

ONE

## DRUDGERY DIVINE



Harriet Beecher Stowe once suggested that a special place in heaven be reserved for certain women she called “domestic saints.” Her own aunt Esther was a good example—“and her name shall be recorded as Saint Esther”—a spinster who cheerfully gave her life to caring for children, nursing the sick, and silently helping out wherever she saw need. Here was a calling worthy of canonization, wrote Mrs. Stowe: “to be truly noble and heroic in the insipid details of every-day life.”

This tribute first appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1864, a time when home life was considered to be our point of closest contact with heaven. Indeed, the boundary between those two pleasant realms was sometimes indistinct—one best-selling novelist of the day explicitly furnished her heaven with pianos, and provided the

angels with gingerbread. Motherhood, of course, best personified the mingling of home and heaven, for a mother was a saint by definition. But while maternity never lost its eminence, during the next few decades an increasing amount of public attention was turned to the actual work involved in home life. Mrs. Stowe's admiration for the righteous doing of "insipid" tasks was one of the earliest signs of what became a national sentiment and finally a mission. "A servant by this clause/Makes drudgery divine/Who sweeps a floor as for thy laws/Makes that and the action fine," ran a familiar hymn; it was quoted often, in domestic-science classrooms, as a reminder of the divine justification for cooking and cleaning.

The notion of women as emblems of divinity, like the notion of women as emblems of sin, had existed for centuries as a source of comfortable reassurance at least to men. But with the dawn of the industrial age, a volatile economic order gave the old perspective new relevance. Ever since the early 1880s, when industrialization was beginning to transform the country, the question of woman's place in the changing economic and moral scheme of things had been energetically pursued by churchmen, novelists, educators, and popular theoreticians. Women had always been housekeepers and that calling remained their first duty, but housekeeping in the eighteenth century was still an occupation located close to the heart of the economy. Before the effects of technology reached them, women produced nearly everything their families consumed; and these were sizable families that might include visiting relatives and hired help as well as parents and children. The wife, with her daughters and the other women of the house, took charge of spinning, weaving and sewing, making the family's clothing, linens, and quilts. She gardened and perhaps did some back-yard butchering, made soap and candles, preserved the fruits and vegetables, salted and pickled the meat, churned butter, and baked enormous quantities of bread, pie, and cake. She was responsible for daily housecleaning, weekly laundering and ironing, and major spring and fall cleaning; she was teacher, nurse, doctor, and midwife.

Beginning with the rapid development of textile mills in the early nineteenth century, however, much of the producing and

manufacturing work of the household gradually moved outside it. Although technology had little effect on the lives of rural and frontier women until late in the century, by the Civil War period women in the expanding cities and towns were able to buy not only cloth but butter, milk, meat, flour, and myriad household necessities. Schools and hospitals took on the responsibility for teaching children and caring for the seriously sick; and families shrank as the older children and hired help left the household to find work in shops and industries. Even with the resources of a city at hand, however, there was still a great deal of work to do at home. The wife continued to sew and mend, to put three meals a day on the table, and to clean house; while laundry and ironing dominated two or three days of every week. But with the exception of child-rearing, most of the work a woman did consisted of day-to-day maintenance: feeding and cleaning and mending and feeding and cleaning. Her tasks were fewer but they were distinctly monotonous and in a tangible sense unproductive.

The very concept of “work,” always a defining feature of man’s world, slipped away from woman’s, for in the industrial world the value of “work” was measured in cash, while women toiled outside that system. The tasks that women did, moreover, were accomplished very differently from the way industrial work was carried out. The principles of organization and precise scheduling that characterized business and manufacturing were missing from household affairs, which bumped along according to such unpredictable factors as children’s tempers and the quality of a batch of yeast. Domestic life was more easily understood as an extension of woman’s existence, one of her natural adornments. The best house-keeping, after all, was invisible, offering a smooth surface of cleanliness and harmony that covered up any trace of flurry, mishap, or sweat.

As woman’s traditional responsibilities became less and less relevant to a burgeoning industrial economy, the sentimental value of home expanded proportionately. Moralists, theologians, and popular writers produced reams of literature aimed at investing domesticity with the spiritual sweetness of heaven itself. According to

these authorities, a woman's most impressive duty was to make her home a heaven in miniature, herself the angel ready at the end of each day to receive and revive the weary worker. This interpretation of her role, while it may not have substituted perfectly for household productivity, did offer a well-defined spiritual challenge to the housekeeper. It was especially pertinent in middle- and upper-class families, where husbands left home each day to dwell in the frankly godless world of commerce and industry—even to profit from it. When they returned home each evening, the most horrifying conditions of factory life and wage-slavery could be gently washed away, all greed absolved, and Christian values brought to the forefront once more, thanks to the domestic angel who spent her day polishing those values into brilliance.

The woman at home came to personify salvation on a daily basis, for the benefit of a society that was still trying to fashion a link between the biblical virtues and worldly success, despite unpleasant evidence to the contrary. Splendid or humble, the domestic hearth became the most grandiose, the most important, the most influential place on earth during this era, because only an image of that immensity could effectively counterbalance the real power of industrialism. Toward the end of the century, this counterbalance would be expressed geographically with the development of suburbs, in which women would pass their days in a world that never met man's world except via public transportation. Around that time, too, the household would come to be recognized as a center of consumption, and the wife as an angel with purchasing power. But the commercialization of home life set into motion at these turning points owed its overwhelming efficiency to the vast amount of moral groundwork performed back in the years before the Civil War. The imagery of Christian sentimentality that blanketed American domestic life in the first decades of the century lent extraordinary new dimensions to the domestic sphere. Popular literature put heaven so close at hand that there were frequent exchanges between the two realms; and in the widely read poetry of that era, dead children would peep down through the clouds to smile at their parents, or God would stop to talk with the woman

sweeping the floor of the church. Such easy contact between here and the hereafter, at least at the imaginative level, injected the metaphors of domestic happiness with a vigor they retain even today, especially in the hands of advertisers and politicians.

Women produced copious sentimental literature in these years, not only because they believed the rhetoric, but because this was a professional realm in which they could flourish. Some wrote fiction, some wrote tracts, some wrote hymns, and some edited florid periodicals for ladies—all of which contributed to the establishment of a fairly rigid female culture for nineteenth-century women. By the turn of the century their opulent writing style and dogged moralism were becoming out of date, but the concerns that drove these women to write and sermonize had been taken up by the domestic scientists. As moralists in strictly modern guise, these successors found the link between home and heaven to have been forged by a perfect distribution of proteins, carbohydrates, and fats—they marveled at a divine beneficence that could make the obscure lentil such a resplendent protein source. By maintaining the religious fervor of an earlier generation they were able to put their scientific interests on a pedestal, thus achieving a vantage point that made science more manageable and their pursuit of it more respectable. The charmed partnership between home and heaven that had the early sentimentalists in thrall became an equally charged partnership between home and science. While the domestic scientists never looked back at their literary predecessors with any gratitude—on the contrary, scientific housekeepers learned to despise most evidences of sentimentality in domestic life—it was the moralists, diligently at work through the better part of the nineteenth century, who made it possible for science-minded women to define a sphere for themselves.

The mutual reinforcement between home and heaven was realized most stirringly in the work of three successful moralists writing at mid-century: Catharine Maria Sedgwick, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, and Catharine Beecher. In the very different books produced by these women, home life attained such gigantic moral proportions that the progress of civilization itself could be measured

according to the rules of domestic propriety. All aspects of home life—the meals, the bed making, the disciplining of naughty children—took on high significance and a heavenly glint, for these were the structures that would keep the nation in order as Americans fulfilled their divine mission: to domesticate the new world. One of the more comprehensive descriptions of how domestic life might pave the way to the everlasting, especially in a newly industrial America, was presented in a straightforward tract by Catharine Maria Sedgwick, who was the well-loved New England author of many moral and historical romances. Miss Sedgwick's didactic purpose led her to enforce a system of rigorous distinctions between right, or uplifting, and wrong, or wholly degrading. The unswerving correctness exemplified in this tract became a kind of moral blueprint for domestic science, which exulted in its freedom from those lackadaisical gray areas lurking between yes and no.

*Home*, published in 1835 and dedicated to “farmers and mechanics . . . by their friend, the Author,” was written by Miss Sedgwick to acquaint the rough, unrefined citizens of the republic with the organizing principles of a rational Christian household. Arranged as a collection of illustrative family scenes, *Home* is dominated by the wisdom of a self-made printer named Mr. Barclay. “Few persons, probably, have thought so much as William Barclay of the economy of domestic happiness,” Miss Sedgwick observed. “He had made a chart for his future conduct, by which he hoped to escape at least some of the shoals and quicksands on which others make shipwreck.” In the Barclay world there are no awkward moral boundaries dividing commercial from domestic life: the same principles govern each, and Mr. Barclay is the natural steward of both realms. Always vaguely busy at unspecified tasks, Mrs. Barclay provides a silent background of domestic efficiency. It is Mr. Barclay who plans how to govern his household so as to make it an “image of heaven,” and Mrs. Barclay who follows a step or two behind, “a loving and, with good reason, a trustful wife. . . .”

The Barclays' real mission in *Home* is to domesticate the whole world, and they begin right after the wedding by furnishing their own little house. Instead of “gewgaws” and “tawdry pictures,” they

invest in good mattresses and a well-ventilated kitchen, and Mr. Barclay personally selects the books for their new bookcase. This attention to physical and spiritual hygiene benefits everyone who comes in contact with the Barclays. As Miss Sedgwick remarked, "There was a disinfecting principle in the moral atmosphere of their house." Eventually the Barclays have seven children, whom they carefully train in domestic citizenship. The children receive a great deal of their instruction at the family dinner table, for meal-time offers "*three lessons a day*," Miss Sedgwick emphasized, in a range of virtues including "punctuality, order, neatness, temperance, self-denial, kindness, generosity, and hospitality." At the Barclays' there is no undue concern with the act of eating; rather, the children vie with each other for the pleasure of giving up their favorite food. When only a few strawberries are placed on the table one day—

"Give mine to Wally, then," said Mary.

"And mine too,—and mine too," echoed and re-echoed from both sides the table.

"And mine too!" repeated little Willie, the urchin next his mother, who had been contentedly eating his potatoe without asking for, or even looking at, the more inviting food on the table.

Little Willie gets no strawberries, not because they are scarce but because Mrs. Barclay believes he is too young to benefit from fruit. Similarly, all the children have been brought up on the plainest food and taught never to ask for anything else. "The monster appetite was thus early tamed," explained Miss Sedgwick. "Its pleasures were felt to be inferior pleasures,—to be enjoyed socially and gratefully, but forbearingly." In addition, these children behave with perfect manners and listen attentively to their elders' conversation. A visitor who drops in during this harmonious meal compares it ruefully with the noisy dinner table he has just left, and concludes that the differences must be chalked up to nature, or perhaps to the failings of his wife. After all, he reminds Mr. Barclay, a man "can't be expected . . . to do much with what you call home ed-

ucation.” Mr. Barclay is too polite to correct him. Miss Sedgwick then appends a brief chapter (“The Reverse of the Picture”) describing dinnertime at the visitor’s own casually run household, where the children fight messily and stuff themselves with rich food, and the parents do no better.

The civilizing function of home is shown on a larger scale when the oldest Barclay son ventures into the wilderness of Ohio to make his living. Charles’s new dwelling place is only two rooms but, as he writes to his family, “it has quite a home look,” with its tablecloth embroidered by his sisters, the quilt and curtains also from their hands, the flute, the pile of books. He has been leading prayer services in the settlement, he says, and domesticating the outdoors as well by planting the flowers and fruit trees of his native New England. “How soon may we plant a paradise in the wilds, if we will!” he exclaims. “The physical, moral, and intellectual soil is ready; it only wants the spirit of cultivation.” Shortly afterward Charles catches a fever in Ohio and comes home to die, or actually to make ready his next domicile. Amid the tears and farewells at his deathbed Charles reminds his brothers and sisters that he is only going to a better home, where all of them will meet again as a family in heaven.

Miss Sedgwick rounded out her account of Charles’s death with a simple proclamation of faith—“Death has no sting, and the grave no victory, in the home of the Christian”—but even while she wrote, it was becoming noticeable that the religious claims made for domesticity ignored much of the reality of women’s lives. What came to be called the “woman movement” surfaced during the years of anti-slavery agitation that preceded the Civil War; and it was the spectacle of the 1840 World’s Anti-Slavery Convention—where women delegates were barred from participating—that spurred some of the outraged female abolitionists to identify women’s own plight as a cause and to begin to organize around it. In addition, during the last decades of the century the divorce rate was increasing quickly enough to alarm people. Fewer than 10,000 divorces were granted in 1867, but twenty years later there were over 25,000, and at the turn of the century the divorce rate was

three times the rate of population growth. Divorce remained a sin and a scandal, but its vivid presence was a reminder of the fragility of domestic bliss. In this period of uncomfortable truth-telling, a young New England woman published the first in a trilogy of novels that presented in the starkest and most powerful terms yet a vision of the household linked to heaven. Elizabeth Stuart Phelps gave new meaning to the concept of a heavenly home by examining it literally: her subject was domestic life after death, and her books on that topic sold in the tens of thousands. Written to comfort, they also managed to criticize—and that edge of bitterness helped to carry the age of domestic sentimentality into the age of domestic science. If Miss Sedgwick wrote the moral blueprint, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps created an emotional blueprint for domestic science: her trilogy on home life in heaven had a passion and a bite that belied its devotional tone and nicely undermined its own air of submission.

Raised in a Calvinist household—her father and grandfather were well-known biblical scholars at Andover Theological Seminary—Miss Phelps received an unusually serious education for a girl in the 1850s, and she also witnessed her mother's painful frustration trying to write books and run a household at the same time. After her mother's early death Miss Phelps grew up with no interest at all in housework ("It was impossible to express . . . her inherent, ineradicable, and sickening recoil from the details of household care," she wrote in one of her several feminist novels), but she retained a great deal of concern with the burdens and rewards of domesticity. The values that distinguished women's work at home—humility, generosity, caring, faith—seemed to her the living fabric of Christianity, and yet they had no very distinguished place in what she called the "cold, smooth theorizing" of the church. In the aftermath of the Civil War, struck by the great suffering of women who had lost husbands and sons, Miss Phelps set out to rescue Christianity from its bloodless male proprietors and turn it over to the real practitioners.

It was an angel, she remarked later, who directed her to write *The Gates Ajar*, the first volume in a unique kind of travel fiction detail-

ing the customs and geography of a wonderful land not very far from New England. The source for this report on heaven is a pleasant woman named Aunt Winifred who arrives to comfort her niece Mary after Mary's treasured brother has been killed in the Civil War. Aunt Winifred's husband is dead, but she is accompanied by her little daughter Faith. After close study of the Bible, and reading numerous commentaries, Aunt Winifred has mapped out an after-life that horrifies local churchmen and thrills everyone else.

“‘I think I want some mountains,’” she remarks to Mary, “‘and very many trees.’” “‘Mountains and trees!’” gasps her niece. And rivers, brooks, fountains, and flowers will be abundant, Aunt Winifred declares. “‘I hope to have a home of my own,’” she adds. “‘... In the Father's house are many mansions. Sometimes I fancy that those words have a literal meaning which the simple men who heard them may have understood better than we, and that Christ is truly “preparing” my home for me.’” She goes on to point out that her husband will be there and the two of them will need a place to live. “‘What could be done with the millions who, from the time of Adam, have been gathering there, unless they lived under the conditions of organized society? Organized society involves homes. . . . What other arrangement could be as pleasant or could be pleasant at all?’”

The personification of Aunt Winifred's faith is, of course, Faith, not at all the dogged, Job-like hero of the usual tracts and sermons, but a rough-and-tumble three-year-old who plays outdoors in the mud all day and constantly gets into mischief. She and Aunt Winifred discuss heaven frequently, and Faith in turn entertains her playmates with the news. “‘P'raps I'll have some strawberries, too, and some ginger-snaps,—I'm not going to have any old bread and butter there,—O, and some little gold apples, and a lot of playthings; nicer playthings—why, nicer than they have in the shops in Boston, Molly Bland! God's keeping 'em up there a purpose.’” In like manner, Aunt Winifred is able to assure a talented neighborhood girl that in heaven she will have the piano that she longed for on earth, and she brightens a stolid country boy by advising him that he might be able to operate machinery in heaven. “‘I don't see

how *I'm* going to wear white frocks and stand up in a choir,—never could sing more'n a frog with a cold in his head,' ” muses the boy. “ ‘Perhaps I could help 'em build a church, hist some of their pearl gates, or something like!’ ”

This domestic theology deeply shocks the clergymen in town, whose pointed names are Dr. Bland and Deacon Quirk. Both are fond of depicting heaven in its traditional terms—angelic choirs playing harps and crying “Worthy the Lamb!” The death of his wife in a kitchen fire, however, thrusts Dr. Bland onto another level of feeling. As the agonized woman is on her deathbed, unable to stop thinking of the four little children she is leaving motherless, Aunt Winifred confides to her that she isn't really leaving them motherless at all, that God will make it possible for her to take care of them even from above. Finally at ease, the woman allows herself to die peacefully. Dr. Bland has a long talk with Aunt Winifred, and some time later Mary notes in her journal that he seems very changed. “A certain indefinable *humanness* softens his eyes and tones, and seems to be creeping into everything he says.”

Not surprisingly, Aunt Winifred herself dies at the end of the book, painfully but gladly expiring from breast cancer while Faith romps about the bedside. Aunt Winifred's last act is to look toward the window and greet her husband. And in the next two volumes, while the characters change, Miss Phelps makes it clear that Aunt Winifred was right in her assumptions, and the Quirks and Blands quite wrong. In *Beyond the Gates* and *The Gates Between* Miss Phelps takes up the day-to-day life of two newcomers in heaven—a woman in the second volume and a man in the third—whose experiences differ significantly. The woman is delighted with heaven: she loves the little cottage she is given, she goes to a concert featuring a new oratorio by Beethoven (his hearing has been restored), and meets a great many artists, poets, and scientists. She also meets God—and he is very much a woman's God. No thunderbolts, no wrath, no mighty judge, this God is just an unusually nice man who falls into conversation with her one day, lets her do most of the talking, and actually listens. Afterward she feels as though she has found a friend, her best friend ever. Perhaps the strongest indica-

tion that heaven is a woman's world comes at the moment when the heroine—who was unmarried on earth—begins to feel as lonely in heaven as she used to feel in life. “The old ache has survived the grave,” she thinks. Just then she comes across the man she had loved years ago, who married another woman and found out his mistake too late. Now, at last, he can marry the heroine—for in this world view a mistake of that importance mercifully ends with death and can be rectified afterward for eternity. God himself blesses the new union, lest it strike any reader as uncomfortably close to bigamy.

Everything that pleases a woman in heaven is appalling to the man who arrives there in the last book, *The Gates Between*. He is a busy doctor who has died right after hurling some mean, thoughtless words at his devoted wife, and when he gets to heaven he wanders around feeling frustrated and confused. “It is all unfamiliar to me,” he complains. “I am afraid I have not been educated for it. It is the most unhomelike place I ever saw.” Eventually he does learn to make a heavenly home, but not until he has been educated in the values of domesticity. The sudden death and arrival in heaven of his son forces the doctor to set up a household and to care for the little boy. When he goes out to look for work, however, he finds he is not qualified to be a physician in heaven. “Here in this world of spirits I was an unscientific, uninstructed fellow,” he admits; and takes a lowly job in maintenance, cleaning up at the heavenly hospital. Finally, in response to the innocent promptings of his little son, he begins to teach himself the more important sciences of love and faith. Then his ambition increases: he decides to request a new job as a spiritual healer in earthly homes. “I wished to . . . set the whole force of a man's experience and a spirit's power to make an irritable scene in loving homes held as degrading as a blow . . .” With this awareness his education is complete, and he is rewarded by the arrival of his wife and the establishment of a familiar, but greatly improved, domestic circle in heaven.

With *Beyond the Gates* and *The Gates Between* Miss Phelps made it clear that the distance between earthly and heavenly domestic life was greater than popular rhetoric might admit. A home free of anger, loneliness, and pain was not going to spring up easily around

every family, even a loving family. Truly blessed domesticity could only be achieved through devotion and self-sacrifice, as the doctor learns; and the way he learns is by taking up the humble occupations of women.

Twenty years after creating the ideal world of *Home* Catharine Maria Sedgwick also came around to depicting a few of the pressures on domestic happiness. In *Married or Single?* a couple somewhat less perfect than the Barclays is carefully running a Christian household with the husband firmly positioned at the head of the family. One morning he speaks harshly to his wife at the breakfast table, and later in the day he apologizes. With her usual benevolence his wife tells him that when he is in a bad temper she simply thinks of him as another baby in the house, who must be diverted and soothed. Furthermore, she adds, “ ‘... these little trials are mere exhalations from the ground, that melt away in the sunshine of our love;... you are my teacher, my master, my daily bread.’ ” This wifely attitude leads Miss Sedgwick to comment approvingly: “With more of such Christian unions there would be fewer divorces for ‘incompatibility,’ and a long lull to the stormy question of ‘women’s rights.’ ”

Miss Sedgwick never married, which undoubtedly made it easier for her to praise domesticity so comfortably as its own reward. Miss Phelps, however, married late and unhappily, and her painful understanding of wifely self-sacrifice was made clear in the openly feminist novels she began to produce after *The Gates Ajar*. Both these experts in divine domesticity, then, recognized the gap between the rhetoric and the reality of domestic life. It was their different perspectives on how best to close that gap that symbolized the threats and opportunities faced by women raised on pure sentimentality. Miss Phelps tended to blame men for most domestic disruption, and would have liked them to take on some of the female qualities of humility, generosity, and moral wisdom. At the level of allegory Miss Sedgwick felt the same way—Mr. Barclay is virtually female in his goodness—but in what passed for realistic fiction she accepted as unchangeable the fact that sometimes a husband was just another baby in the house. Miss Phelps’s acknowledgment of

the bitter problems that maleness could create, both theologically and domestically, helped women of her time to see more clearly through the fog of nineteenth-century religiosity, but relatively few of them saw straight through to feminism. Outright challenge to the male was never a widespread solution to the domestic difficulties of the postwar era; instead, women developed ways to maneuver within accepted boundaries. Most often, married women with some free time joined clubs for self-betterment or threw themselves into dozens of projects and causes they could construe as beneficial to someone else. Even in this activist frame of mind, however, many clung to the attitude represented by Miss Sedgwick: that women had a special responsibility to ensure the success of domestic life. This mix of traditional responsibilities with a new reforming spirit helped give rise to domestic science, the movement that enabled women to focus critical attention not on their husbands but on their housework.

For the domestic scientists, criticizing domestic life meant glossing over its contradictions and confusions, imposing order upon chaos, and polishing the surface—a systematic program of sanitation that apparently operated on their own public personalities as well as their households. Domestic scientists loved to create models of the ideal housekeeper, their modern woman—someone serene, unhurried, and with a mind fixed on eternal truths, who would move through a day of chores and challenges like an invisible force for good, applying the laws of chemistry and biology to every mark of disarray. Not until fairly late in the movement, as it was becoming home economics and trying to establish its validity as a profession, did domestic scientists finally acknowledge their history and discover that Catharine Beecher had been there ahead of them. In Miss Beecher's 1841 best-seller, *A Treatise on Domestic Economy*, the image of the ideal American housekeeper leading her family and hence the nation into a glorious Christian future was delineated in every particular, from diagrams of the skeletal system to suggestions for charitable beekeeping. Unlike Miss Sedgwick and Miss Phelps, Catharine Beecher took a lively interest in the details of housekeeping: for her, domesticity really did mean scrub-

bing and boiling and ironing and darning, not to mention architecture, plumbing, and agriculture. Yet her perspective was anything but narrow: she preferred to discuss female domesticity in what she considered its most meaningful context—the progress of America—and worked to put housekeeping on an intellectual level that would match its moral loftiness. *A Treatise on Domestic Economy* was an early blueprint for the domestic scientist herself, the woman educated for acquiescence who would re-create heaven on earth by attending to the surface of things, perpetually inspired by her accommodation to a higher authority.

Born in 1800, Catharine Beecher grew up a brainy, energetic woman in a family devoted to men. The Beecher patriarch was Lyman Beecher, the famous evangelical preacher, and he concentrated the family resources on sending his sons to college and seminary so that they, too, might become ministers. His daughters were raised to become wives—preferably the wives of ministers—and to care for them as assiduously as Lyman Beecher's three wives each cared for him. As the oldest of thirteen children Catharine Beecher learned early on to help keep house and raise children. Following some decorous schooling and a brief, unchallenging teaching job, she dutifully fell in love with a young science professor at Yale. Her fiancé died in a shipwreck before they could marry, however, and she appears never to have seriously contemplated another engagement. After his death she spent some time going over his scientific papers, and took his place briefly as tutor to his younger sisters—an experience that set her life in an altogether new direction. Teaching herself algebra, geometry, chemistry, and other branches of science, in order to understand his work and to teach his sisters, Catharine Beecher discovered that she had an excellent mind and loved using it. In 1823 she opened her first school, the Hartford Female Seminary, and she spent the rest of her life gathering converts to her chosen cause: women's education.

Teaching and running a school were suitable enough pursuits for a young spinster, but Catharine Beecher had a great deal more ambition than any single job could satisfy. After seven years at Hartford she left her thriving school and set out on a career that