

## IX

HENRY WARD BEECHER AND PLYM-  
OUTH CHURCH.

ORIGIN OF THE CHURCH. — PLYMOUTH CHURCH ON SUNDAY MORNING. — TEN-MINUTE RULE. — MR. BEECHER IN THE PULPIT. — PECULIARITIES OF THE CHURCH. — HOW MR. BEECHER MANAGES IT. — THE INFLUENCE OF PLYMOUTH CHURCH. — MR. BEECHER IN THE LECTURE-ROOM. — HIS CONVERSION. — PERSONAL. — AS A PASTOR.

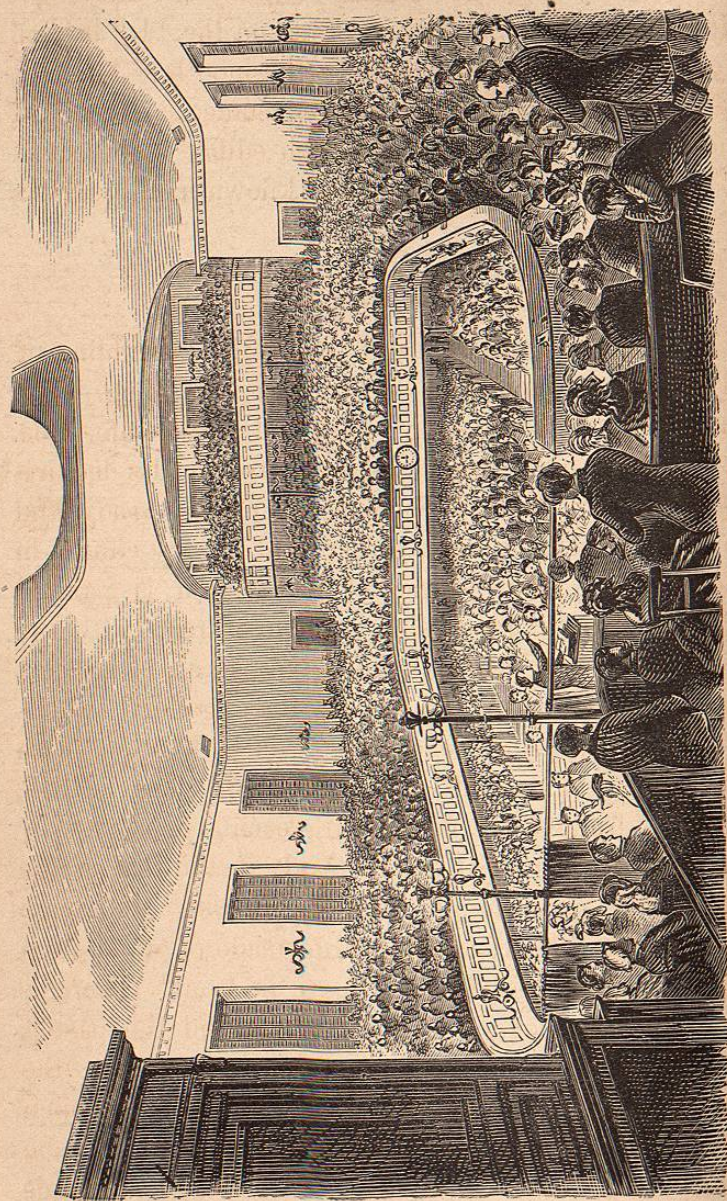
## ORIGIN OF THE CHURCH.

On Saturday evening, May 8, 1847, a few gentlemen met in a parlor in Brooklyn. Their purpose was to form a new Congregational Church. They adopted this resolution: "That religious services should be commenced, by divine permission, on Sunday, the 16th day of May." Dr. S. H. Cox, then in his glory, had outgrown the small brick church on Cranberry Street. His society had just completed a stone edifice on Henry Street. Mr. John T. Howard, still a leading member in Plymouth Church, obtained the refusal of the old house in which the first service of the church was held. Mr. Beecher was pastor of a church in Indianapolis. He was invited to preach at the opening of the church, which he did, morning and evening, to audiences which crowded every part of the building. The new enterprise, under the name of "Plymouth

Church," was organized on the 12th day of June, 1847. Mr. Beecher was publicly installed on the 11th day of November of the same year. In the month of January, 1849, the house of worship was consumed by fire. On the same site the present church edifice was erected. It has a metropolitan fame, and is known in all quarters of the globe.

PLYMOUTH CHURCH ON SUNDAY MORNING.

It is an exhilarating sight to see the assembling of Plymouth congregation on Sunday morning. The church is very large, very plain, and very comfortable. It will seat over two thousand persons. Its lecture-room, parlors, Sunday-school room, pastor's study, and committee-rooms, cannot be excelled by any church in the country. The interior of the church is painted white, with a tinge of pink. This contrasts with the red carpets and cushions, and gives an air of comfort and elegance to the house. A deep gallery sweeps round the entire audience-room, which is capped with red velvet. The seats rise in amphitheatre fashion, from the front to the wall, giving each a good view of the pulpit. The great organ stands in the rear of the pulpit. A platform is reared opposite the main entrance, on which stands a table made of wood from the garden of Gethsemane, open in front. There is no cushion or covering to the table, and the pastor, in his emphatic moments, raps his knuckles on the hard board, that all may hear. Everything is open on and around the pulpit, so that the pastor can be seen from his boots to his hair. A single chair stands on the platform, indicating that the pastor needs no assistance, and wants no associate. A crowd



INSIDE PLYMOUTH CHURCH.

always hangs around the church on Sunday morning. More people wish to attend service than can be accommodated. Strangers come early, fill the vestibule, and stretch out into the street. Policemen keep them in order, and ushers guard the door. Every seat in the house is let, with the chairs and stools in aisles and recess. The ushers who seat the congregation are members. Their services are voluntary. Some of them have been in attendance for years. They do their duty with great consideration, tact and efficiency. All strangers of note who are in New York visit Plymouth Church. Members come from New York, Harlem, Hoboken, and from all the region round about Brooklyn. There is but one Plymouth Church on the continent. As the hour of worship draws near, long processions of persons can be seen coming from all directions. The cars are crowded, the ferry-boats, known as "Beecher boats," are loaded down, and all unite to swell the crowd in front of the house.

#### TEN-MINUTE RULE.

No persons are allowed to enter the church, except pew-holders, till ten minutes before the hour of service. The small upper gallery, which is free, is filled at once. The crowd double-line the door, waiting for the moment of admission. As soon as the bell begins to toll, all seat-holders who are not in their pews lose their chance. The public are admitted, and they come in with a rush. The house becomes one dense mass of human beings. No aisles can be seen. The ten inner doors of the church are crowded. Ladies and gentlemen sit on the stairs and fill the vestibule. All the

spaces in the church are filled, and standing-room thankfully received. The services are long, seldom less than two hours. But the crowd scarcely move till the benediction is pronounced. The organ, the largest in any church in the land, touched by a master hand, with a large, well-trained choir, leads the congregation, which rises and joins in the song, and sends up a volume of melody seldom in power and sweetness equalled this side of heaven. A basket of choice flowers stands on the pulpit. A member of the congregation has for many years furnished this superb floral decoration. In the summer he gathers the flowers from his own garden. In the winter he leaves a standing order with the most celebrated florist of Brooklyn, who executes it as regularly as the Sabbath dawns.

#### MR. BEECHER IN THE PULPIT.

In the rear of the platform is a small door, through which the pastor usually enters. At the exact time the door slides, the chair is pushed suddenly one side, and the pastor, with an elastic bound, comes on to the platform, hat in hand, which he usually throws on the floor. He takes a smell at the vase of flowers, gives a sharp, sweeping glance over the vast auditory, and seats himself in his chair. The congregation has a fresh, wide-awake appearance. There is always an excitement attending a crowd. Every portion of the service interests and holds the assembly with an irresistible power. A great portion of the audience are young. They crowd the church, fill the choir, compose the many Bible classes in the Sunday school, and furnish the large corps of teachers. In the pulpit, Mr. Beecher

seems about fifty years of age. He is short of stature, stocky, but compactly built. His countenance is florid and youthful. He dresses in good taste, without display. A black frock coat, pants and vest, collar of the Byron order, turned over a black cravat, complete his costume. His manners are gentle as a woman's, his spirit tender as a child's, his smile is winning. In the pulpit his manner is reverent and impressive. His voice is not smooth, but it is clear, and fills the largest house. He is very impressive in prayer. His words are fit and beautiful. He puts himself in sympathy with his audience, and leads them, as it were, to the throne of grace. His reading of the Word of God would serve as a model. He rises from his chair, touches the Bible as it lies on his desk as if it were a sacred thing, reads with solemnity, taste, and clear enunciation the passage selected, with a heartiness and artlessness that attracts and holds the attention. In all his public services there is an entire freedom from irreverence, vulgarity, or cant. In the heat of his discourse he appears like a man engaged in a great contest. He is on fire. His face glows, his cheeks burn, his eyes flash. He stands erect. His antagonist is before him. He measures him. He strikes squarely and boldly. The contest waxes hotter. The preacher and the audience are in sympathy. He thunders out his utterances, and they ring round the church, strike the audience on the sidewalk, and arrest the passers by. The sweat stands on his forehead. He stamps with his foot. He thumps the hard desk with his knuckles. He walks rapidly to the front of the platform as if he would walk off. He chases his antagonist

from one side of the platform to another. When he has floored him, he pauses, wipes the sweat from his forehead, lowers his voice, and in his colloquial tones commences again. He holds his audience completely under his control. A broad smile, like a flash of sunlight, glows on the face. A laugh like the winds of autumn among the dry leaves, shakes the vast auditory. Tears fill every eye. The preacher is at times colloquial, dogmatic, vehement, boisterous, at all times impressive.

#### HIS SERMONS.

They are after his own order. He is his own model. No man can tell what the sermon is to be from the text. He has his own modes of illustrating truths. He finds subjects in texts where few men would think of looking for them. He preaches much on the love of Christ, the need of regeneration, and of judgment to come. He regards a Christian as a fully-developed man, and he preaches to him as a creature that has civil, domestic, and social duties, who has a body, intellect, and soul to be cared for. What are called *Beecherisms* are isolated sayings picked out from their connection, which give no more idea of Mr. Beecher's preaching than the eye of Venus on a platter would of its appearance in its proper place, or the head of John the Baptist on a charger as it would have appeared on the shoulders of that memorable man. His utterances that startle, given in his bold, energetic, and enthusiastic manner, enforce some doctrine or fasten some great practical truth.

One of his most impressive methods is the use he makes of the Word of God in his sermons. In the

height of an impassioned appeal he will pause, and in a low, tender tone, say, "Let us hear what the Savior says." Taking up a small Testament that lies by his side, he will read the passage referred to. On it he will make a few crisp, pertinent comments. His elocution is peculiar, and he reads with good taste. The idea that Jesus is speaking to them pervades the assembly. No one doubts but that the preacher believes he is reading the words of Jesus. His low, earnest tones carry home the Word. He concludes. A long, pent-up sigh goes forth, indicating how deep the interest of the audience was in the Scripture read.

He has great dramatic power. It is so clearly natural, unstudied, and unavoidable, that whether it sends a smile through the audience, or opens the fountains of the soul from whence tears flow forth, it is equally impressive. He imitates the manner and tone of a drunken man before a judge, a blacksmith at his forge, or an artisan clinching rivets inside of a steam-boiler. He will imitate a backwoodsman whacking away at a big tree. He will show how an expert fisherman hauls in a huge salmon with dexterous skill. He has a peculiar shrug of the shoulders. If he speaks of hypocrites, he will draw his face down to such a length that it is irresistible. He has wit, humor, and illustration, which keep his audience wide awake. His figures, fresh and lively, are taken from daily life, from his rural home, his journeys, cold nights on a steam-boat, or from the marts of trade. He knows human nature completely. The sword of the Spirit in his hands is the discerner of the thoughts and intents of

the heart. His figures are fresh, vivid, and varied. He keeps abreast of affairs in the nation, in social life, in the church, and in the world. His style of labor would ruin most men. He constructs his morning sermon on Sunday morning. He goes from his study to his pulpit with the performance hot from his brain. He sleeps at noon, composes his evening discourse after his nap, and, glowing with thought and excitement, he preaches his sermon. The sparkle and lightning-like power of some parts of his sermon come from this practice. He gives this reason for it: "Some men like their bread cold, some like it hot. I like mine hot."

#### PECULIARITIES OF THE CHURCH.

Mr. Beecher's tact is displayed in his management of the large church over which he is pastor. It has a membership of nearly two thousand. It boasts the largest congregation, pays the largest salary to minister, organist, and sexton, has the largest church organ, and one of the largest Sunday schools, in the land. Most of the Plymouth Church are young, or in the prime of life. It has all grades of men in opinion and faith, — Orthodox and Latitudinarians, Conservatives and Radicals, men of strict views and liberals, men steady as a Pennsylvania cart-horse, men unmanageable as Job's wild asses' colts. The freedom of speech is allowed to all. Some men think they can convert the world and reform society in a few weeks. The pastor encourages them to go ahead. If opposed, such parties, like compressed steam, would blow out the pulpit end of Plymouth Church. As it is, they soon tire out, and settle down into staid and quiet church members. For