

Contents

PART ONE: The Embarkation (1788-1812)

<i>Author's Note</i>	vii
<i>Foreword</i>	ix
i The Frame (1788)	3
ii Clouds (1789-1792)	9
iii Wenham (1792-1799)	16
iv Braintree, Plymouth and Brown (1800-1807)	25
v Revolt (New York: 1807-1808)	36
vi The Dedication (Andover: 1808)	46
vii <i>Embassy to Ava</i> —The Decision (1809)	51
viii The Brethren; the American Board (1810)	58
ix Nancy (<i>Ann Hasseltine</i> : 1810)	72
x A Wild, Romantic Undertaking (1810)	81
xi France and England (1811)	89
xii The Formal and Solemn Reprimand (1811)	96
xiii The Ordination (1812)	103
xiv The Embarkation (1812)	115

PART TWO: The Dangerous Voyage (1812-1826)

i India (1812)	125
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ii Exile (1812)	143
iii Rangoon (1813)	157
iv Burma (1813-1814)	170
v Little Roger (1814-1816)	179
vi Time Must Bring a Harvest (1816-1817)	194
vii Alarms and Excursions (1817-1818)	202
viii The First Convert (1818-1819)	215
ix Let Us Go to the Golden Feet (1819)	229
x Ava—and Failure (1819)	242
xi Crisis (1819-1820)	256
xii Return to the Golden Feet (1820-1822)	269
xiii Royal Reception (1823)	278
xiv The New Testament; Nancy Returns (1823)	284
xv Foreigners Must Be Spies (1823-1824)	291
xvi Imprisonment (1824)	302
xvii Death Prison Days (1824)	314
xviii Prison Life; Little Maria (1824-1825)	324
xix Take Care of Yourself (1825)	332
xx Oung-pen-la (1825)	340
xxi Release and Triumph (1825-1826)	353
xxii The Black-sealed Letter (1826)	365

PART THREE: To the Golden Shore (1826-1850)

i The Shadows Fall (1826-1827)	375
ii The Hermitage; Give Us a Writing (1828-1831)	384
iii The Burmese Bible; Sarah (1831-1834)	400
iv Quiet Years; the Family (1834-1839)	415
v Let the Will of God Be Done (1840-1845)	428

CONTENTS

	xiii
vi America (1845)	442
vii Fanny Forester (1845-1846)	452
viii When We Shall All Shine Together (<i>Moulmein; Rangoon: 1846-1847</i>)	466
ix Bat Castle (<i>Rangoon: 1847</i>)	477
x Sunset; the Dictionary (<i>Moulmein: 1847-1849</i>)	490
xi To the Golden Shore (1850)	495
xii Afterwards	506
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	507
<i>Concerning the Sources</i>	509
<i>Index</i>	515

CHAPTER I

The Frame

[1788]

IT must have been love for Abigail Brown that decided the Reverend Adoniram Judson, Senior, to become a candidate for the pastorate of the First Church in Malden. Hardly anything else could explain it.

True, to anyone but a Congregational minister — particularly to one of Mr. Judson's character — Malden would have seemed as pleasant a town to live in as any in Massachusetts. The nearly two hundred families who farmed the fertile slopes below its low, verdant hills almost all lived in solid comfort. The total population of about a thousand was ample to support a church and minister in appropriate if not lavish style. In size and prosperity it compared favorably with such communities as Concord and Lexington and it had a real advantage in location, for it was scarcely five miles north of Boston, that flourishing center of culture and wealth which was now reputed to have achieved the fabulous population of some twenty thousand. Of course, to reach Boston from Malden, one had to ferry across two rivers, the Mystic and the Charles; but plans were already in the making for bridging both.

To a minister minded to matrimony, however, Malden's greatest attraction would have been its parsonage, which was a large, square, two-story house with a pitched roof, and with an ell at the rear — built in the old style of the early 1700's and having two huge chimneys, one on each side of the hall, which divided the house from front to back.

To be sure, the parsonage was more than sixty years old that summer of 1786 when Mr. Judson began to imagine his children playing about its doorstep; but its construction was so solid and honest that it showed hardly any signs of deterioration. During the

years huge elms and evergreens had grown up to shade the broad lawns which sloped gently to the rough stone wall by the side of the road. Across the road stood the church, a hundred yards or so away. Not far from the church a spring of pure water bubbled out of the ground at the foot of Bell Rock, where in generations past the town bell had hung suspended from a tripod of huge timbers. Wells might run dry, but the spring had never been known to fail.

This was what Mr. Judson saw every Sunday that summer when he preached as a candidate for the pastorate of the church. Seeing it, he wanted more and more to occupy its study permanently, to live in it with Abigail Brown, to have his children born in it and grow up in it; perhaps, even, like the beloved divine for whom it was erected, to die in it.

His scruples against accepting calls that were less than unanimous faded and finally vanished altogether.

He was thirty-six years old, this Adoniram Judson, Senior, the father of our subject; he was a medium-sized, stocky man. He had preached in many pulpits since graduating from Yale in fateful 1776. But never yet had he accepted a call from a congregation. The First Congregational Church of Scituate, some ten miles south of Boston and nearly three times the size of Malden, had called him in 1784. He had declined. Hardwick, farther west in Worcester County and almost twice the size of Malden, had called him twice, the second time in the spring of 1785. He had declined. Wrentham, some thirty miles southwest of Boston and larger than Malden, had called him, and this call too he had declined.

All these calls he declined because they were not unanimous. For Mr. Judson wanted not merely a church, but one in which every member subscribed to his views. Since the Revolution, such churches had become increasingly hard to find. The ferment that led to a rejection of the divine right of kings and to eventual independence from England had led to a questioning of the old Puritan Calvinist theology. In worldly Boston there were prosperous Unitarian churches, amply supported by the rich and powerful, teaching a creed that seemed to him scarcely better than infidelism; and in nearby Cambridge the Congregationalism taught at Harvard had undergone a sad watering-down. Even in the outlying rural villages, the Hardwicks, Wrenthams, and Maldens, a growing number of

church members were moving toward the conclusion that God had created the world for the happiness of men as much as for His own glorification, and that the damnation of sinners was not part of His original plan.

To Mr. Judson, once a pupil of the noted Joseph Bellamy and an exponent of the views of Samuel Hopkins — both doctrinal heirs of Jonathan Edwards — such assertions were rank heresy, defying logic and Scripture alike.

But he declined to engage in controversy. He preferred not to be pastor of a church in which it was necessary.

That is, not until he became a candidate for the pulpit of Malden. Yet Malden was divided by far worse disagreements than the churches whose calls he had declined. Its First Church suffered from not *one* dispute, but *two*.

One, of course, was the old matter of creed. To a substantial minority (consisting mainly of the more prosperous and substantial citizens) Mr. Judson's old-line Congregationalism was an affront and an abomination. They had listened to him nearly all that summer of 1786 with growing disapprobation. But to their dismay, when the congregation met on Friday the seventh of July to decide the candidate's fate, a majority voted to extend him a call. Mr. Judson preached the undefiled faith of their forefathers. Moreover, the church needed a minister badly, and Mr. Judson seemed as good as any under the peculiar circumstances existing. The minority argued vociferously, but to no avail. Even so, the last diehards went down fighting. On the church record for that day still stands the sentence: *Capt John Dexter desired that his Protest Might be entered against Settling a Minister of the Bode Hopkintonian Principels.*

But there was a second, even more serious, matter dividing the First Church; and this one had been making trouble for generations beyond memory. It concerned the location of the church, which had been determined long ago when the first settlers from Charlestown crossed the Mystic River to found Malden on the northern side. Those who had remained closest to the river always felt that the church had been built altogether too far north for convenience or even common sense. The issue had smoldered quietly during the half century from 1721 to 1767, when the pulpit had been filled by

the beloved Joseph Emerson — he for whom the capacious parsonage had been erected in 1724. Beloved as he was, he had powers to inspire awe which quelled the merest murmur of disunion. As his son wrote of him, he was "a Boanerges, a son of thunder, to the workers of iniquity; a Barnabas, a son of consolation, to the mourners in Zion." When, white of hair and rich in redeeming grace, he was gathered to his reward, the congregation searched three years before it found a suitable successor in the brilliant Peter Thacher, who had been ordained at a precocious eighteen and called "Young Elijah" by no less than the great evangelist Whitefield. Thacher gave universal satisfaction, but times and tempers had changed. The dissidents who wanted their own church in the South Parish began to raise their voices.

In 1785, his renown having spread to Boston, Thacher received a call from the influential Brattle Street Church. He accepted, probably thinking himself well out of Malden, for presently the South Parishers by the Mystic withdrew and set up their own church. Now Malden had two weak churches where had flourished a single strong one under Emerson. At this point the First Church called the Reverend David Avery. He declined, with motives which are understandable.

This, then, was the situation when the senior Mr. Judson became a candidate for the vacant pulpit of the First Church. He knew, that summer of 1786, that a substantial minority disapproved heartily of his doctrines. He knew they were convinced he was not the man to bring the two enfeebled churches together. He could not have helped knowing — for Captain Dexter spread it on the records that Mr. Judson's installation as minister would prove *an Effectual Barrier in Preventing the mutually wished for Union of the Two Parishes in this town both of which have severely felt their Separation, and this Remaining will probably terminate in the Ruin of Both.*

What Mr. Judson thought, it is hard to say. To those who knew him his personality was one with his creed. Both were stoical, forbidding, and austere. His judgments were scrupulously fair; but he had great determination — obstinacy, his enemies would have called it. Probably, thinking of that comfortable parsonage — and Abigail