury.²⁷