

7

Dilemma

Sometime in the spring of 1886, probably early May, George Herbert Palmer, a relatively young but rapidly advancing and highly ambitious Harvard professor of philosophy, and Alice Freeman, president of Wellesley College, were invited to dinner. Their hosts were the former Governor of Massachusetts, William Claflin, and his wife, Mary Bucklin Claflin, one of five women who were members of the board of trustees of Wellesley College. [1](#) The Claflins lived in Boston where their social milieu was the intellectual, academic, political power clique that governed part of the Boston social scene.

Mary Claflin and Alice Freeman had enjoyed for several years a relationship that on Claflin's side combined easy communication with respect and admiration. Freeman, who needed all the help she could get for remaking Wellesley, linked a genuine liking for a well-connected, helpful, semi-powerful woman with a touch of self-serving but necessary cultivation of the prominent. The Claflins knew both Freeman and Palmer, liked them both, and also knew that both were comers in the academic world. Boston society enjoyed mixing old blood and new talent, and the Claflins dropped Freeman and Palmer like a couple of plums into one of their proper, carefully orchestrated dinners. Neither Alice Freeman nor George Palmer was averse to being used that way. Calculated friendship and measured intimacy were integral parts of their lives.

But no one expected what happened. They fell in love. Within ten days the debate that lasted for a year and a half was underway. Together, with pain, understanding, and immediate sacrifice on the part of Alice, Palmer and Freeman worked out the bargain that defined the dilemma. Where did the New Woman belong?

Since the couple seldom met, the bargain was largely negotiated through a voluminous correspondence, sometimes several letters a day. [2](#) And wonderful letters they are. So articulate were both of them that they used words as rapiers, shining in the sun. As George sharpened his arguments and perfected his metaphors, Alice rose to the challenge and replied in kind. Caroline Hazard, a later Wellesley president, compared the Palmers to the Brownings, participants in the nineteenth century's great literary romance. [3](#) The analogy is apt. Quite possibly both Alice and George cast themselves in such a role. Alice's rather hapless attempt at poetry, *A Marriage Cycle*, although lacking literary merit, may quite well have been inspired by Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets From the Portuguese*.

Through their letters one can follow the intricacies of the relationship. Two successful, independent people both reached for and confronted each other. For a year and a half they cannily bargained, guiltily reassured, shamelessly adored, and very occasionally withdrew from their overwhelming need for each other. They loved, they doubted, and they fought with infinite politeness and great skill. And underneath pulsed the ever-present major theme: Alice must preserve her independence within her surrender, and George was determined his life plan should not be changed.

Their courtship had many aspects. [4](#) One was a power struggle. Would Alice become George's wife, bright but subordinate, and perform her marital duties in a conventional way? Or, would George recognize his wife's great achievements and make allowances that would permit her to continue her career? Another dimension was sex. The sexual tension that emanates from their hundred-year-old correspondence is palpable. One can feel the hormones of this less-than-youthful couple racing back and forth between Wellesley and Cambridge. As good Victorians they could hardly admit to being governed by the flesh, but the flesh was calling loud and clear within each of them. Still another aspect was duty. What were Alice's obligations to fifteen-year-old Wellesley which was just beginning to establish itself as a viable and prestigious institution. George's duties seem less compelling to a twentieth-century feminist, but he strongly cherished obligations to his discipline and to his academic institutional connections. He was a devotee of the new German-inspired university system and felt he exerted important and necessary influences in Cambridge. To George, a new women's college could hardly make comparable demands.

For eighteen months they hammered out the answers to these questions, never quite phrasing them as they have been framed here, but bit by bit resolving their differences, Alice eventually found a resolution that was probably inevitable for the nineteenth-century New Woman. Although she fought hard, it was clear from the beginning that, for the first time, she was ready to surrender and abrogate obligations both to her family and to her own independence. She was tired. She had had almost enough of making her own way. And George was a persistent and an able strategist. He saw what he wanted and he went after it with zeal.

1

A few days after their first encounter Alice received a letter from George, "Do you ever have such a thing as leisure? If within the next weeks you should discover an unoccupied half hour, might I ask the privilege of depriving you of it?" [5](#) His excuse for seeing her was a bit unconvincing but easily accepted by Alice. He wanted to discuss the possible further education of the daughter of the farmer who tilled his Boxford farm. Ten days later Alice answered that either the next Friday or Monday she would be at liberty. [6](#) And she encouraged him further. She invited him to a Wellesley fete on June 4th in honor of Eben Horsford, who was, of course, not only a benefactor of Wellesley, but one of George Palmer's Harvard colleagues.

George went, and in his thank-you note written after his train brought him back to Cambridge that evening, he took up a theme, Alice's health, on which he would improvise variations for the next year and a half. "I was distressed to see you look so worn, and to find you were having little appetite and sleep," and he proposed that she "become a girl again and come like a child to our [Harvard's] Class Day?" But she must not "let this invitation be one more burden." She should simply not answer unless she truly wanted to come. [7](#)

She accepted with alacrity: "What a delight to sit in the midst of a class day for whose arrangements I made no plans, and could have no responsibility." [8](#) And the serious wooing began. She was willing. He was both ardent and determined. George escorted her back to

Wellesley that evening laden with water lilies, roses, and laurel and pressed upon her invitations to join him for a holiday at his Boxford farm. She had not had a serious suitor (or at least one she had permitted to be serious) for some time. [9](#) For the last five years, she had carried crushing responsibilities. She had been working, probably beyond her physical strength, since she was nineteen. The temptation to lighten her life with a touch of romance was more than attractive. He offered a change of pace, and she responded eagerly.

In July, she spent a week at Boxford, north of Boston, where George owned a farmhouse that had been in his mother's family for two centuries. [10](#) Mrs. Claflin, the unsuspecting matchmaker, accompanied her as chaperone. Alice and George walked alone in the woods when Mrs. Claflin was resting, played with his dog Barnes, and got well past polite banter to intimate friendship. It was clear that their emotions were now involved. She wrote to George on her return to Wellesley, "Whatever you may think when you think this day over, you certainly will know this, that from the beginning you have seen my heart, and I have concealed nothing from you." [11](#) When the "week of peace," as they called it was over, he wrote to her about his work (he was then translating Homer), sent her Jonas Very sonnets to read, and as he strolled the farm, "came out on the hard green turf which encircled the old cellar, where we and the moon looked at one another a few nights ago." [12](#) Friendship it may still have been, but their relationship now included moonlight and roses.

By the end of July, George was declaring his love and probably pressing her to marry him. He wrote: "It was horrible not to kiss you in the wood today, to claim you as my own and to protect you against the wounds that I made. But then it is you that I want, you with all your splendid powers and high aims, you entire, your charm, your beauty, your clinging love. We could say anything for a minute, but what shall we say for a lifetime? That we belong together--I think--." [13](#) He had declared his love, and that distressed her. She was not ready for love and commitment, and he promised that "I will not speak again of what I spoke today. I will only be near you and we will share the many interests which fill our busy lives." [14](#)

By August the love George had declared in July was mutual. He followed her to Saginaw on her annual summer visit to her family, dismissing her objections because "before our terms begin we must have a definite and clearly considered policy about our intercourse during the year. It is a complicated matter which we must arrange together. For meeting its perplexities, letters are quite insufficient." [15](#) She was not yet prepared to tell her family of their relationship but, of course, her family guessed when her mother surprised Alice in the upstairs sitting room on George's lap. [16](#)

To marry or not to marry, that was the question. Here came the hard thought and the bargaining. As George wrote Alice: "There is no simple solution. . . . Time is necessary and the most unselfish care." He saw two elements in their problem: "(1) Wellesley must not suffer. (2) We must come together. We cannot neglect one of these and expect to preserve the other." [17](#) She was not so sure they could achieve both those aims. And, of course, George left out the third condition, that George's professional life must remain autonomous and intact.

Alice Freeman had been attracted to intellectual men since she was fourteen and her Windsor Academy tutor had persuaded her to betroth herself to him. He was followed by a score of

Michigan suitors, some of whom continued to pursue her after she went to Wellesley. Many of the male administrators who had hired or worked with her had been avid for marriage. She had withdrawn. Now when she had everything--power, position, a comfortable income--marriage became an almost irresistible prospect.

2

Was George Palmer so attractive, so powerful, that he could break the pattern that had governed Alice Freeman's romantic attachments thus far--attraction and withdrawal? He was probably the most prestigious man who had yet courted her. He certainly outshone high school superintendents and Michigan undergraduates. Palmer, in turn, had always been attracted to intellectual women, but this time he had a monkey on his back. Alice Freeman was not only something of an intellectual, but the incumbent in one of the most important posts occupied by an American woman of her time.

In 1886, George Palmer was forty-four. Three years before he had received his full professorship at Harvard where he had been teaching classics and philosophy since 1870. Although Palmer was never ordained or licensed to preach, he chose theological training after graduating from Harvard as the one way then available to study philosophy. Palmer also studied, as did many of the new university professional academics, in Germany at the University of Tübingen. His education had been interrupted by a stint in his family's wholesale dry goods business and a year of high school teaching, but he had chosen college teaching as his life work before his marriage in 1871 to Ellen Margaret Wellman of Brookline. [18](#) Theirs had been a difficult courtship. She was an intimate of his sister as well as the sister of a college friend. Ellen was several years older than he and in poor health. They long carried on an intellectual correspondence (with infrequent meetings) about books and ideas. Ellen was an intellectual, a self-taught student of philosophy and literature, and probably had a truer concern with ideas than Alice. George and Ellen shared rich and varied interests. Aside from the impact of two years at the University of Tübingen, Ellen probably contributed as much as anyone to George Palmer's intellectual development before he came to Harvard to teach.



George Palmer at about the time of his marriage. (Courtesy of Wellesley College Archives.)

But when they decided to marry, both their families were strongly opposed. The Palmers disliked intensely Ellen's Swedenborgian religious ideas, that she was older than their son, and that she was already stricken with active tuberculosis which had plagued her much of her adult life. Eventually, however, everyone was reconciled. The marriage seemed happy and fulfilling for both, marred only by Ellen's ill health. Always frail, Ellen died in 1879 of tuberculosis. Thereafter George Palmer lived the bachelor life of an academic don near Harvard Yard. [19](#)

George and Alice were an incongruous pair. Physically George Palmer was unimpressive. While he had been frail and chronically ill as a child, careful habits including regular exercise and a healthful diet had helped him achieve a vigorous adulthood. Nonetheless, he was a small man, not much over five foot two inches, and rarely weighed over 130 pounds. And Alice had not shrunk over the years. Although George always called her his "little girl," she was certainly considerably taller than he, and while still slender when they met and married, she, more than he, put on weight over the years. Nonetheless as his biographer states, George Palmer had "a personal force which made its impression." [20](#) Alice responded to that force, rather than his height, and there is no evidence that she ever worried about any physical incongruities, nor that her Wellesley students, who were not always reverent, made fun of an "odd couple" when their engagement was announced and wedding celebrated. Longish, dark hair, handlebar mustaches, and a pair of bushy eyebrows over deep-set, startling pale blue eyes, helped to create a face that no Harvard undergraduate would ever forget. [21](#)

It was his voice that was Palmer's most remarkable feature. Vida Scudder, who knew him at the time that Alice first met him, called it "one of the most beautiful voices ever granted a man" as he read Shakespeare's sonnets or the *Odyssey* to her mother on summer evenings. [22](#) Lucy Sprague, the Palmer's surrogate daughter who lived with the Palmers during her Radcliffe days and later traveled with them in Europe, described George's "wonderful, cultured voice that could make Milton sound like an organ." [23](#) Wellesley girls were also entranced by his voice and his readings. Harvard men flocked to chapel when it was announced he would speak. George Palmer was no physical Adonis, but he combined his wonderful musical voice with a penetrating way with words that left few immune to his personality. Both Alice and George responded to each other's voices. In an era when reading aloud was the middle-class family's chief form of evening entertainment, the musical, resonant speaking voice, plus a few histrionics, was a treasure to be carefully cultivated. Both Alice and George were great readers, for each other, as well as others.

George Palmer's interest in the education of women long antedated his relationship with Alice Freeman. His first wife, Ellen, had helped arouse that interest; his mentor, the Scottish philosopher Edward Caird, further encouraged it. Palmer was an early lecturer at the unofficial Harvard Annex (later Radcliffe College), not an unusual means for a junior, underpaid Harvard teacher to pick up a bit of extra money. In fact, President Charles Eliot often held out such employment as bait when hiring promising young men at ridiculously low salaries. But Palmer, unlike the other grubbers after a few hundred dollars, always gave his best to the Annex and credited its students as being among the most stimulating he would teach in Cambridge. He continued to appear on its roster long after he had established himself at the Yard and had no need for extra income. In fact, when George Palmer was scheduled to give a series of Greek readings at Harvard in the spring of 1887, he pressed the authorities to permit the Annex women to attend. Harvard bigwigs protested that the occasion would seem less serious "if bonnets were present." Palmer's rejoinder was to promise that if they were not allowed he would read all six books over again for the Annex. [24](#)

Vida Scudder, who as a young girl knew George Palmer intimately when she and her mother were summer tenants at the Boxford farm and who continued as a close colleague and friend throughout both their lives, saw him as possessing a culture as wide and sensitive as anyone she had ever known. But she also saw in him a certain humility, and she quoted a heartfelt remark he

had once made to her, "I am defeated, and I know it, if I meet any human being from whom I am unable to learn anything." [25](#) George Palmer had his faults. In his old age (and he lived for over thirty years after Alice died), he became quaint and eccentric and perhaps pompous and rigid. But the man Alice Freeman met in 1886 was none of these. He was spontaneous, venturesome, and very ambitious. He knew he was confronting the New Woman. At least most of the time, he relished taking her on.

At the time that Alice Freeman and George Palmer met, she was a much more prominent public figure than he. As the only woman who was president of a well-known educational institution, she had attracted considerable attention. The Harvard faculty viewed the exotic, charismatic young educator from the Midwest with curious interest and made occasional tentative overtures to welcome her into their academic fraternity. Popular magazines sent journalists to write celebrity sketches based on interviews about her life and work. Although publicity made her uncomfortable, it attested to her national prominence. As we have seen, she was in demand as a public speaker, both in the United States and in Canada. George Palmer was hardly known outside Cambridge and Boston and certainly not a man to attract the notice of the public press. He had received no honorary degrees when Columbia conferred one on Freeman. What is more, she earned more than he did. In 1887 her salary was \$4,000 to his \$3,500. [26](#)

George Palmer was not a jealous man, and he took great pleasure in Alice Freeman's fame and accomplishments. When her Columbia degree was announced, he wrote: "I rejoice that you are so broadly known. The universal honor in which you are held will make both our lives wealthier and more productive." [27](#) In fact, George would have preferred to announce their engagement at the time she was receiving all the public attention, an idea that horrified Alice. In the same letter he remarked: "I shall be delighted too to have the degree announced at just about the time of our engagement. . . . I welcome a racket. We can't get engaged everyday, sweetheart, and I don't object to getting all the fun out of it that is possible." [28](#)

George Palmer belonged to the liberal intellectual community that welcomed new ideas, including a change in the role of women. He was also an exponent of the religious liberalism that was sweeping American universities in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. As early as 1882 he opposed Harvard College's stuffing compulsory religious practices down undergraduate throats. [29](#) He bridled at religious tests for academic appointments and encouraged Alice Freeman in her attempt to modify Durant's rigidly sectarian qualifications for the Wellesley faculty and trustees. In a weak moment, when the Wellesley presidency was being urged on him, he considered possibly accepting "if the College could be placed on an independent basis and become genuinely unsectarian." [30](#) Alice had encountered a worthy partner, capable of recognizing her ambitions and talents and fully meriting her respect. But he had reservations.

As the academic year 1886-87 got underway, the little excursion into purely personal pleasure and satisfaction on which Alice Freeman had embarked the previous spring left her with an additional large problem, one that dwarfed those old problems she inherited from previous years, such as building a competent faculty, constructing physical facilities to house a rapidly expanding enrollment, securing prestigious and informed trustees, and acquiring a firm financial base for Wellesley. Now a new question was added. Would she, should she, could she marry? For Alice Freeman was ambitious, not only for herself but for the enterprise with which she was

most closely associated. Perhaps Wellesley would have become Wellesley no matter what Alice Freeman did, given the place, the time, and the circumstances. But she certainly facilitated its transformation from Mr. Durant's missionary enterprise into a viable force in the new academia. And as she repeatedly said to George, her work remained unfinished.

As she looked at the college and herself, the old problems and the new one became intertwined. There was no way she could escape her duty to Wellesley, as she saw it. She could not retreat into marriage and leave the college to fend for itself. Nor could she simply add marriage to the roles she already played because, when it came to final choices, George Palmer could not and would not permit it. Only by solving the college's problems could she solve her own dilemma.

Consciously or unconsciously George Palmer adopted a pair of strategies that advanced his suit and tied Alice Freeman more closely to him. Very early in their relationship George began to play an active, if publicly unacknowledged part in policy-making at Wellesley. His first clear intervention occurred in August of 1886 when he urged an overworked Freeman to create a deanship to relieve her of administrative duties beyond the secretarial level, someone, as he said, who would have sufficient academic status to answer policy correspondence and be "in training for a future president." In doing so he asked, "now have I been very meddlesome?" [31](#) But his advice was to flow freely thereafter. For example, in September he suggested a candidate for Wellesley's professorship of ethics. [32](#) By October Alice Freeman was clearly dependent on him for advice and succor in managing the burdens of the presidency that she had handled alone for nearly five years before they met. Her need was so great that she risked gossip to have him come to her rooms because it "has been a destructive week. . . . For the second time in my life I have had to dismiss a student publicly," and another student showed signs of mania and must be constantly guarded until she could be got home. [33](#) Even her relationship with students became part of his ken, and his advice on the composition and handling of the board of trustees, selection of new faculty, and the management of Pauline Durant was specific and constant.

But Alice had not yet agreed to marry George. That commitment was not made until January (possibly early February) of 1887. Meanwhile her ambivalence kept them both in a turmoil. On the first of September in 1886 she wrote him: "We must stop here. . . . Upon the closest thought that I can give the subject from all sides, no other course seems open to me." And she added that: "I will never run the risk of spoiling your dear life and my work at the same time until both He [Christ] and you and my own heart make it clear that taking that risk is greater service than anything else He has in store for you and me." [34](#)

Only solving Wellesley's problems would lead to her surrender, and he willingly acquiesced in that necessity, especially as time went on and he realized that it was his only hope of success. In November he wrote: "All your obligations are mine. . . . And until they are wisely treated I could not welcome you." [35](#) Throughout the fall she vacillated between involving him more deeply in college affairs and attempting to free herself from him. Part of the time she vowed she would try "not to press the burdens and joys of College life upon you so." [36](#) At the same time she had arranged for him to give a series of Greek readings to Wellesley students, and rejoiced "to have you *in* Wellesley, and instructing our students, do you know how much it means to me? You come into my daily life then; you stand beside me in my beautiful work here and have a part in it. It seems as if you belong to me in a new way." [37](#)

George tried to be patient and not push her toward commitment too rapidly. On one occasion he wrote: "I have been thinking much about our possible intercourse lately, in this long week. I do not want our approaches to have anything feverish, anything disturbing, about them. We are man and woman, not children. We mean to be strong." He suggested they write only once or twice a week but try to see each other in public places like the art museum in Boston or the college (but not Norumbega, the cottage where she resided) more frequently. [38](#)

As the new year began Alice Freeman was unable to free herself of her dependence on George Palmer's advice. She wanted to discuss with him the plans for the new art building, the problems in the philosophy department, the Furness Shakespeare fund, and a half- dozen other matters, and again she risked gossip by asking him to come on a Saturday evening to her college office by the seldom-used east door. [39](#)

There were times when neither thought they could resolve the dilemma. How could she possibly leave the work she had really just begun? He suggested that "administration may be now your genuine life. If it is so, do find it out and tell me, and do not let me spoil a life--two lives--that I want to enlarge. Would you not be happier, and in your judgement more useful, darling, as president of Wellesley than as my wife?" [40](#) And in the same letter he revealed clearly that if they married he would expect her to subordinate her needs to his, "Have you any such desire to be always by my side that studying *how to help me* [italics mine] could ever seem to you the greatest of duties, for which all others might wait?" [41](#) His acceptance of the goals of the New Woman with her need to control her own life was wearing thin in those sentences. But actually he was as ambivalent as she for he wrote next day, saying: "I would far rather you never came to me than that you should come and find your great powers in any respect lessened. For I do not seek to get you, not for myself. Only that by joining, we two together make up one more righteous person than either could be alone." [42](#) Part of the time they were ordinary Victorians unable to see beyond the conventional marriages they saw all around them; part of the time they believed they could meet as equals and forge a new kind of relationship that permitted both of them to fully incorporate professional lives.

There also was truth in George's statement, "I am a shadowy being who has lent a romance to your life." Alice did find escape into romance much more attractive than the realities of marriage. As George said: "In my presence you like to forget all realities and live in the rapturous moment. But the feeling gone, hard facts are waiting and these do not include me." [43](#)

During the first year of the Freeman-Palmer courtship, until their impending marriage was publicly announced, where and when to meet was a constant problem. Had they met frequently speculation about a romance would have been rife on both campuses, and since they had made no firm plans and saw Wellesley's need for steady, stable leadership as essential, they felt they must keep their relationship a secret. As George wrote his sister-in-law that first summer: "We are not allowed to know each other's daily lives. We cannot share or even hear minutely each other's work. . . . Our meetings are infrequent." [44](#) Except for formal public occasions they met secretly. Just before school began in the fall of 1886 they rendezvoused in the woods near Wellesley. George brought a picnic lunch. Alice was to make sure her horse would make no trouble by seeing that he was fed and watered beforehand. Afterwards George walked back alone to the Wellesley station and she went off on a round of errands. [45](#) That October they met at

Boxford with Mrs. Claflin serving once more as unsuspecting chaperone. [46](#) Later that month Alice attended the Collegiate Alumnae Association meetings at Bryn Mawr, and he joined her on the overnight steamer from Fall River, Massachusetts, to New York City. He brought "rolls to feed us both again before we go to bed," and reserved two staterooms side by side. They had three hours alone together that evening and he promised to "purr and coo, to lay my head on your breast, and talk quietly and be talked to." [47](#) At least once that fall (during Thanksgiving weekend) they met in her hotel room at the Vendome where she stayed when in Boston on business, "where once your door is locked nobody knows whether you are at home or not." [48](#) They considered spending a few days together at a mountain resort during the Christmas holidays, but she eventually vetoed that excursion as too risky. [49](#) In January he complained, "What is to be done about these enforced separations?" and he suggested they arrange to meet in his brother Julius's law offices in Boston. Julius would have to be told about their relationship, but he would be completely trustworthy. They contrived to invite Fred Palmer as a guest preacher to Wellesley which served as an excuse for two easily explained meetings. [50](#) It was not easy. Sometimes they did not see each other, publicly or privately, for two or three weeks. After he had taken a solitary, starry stroll on a November night, he lamented that "we have never walked together outside Boxford." [51](#)

Their correspondence made explicit their physical intimacy. He wrote more openly than she, as in "only a day or two and you will be sitting in my lap," or "were you only here I would kiss you and lay you in bed and you should rest beside me." [52](#) Or, on another occasion: "How close we have been, sweet love, and what peace that closeness contained! Did I tell you as you lay sleeping in my arms, you murmured, `You will not go away, dear,--not to Germany again?' " [53](#) But despite these intimacies they seem not to have fully consummated their union. In March he wrote: "I will keep your dear flesh to myself, if you please. Already I have claimed it all as mine. And I am glad to think that when at parting we knew how truly our spirits were one, we dared rejoicingly to own that our bodies were so too." [54](#) However, in May, he wrote: "Since I left you yesterday I have been full of self reproaches and resolves. I shall not come so near you any more, for I am sure that instead of calming you with assurance of our immense present wealth, I am only stirring longings for the greater blessings which we neither of us believe to be honorably ours at present." [55](#) His meaning seems clear. There were limits (despite its intensity) to their physical relationship before their marriage.

Although the terms were unresolved, Alice Freeman, early in the new year, made a firm decision to marry George Palmer. She let him give her a ruby and diamond engagement ring on her birthday, February 21, and she wore it at once, although she explained it to curious students as a birthday present from her family. She refused to make a public announcement and had not yet told her parents. And despite George's impatient urging she would not commit herself to a date. Her decision had not been made easily. For months she toyed with the idea of a European trip with her friend, Lillian Horsford, to put some distance between herself, Wellesley, and George to better assess her dilemma. But she postponed that possible separation repeatedly until her family's problems made it impossible, and she made her decision without this hiatus.

Alice Freeman decided to marry at a time when her problems with the college were compounding. Relations with Pauline Durant "were never more uncomfortable, and with all the work the friction becomes more difficult to bear. If the subjects of dispute were only great

interests [which in many ways they were soon to be] there would be a dignity and value in variety of opinion, or even in strenuous opposition." [56](#) But Freeman saw the strain resulting from petty matters-- how the farm's produce should be used, campus rules, chapel attendance, faculty custodial duties.

The trustees were a major problem. Most of the active trustees were original Durant appointees and joined Pauline Durant in emphasizing the strict "evangelical" point of view. But when Sarah Houghton and Caroline A. Wood, two of the five women trustees, died in January of 1887, the opportunity arose for Alice Freeman to create a board more to her liking. [57](#) Two vacancies existed. Since some of the trustees, such as the evangelist Dwight Moody, were almost completely inactive, additional strong, involved trustees that shared Freeman's view of the college could probably control policy. Her first choice was Lillian Horsford, her close personal friend and Eben Horsford's unmarried daughter. [58](#) She would bring both the Horsford money and a liberal point of view to the board.

Pauline Durant, however, did not want any new trustees. She thought the board was already too large and interfered too much with running her dear husband's college, and Alice complained to George, "These are discouraging days whenever I get a glimpse of her feeling concerning the management." Mrs. Durant rejected most of the names proposed by Freeman as not "evangelically sound." Alice felt that Durant was so sensitive to change that any rash word would endanger the college. [59](#) It was George who was assigned the job of checking the opinions of Judge Bradley, the only potential trustee to whom Mrs. Durant reacted favorably. [60](#) A week later George provided Alice with an annotated list of possible trustees all of whom would back Freeman in a crisis. [61](#) George suggested she let Durant pick three from this list. She replied: "You help me so much in my trustee work as in every item of all my affairs. Thank you for this letter so full of your heart and head." [62](#) By this time managing Wellesley College was clearly a joint enterprise. Freeman could no longer, or at least thought she could no longer, handle her administrative responsibilities without Palmer's help.

Meanwhile, slowly but surely, through the combined efforts of Alice and George, progress was made in long-range plans for Wellesley's future. The trustee issue came to a head at the February meeting, an all-day session where the president put forth her nominees: Lillian Horsford, John William White, and Daniel Sharp Ford. Another trustee nominated a conservative Baptist whose daughter had attended Wellesley. Pauline Durant protested that there were too many nominations, and anyway she would vote against some. George Palmer's advice on strategy flowed freely at this time. He thought Horsford, the Claflins, Hovey, and McKenzie would provide enough support so that Freeman could get what she wanted from the board. [63](#) And he was right. New trustees were not elected until the June meeting when Lillian Horsford won a place over Pauline Durant's strong objections, and Eustace Fitts, another person on whom Freeman could count, joined the board. [64](#) Henceforth Pauline Durant's power definitely was shaken.



Pauline Durant, cofounder of Wellesley College. (Courtesy of Wellesley College Archives.)

The next major question dealt with the administrative leadership of the college. Palmer still favored a dean who would assume many immediate burdens and be in training for the presidency itself. And by late winter Freeman had found a candidate for the job, another midwesterner, Margaret Evans, preceptress and professor of English at Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota. The two met in Chicago for an interview in early spring. Evans was attracted by the offer but decided prior obligations compelled her refusal. [65](#) In the end the question of administrative leadership was postponed until fall. Whether he was aware of it or not, George Palmer's strategy to make himself indispensable to Alice Freeman in her role as president of Wellesley had worked. She needed and used him every step of the way.

During their courtship George Palmer discussed his work fully with Alice Freeman; his trials and triumphs with publishers, his survey (with an eye to keeping Harvard College a viable option for the poor) of the financial status of Harvard students, his slowly growing acceptance by the Harvard establishment both as scholar and as friend. He talked of what his contributions to Harvard were and might be in the future, and where his scholarly interests would take him, his discourse with students, even the examination papers he read. He did not, however, ask Alice Freeman's advice about his career. That counsel which she frequently asked for herself and which he gave so freely was not expected to be reciprocal.

Another strategy that George Palmer used to lead Alice Freeman both toward marriage and away from the Wellesley presidency was to emphasize the risks of stress and overwork to Alice's health. Her physical condition, which had been relatively stable for several years, began to deteriorate during the fall of 1886. In November she caught a feverish cold that persisted for months. Adding her personal dilemma to her professional problems undoubtedly contributed to the physical stress under which she lived. But long before her illness, George Palmer argued that by marrying him she could ensure her future good health. "In my home you will be stronger for Wellesley, for yourself, for every good purpose for which the Lord made you, than you can possibly be by continuing longer as a public functionary." [66](#) In that same letter George proposed for the first time that Alice marry him, live in Cambridge, and guide Wellesley from the board of trustees rather than as president. His argument was based on the need to preserve her fragile health. It was an argument that he continued to put forth with persistent vigor until she resigned the presidency.

George Palmer was undoubtedly sincere in his concern that if Alice stayed on campus as Wellesley's full-time administrator, tuberculosis would claim her. He had lost one young wife to that disease. Alice's family had a history of fatal consumption. Alice was overworked and overextended, and it was impossible for her to rest in her residential situation. By spring of 1887, when they had already decided to marry, the doctors reported that her disease was accelerating, reinforcing George's conviction that it was "imprudent for your health to manage the college any longer . . . I shall fight stoutly. And I shall not be put off by makeshifts, those pretty plans that demonstrate that while you are still to continue as president, you will have nothing at all to do." [67](#) Her health failed to improve. In summer she was so ill that she had to interrupt her Saginaw-to-Wellesley trip by stopping at a friend's home in New York state. The doctors then advised her that only after a long and complete rest could she continue her work. [68](#) In September she was in bed again and spent many days confined to her room during the fall of 1887.

Since her junior year at Michigan Alice Freeman had frequently been ill. She had had tuberculosis severe enough to precipitate hemorrhages. But she had never consistently taken to her bed before. Even when consumption threatened to overwhelm her in the spring of 1881, she had retreated to the Susquehanna Valley, rested a bit, slept late, gardened and climbed the easier surrounding hills. Now she was frequently in bed. George Palmer's fears for Alice's health were not unrealistic.

To further complicate the decision-making process the Freeman family needed considerable help and support from December of 1886 through the following fall. Alice's mother suffered an acute attack of "inflammatory rheumatism with neuralgia," was bedridden, in considerable pain, and needed constant nursing care. [69](#) Telegrams and letters flowed back and forth, and for weeks on end Alice did not know when she might be summoned to Saginaw. The expenses of nursing care fell on Alice. [70](#) Finally on March 10th Alice left for Saginaw and stayed nearly a month. She found her mother and father frail and old, her mother still bedridden, unable to walk, and in great pain, but continuing her interest in temperance and women's reform causes and every morning dictating letters that she could no longer write herself to carry on with her public work. [71](#) The family considered taking her to a sanitarium such as Battle Creek or Arkansas Hot Springs, but they felt they could not safely move her. [72](#) And all the Freemans were ailing with the usual assortment of winter colds and influenza.

The family's financial situation was also precarious. Despite her father's and Fred's flourishing practice much less had been done about freeing them from debt than Alice had hoped. They still owed six thousand dollars; expenses were high. They had built a new house the previous summer and had three extra servants to care for her mother. [73](#) George provided Alice with what emotional support he could from a distance, suggesting they would work out her family's money problems together "by a rigid campaign of economy and thoughtfulness." [74](#) Although the Freeman family may not yet have known Alice and George were betrothed, they were aware of the seriousness of Alice's attachment to George Palmer and that fact seems to have added to their insecurity. Undoubtedly everyone wondered how much longer they would be able to count on Alice's unstinting financial aid. However, when she returned to Saginaw for two weeks after commencement in June, she found Fred again in good health and her father no worse. As usual Ella and her husband were "not quite strong." Her mother was "much better than I feared" but not yet up to a long journey, and Fred predicted that she would not live long. [75](#) Of course both parents outlived Alice by many years. Now, however, the family's financial burdens were on Alice's shoulders, and on her return trip to Wellesley, it was Alice who became so ill she had to break her journey to recuperate. [76](#)

That fall Ella and Charlie Talmadge became a further drain on Alice. Charlie had decided to train for the ministry in Boston, and during Alice's hectic last months at Wellesley, Ella lived at Norumbega with her. George disapproved emphatically. He constantly urged Alice to have Ella make other living arrangements, and Alice promised, but nothing was ever done. [77](#)

Meanwhile the issue of George's previous marriage had to be resolved. Although preoccupation with a relationship long since terminated by death sounds strange to twentieth-century ears, Ellen, and Alice's relationship to Ellen, was something with which both George and Alice felt they must deal. The first summer that they knew one another, George gave Alice the letters from

his first courtship and marriage to read. He protested almost too much that Alice did not replace Ellen, but was a quite different attachment. However, both Alice and George seemed to need Ellen's approval. He wrote: "I only know that my honor for her and gratitude are not as a fact interfered with as you take possession of me. I used to tell her I should marry again if I could ever love anybody as I loved her, but I did not see how this could ever be possible. It has not been possible during these eight years, but how great you have made it so. I thank you and I believe in heaven Ellen herself does." [78](#) And Alice many times wrote to George in this vein, "how tenderly I think of her, always, or reverence her dear memory." [79](#) His family also felt compelled to meld Alice into Ellen. When Alice paid a first visit to Mary Palmer, wife of George's brother Fred, Mary wrote to George: "Of course Nell [Ellen] is strong in her. Neither I nor Nell could love her if she were not. . . . How Nell would have rejoiced in her, and she in Nell." [80](#) One way to explain this concern is to assume their belief in a literal resurrection when the three spirits would be compelled to face each other. Or perhaps they half believed, as did Susan B. Anthony, that marriage was so binding that second marriages after the death of one partner were sacrilegious and unacceptable. [81](#)

In all the courtship negotiations a crucial question, whether or not they should have children, was never mentioned. When Alice Freeman died many eulogists at her various memorial services suggested that the absence of children was a disappointment to the Palmers, and that they substituted attachments to Harvard and Radcliffe undergraduates, especially Lucy Sprague, who became a surrogate daughter. George Palmer in his memoir does not mention the absence of children, painting his idyllic portrait of their marriage, acknowledging no disappointments or lacks. Alice became sentimentally attached to Fred Palmer's small son and seemed always to have enjoyed children. When the Palmers married she was only thirty-two, hardly past child-bearing age. George was in his forties, but certainly not too old for parenting. However, in all their planning for the future the possibility of children is never mentioned. After they had been married several years George did allude in a letter to the absence of children. When commenting on the death of the son of a friend he wrote that "I declare such a thing makes me glad we have no child," and Alice once wrote George from Saginaw: "Father pathetically asks me where his grandchildren are, and I tell him it isn't my fault. . . . When he comes East he may give you a scolding." [82](#) Perhaps George dared not jeopardize Alice's fragile health with a pregnancy. He had already lost one wife to consumption.

3

George Palmer wanted to announce the engagement as soon as Alice accepted his ring, but Alice insisted she must first tell her family, interview Margaret Evans of Carleton College as possible dean, and pick an auspicious time to tell Pauline Durant. Their differences over this question were strongly felt, and they came as close to quarreling as any time during their courtship. But George eventually capitulated, "Our sole thought must be Wellesley's interest." [83](#)

Alice conceived the happy thought that breaking the news to Pauline Durant around the time of Durant's own wedding anniversary on May 23rd would make Alice's marriage more palatable. She also made the announcement by letter to allow Durant time to react. Durant responded by

letter, stunned, ambivalent, but unable on that "sacred day" of her own life to be completely negative. And she closed, "with warm love, your friend in trial." [84](#) Once Pauline had assimilated the news, she was "loving and sympathetic" in two long talks with Alice, but adamant that the trustees not be informed until the three, Palmer, Freeman and Durant, had made "definite plans for the college." [85](#) Pauline immediately suggested building the couple a house on campus, assuming Alice would stay on as Wellesley's president. To sweeten the shock and help Pauline feel she was being consulted in all the planning, she was invited to chaperone Alice for a Boxford visit and intimate consultations in early June. [86](#) The trustees were finally told in July. [87](#) Freeman did not resign and promised to guide the college until a successor could be found, and the trustees expressed the hope that she continue as president for the coming year if not longer. Meanwhile, George unsuccessfully pressed for an August wedding. He did not get his way. Freeman resigned, effective at the end of the fall term in December, at the September trustees meeting. [88](#)

Once their engagement was announced, the couple could do things openly that had previously been clandestine. In late September they again took the boat from Fall River to New York, this time for Augustus Palmer's wedding at Poughkeepsie. [89](#) They enjoyed supper alone in George's rooms in Cambridge after an October Saturday afternoon spent inspecting possible houses, [90](#) and a Boxford weekend together when the fall color was in its height. [91](#) But these happy interludes did not solve the problems of Wellesley's future.

Since April the possibility that George become president of Wellesley had engaged Alice's interest. By working together, none of her hopes, programs, and long-range plans would be in jeopardy. George was more than reluctant. Following a long discussion in his brother's office he wrote:

I would do it if it were necessary for your health, or even if I believed your powers were to be paralyzed by change of duty. But I have been long in building up an influence here which I must not lightly abandon. I am sure you would find it somewhat humiliating to see me marry into a position. You would like to have me stand on my own two feet. I do that here, and you will stand by my side, my strong support. But I will not insist. Do with me as you see fit. [92](#)

Obviously George did not see it humiliating to Alice if she married into a position. However Alice did not abandon this solution to her dilemma. In September she relayed arguments of Trustee Willcox urging Palmer to accept the presidency, "that only thus can Wellesley be saved." [93](#) But George was now unequivocal in his rejection, declaring he would refuse the presidency on all terms.

Alice hoped to find a way she could marry and continue to live in Wellesley. During the summer when she had not yet consented to give up the presidency, she found a "pretty new cottage near the Station--just finished and, entrancingly convenient for perfect housekeeping." She would no longer have to live at Norumbega, she would not have to catch trains, and she was sure Harvard would not mind George's commuting to Cambridge. [94](#) But George intended to retain his Harvard base. He replied obliquely to her appeal with talk of possible Cambridge houses they might rent. [95](#) George Palmer eventually chose a house as close to the Yard as possible.

By the October trustees meeting, the basic decisions on the future governance of the college had been reached. Alice finally had relinquished the idea of continuing as president or installing George in that role. She had chosen Helen Shafer, professor of mathematics, as her successor. [96](#) Daughter of a Congregational clergyman, educated at Oberlin as were so many early women educators, gifted teacher and careful planner, she was to meet Wellesley's needs in a businesslike, if not inspiring incumbency. [97](#) Although not elected formally as a trustee until after her resignation took effect, Freeman fully intended to lend help and counsel from the board. It was agreed that the financial affairs of the college would be removed from Pauline Durant's supervision and placed in the hands of a bursar who valiantly tried during the following years to reduce the deficit and debt and sort out the tangled web of endowment and expenditure that he had inherited. [98](#) Although the problem of Wellesley's debts would not be solved for fifteen years, the beginning steps had been taken to put Wellesley on a firm financial footing.

4

By September Alice and George had decided to marry at the end of the term, and George was seriously looking for the temporary rental of a furnished house in Cambridge that would permit them to go abroad in June if his plans for a sabbatical year were realized. They began compiling a list of wedding guests and she started to plan her trousseau. At the end of October, he found a home, at 497 Broadway in Cambridge, "a pretty nearly perfect one, near the College Yard, of good size, and full of sunshine. It is exquisitely furnished, and we can have it at no great price until next summer. Will see it after Thursday's concert." [99](#)

Although they needed to economize, their economic outlook also seemed brighter. Instead of a combined income of \$7,500, they would have to live on George's \$3,500. For years Alice had lived in college and could spend freely on herself and her family. Now two would have to live on less than she did. However, George Palmer was promised a raise when senior philosophy professor, Francis Bowen, retired the next summer. George cautioned that "we are obliged to live snugly. But economics, when we are of one mind, are only an interesting game." [100](#) Certainly they lived very comfortably the rest of their lives. Generous wedding presents assisted with their immediate needs. Eben Horsford provided \$5,000 toward the European journey, and Edwin Abbott presented them with \$500, certainly princely gifts in the 1880s. [101](#) George's Aunt Hattie provided brass andirons, Carla Wenckebach sent a picture, and the Wellesley faculty spent over \$200 on an expensive vase. Plates, spoons, and cut glass dishes arrived daily. [102](#)

As the wedding date drew near, Alice became increasingly aware of the finality of her decision. She queried George about second thoughts, but she was really thinking of herself. As she wondered if he was somewhat "disturbed in your mind," she confessed. "I am not ready to leave the College. I am not ready to be married, I have made no proper preparations, I have taken no training, and my work here is not done. But I walk as happily as a child to a holiday--or any happy girl to meet her lover." [103](#) However she spent her last days at the college in bed. She dared not go to chapel for fear of breaking down. She said her goodbyes to the students through one of her associates, and to George she uttered a cry from her heart: "The College life is all over! And I feel like an empty-handed, lonely creature. But I have you dearest! I say it over and

over to quiet my heart." [104](#) Her decision was not easy. Her ambivalence showed to the very end.



Alice Freeman in her wedding dress. (Courtesy of Wellesley College Archives.)

Alice Freeman as a mature New Woman wished to continue to be someone who shaped her own life and her own goals, who took her own risks and was responsible for her own actions. This was the way she had governed her life since she was seventeen, for the fifteen years of her adulthood. But for the last five years, during her presidency, hers had been a lonely road. She found herself distanced from old friends like Lucy Andrews and Angie Chapin who were now on the faculty she led as well as her old friends. She increasingly needed to protect herself from her ever-demanding family. The normal women's networks on which she had relied for so long could no longer effectively provide her with emotional sustenance. Either women needed things of her or she needed things of them, and all her relationships were tuned to the needs of Wellesley College. George Palmer appeared at a crucial time in her life. She was alone and overextended. She needed support. Once more she saw marriage as an alternative. But neither did she wish to relinquish her long-cherished independence. She was confronted with the choice of her life, and making that choice was her most difficult decision. She wanted both worlds, but at her time and place in history she could not have them.

The reaction of friends and the public to Alice Freeman's decision had not made her choice easier. Mary Claflin was angry and "full of soreness," although like Pauline Durant, she soon became an enthusiastic supporter of the match. [105](#) The Wellesley faculty was stunned, apprehensive, and, of course, insecure. Anna Newman, superintendent of Norumbega Cottage, wrote Eben Horsford:

For myself I am bitterly disappointed, and I believe I never faced the work of a year with such an utter lack of courage as I look forward to this. If I could see that it meant relief from care and rest from the already heavy burdens for the dear Princess I would try and not think of myself at Norumbega, but I cannot see that the contemplated change means anything but leaving a burden to which she is accustomed and taking up a greater of which she only knows the pleasant side.

[106](#)

Despite initial sadness, the students eventually accepted their "princess's marriage" with girlish enthusiasm.

George Palmer later admitted that to pass their marriage by with a bare record, although he saw it as a very private matter, would be unfair because it presented certain problems of general public concern. "It excited much public debate at the time, and probably influenced more people for good or ill than any other event of her life." He also admitted that some trustees and faculty initially were unable to see "why marrying should break her career and leave mine intact." [107](#) He argued that by 1887 Freeman's task at Wellesley was essentially complete, but Freeman herself did not think so. The only sensible, realistic reason he ever advanced for cutting short her

career was that had they lived in Wellesley with Freeman as president, her backbreaking schedule would have continued and her health been permanently impaired. [108](#) Her friend the educator and commentator Lyman Abbott thought many of her friends and the public saw her as "giving up a position of great influence and power for a minor position," despite her reassurances to the contrary. [109](#) As one supporter wrote in a letter to the editor, Freeman had "weighed the question of duty" and believed she could now do even more for education, that her coming marriage was in no way abandonment of her work as an educator. [110](#) But the feeling was widespread that she had betrayed a trust. As a woman she had accepted a position of influence and responsibility which she was now abdicating for purely selfish, personal reasons, thereby to many, not only women, she had betrayed her sex. [111](#)

Alice Freeman was not the only Wellesley academic to face the dilemma. In 1884 a colleague who married was invited to remain on the faculty and live outside the college. She chose instead to resign. [112](#) Young women academics frequently married in the late nineteenth century. In fact, the *Wellesley Annals* for 1883-84, commenting on the marital plans of instructors Parker, Jencks, and Foote, suggested that "there must be something in the atmosphere of the office which makes it incapable of supporting a life of single blessedness. One by one, faces to which we have turned in our anxieties, have gone to brighter less official places." [113](#) But Alice Freeman was no young novice teacher. By 1887, she was America's most visible and prestigious woman educator, and she was expected to devote her life to her chosen mission. Only about half the first generation of graduates of the women's colleges married, and they married later than the general population. As Jill Conway has pointed out, "They could not accept conventional marriage because their minds had been trained along lines which required discipline and independent effort, and they expected to put this training to a practical use which was not to be found within the narrow confines of domestic life." [114](#) Alice Freeman could accept marriage for herself, but many others saw betrayal in this acceptance.

And so George and Alice came together, the soon-to-be eminent philosopher and the lady college president, passionately but tentatively pursuing the path to matrimony. Alice Freeman truly wanted to marry. She expected thereby to find a fulfillment that serving the myriad needs of institution and individual could not provide. She loved George, and a sexuality that had always been close to the surface had been fully awakened by someone she could respect intellectually. The Cambridge milieu itself undoubtedly was attractive. As Charles Eliot Norton once told George (long before he knew of their attachment), Alice Freeman must find her life as president of Wellesley a lonely one. It was not lonely in the sense that loving, caring people were always around her, but it was lonely in that until George Palmer courted her she had no one with whom to share freely Wellesley's problems. She met his sympathetic concern with an avid hunger.

Who won at the bargaining table? One could certainly interpret it as a victory for George Palmer. He had captured a woman everyone loved, everyone respected, everyone (of any importance) knew, and who was undoubtedly the most prominent woman educator in the United States. He had given up nothing. And as he was committed to making a name for himself in higher education, she could only prove an asset. She had lost her position, her income, her mission and gained only a lover, a husband, and a companion. She was eventually to solve the dilemma, but the solution was inherent in her, not in the marriage.

The ceremony was performed at Governor and Mrs. Claflin's house on Mt. Vernon Street in Boston at 11:30 a.m. on the morning of December 23rd. The Reverend Doctor Herrick of Worcester was the chief officiant assisted by George's brother Fred and Alice's brother-in-law, Charles Talmadge. Although her family was present, the bride was attended not by her sister but by three small Claflin nieces. Six Harvard students acted as ushers. The bride wore a white moiré silk gown with a short train and a tulle veil fastened with lilies of the valley. It was a fashionable occasion. President Charles Eliot of Harvard, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and Phillip Brooks were among the guests, and the wedding breakfast table was "trimmed from head to foot with rare flowers in pretty designs." [115](#)

The Palmers caught the 4:15 train to Boxford where they spent the next ten days. Alice wrote to her parents the next day that George's farm tenants had a delicious supper on the table for them "which I was hungry enough to eat" and after supper she lay on the lounge and George read aloud Tennyson's *The Princess*, whose title the Wellesley girls had conferred on her years before. The Wellesley undergraduates' "Princess" had now been safely sequestered by George in his very own castle. The weather was fine, the sleighing enticing; moonlight and sunlight and walks in the woods competed with letter writing and sending out the 1,700 announcements. [116](#)

Both Harvard and Wellesley were eager to honor the bride and groom, and glittering receptions and dinners given by President Eliot, the Horsfords, and others would follow, but Alice insisted Wellesley must be granted the first reception on January 9th, soon after the students had returned from Christmas break. A student, Emma Emerson, wrote home:

Monday night's reception is the chief topic now. It is going to be a grand affair. All the faculty are having new dresses for it. There are to be refreshments (caterers from Boston, I suppose) in the parlor. The Beethoven Society are to have their refreshments in the dining room by themselves. There are 500 invitations sent out. We are lucky to get any at all we think. [117](#)



The atrium of College Hall, where the College's reception in honor of George and Alice Palmer's marriage was held. (Courtesy of Wellesley College Archives.)

And after the gala event had occurred, the same undergraduate reported:

She looked very handsome and carried a handsome bouquet of flowers. Professor Palmer was simply dressed in black. He looked very nice, of course, but he wasn't the principal object of attention. [118](#)

Only seniors received invitations, and the students who were not invited lined the bannisters on all four floors of the great central atrium in College Hall. The bride acknowledged them by throwing kisses. The Palmers stayed the night in college and Alice led chapel the next morning. [119](#)

Although she was to be much on the Wellesley campus for the rest of her life, she was not to live there again. And the students sentimentalized in the *Annals* that

Only after she had gone did Wellesley realize what Miss Freeman had been to her--a guide and inspiration, a presence of light and courage, a law by whose standard we were wont to adjust ourselves, a gospel whose high aim for us we endeavored to make our own. [120](#)

Poor Helen Shafer, what a burden to assume. In her papers is a penciled fragment in her own hand: "not often is a new executive called to conditions more difficult on the personal side, the retiring president's magnetic qualities and brilliant career having engendered the belief that the college could not be carried on successfully without her." [121](#)

For Alice Freeman Palmer the options had narrowed considerably, but the dilemma was not yet resolved. She was George Palmer's wife and no longer president of Wellesley, but she would still find ways to occupy her position as the United States' foremost woman educator. The New Woman was still evolving.

Chapter Seven Notes

[1](#) George Herbert Palmer said that he and Alice Freeman first met in 1884 at the home of Eben Horsford (Palmer, *Life*, 169). This may be correct, but their friendship and growing intimacy clearly dates from the spring of 1886.

[2](#) Many of these courtship letters are available in published form. See Hazard, *Academic Courtship*. A complete file of the original letters including those for the rest of their lives are deposited as part of George Palmer's papers in the Houghton Library, Harvard University. I have looked at these letters to compare them for completeness with the typescripts prepared for Caroline Hazard's use and deposited in the Wellesley College Archives. All citations in this book are to the Wellesley collection rather than the originals in the Houghton except for the period 1897-1900. No Wellesley typescripts exist for those years, and I have used the Houghton materials. A very few original letters between Alice and George are in the Alice Freeman Palmer Papers, Wellesley College Archives, and not part of the typescripts. The Freeman-Palmer correspondence is, of course, supplemented by other Freeman papers at Wellesley.

[3](#) Hazard, *Academic Courtship*, ix.

[4](#) For a comprehensive picture of courtship and marriage in the last decades of the nineteenth century see Ellen K. Rothman, *Hands and Hearts: A History of Courtship in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), pts. 2-3.

[5](#) George Herbert Palmer to Alice Freeman, May 26, 1886. Wellesley Typescripts.

[6](#) Alice Freeman to George Herbert Palmer, May 26, 1886. Wellesley Typescripts.

[7](#) George Herbert Palmer to Alice Freeman, June 2, 1886. Wellesley Typescripts.

[8](#) Alice Freeman Palmer to George Herbert Palmer, June 7, 1886. Wellesley Typescripts.

[9](#) Actually, she was being called on by a Harvard French professor during these months, but he did not interest her romantically.

[10](#) Mitchell, *Two Lives*, 124; Palmer, *Life*, 280.

[11](#) Alice Freeman Palmer to George Herbert Palmer, July 29, 1886. Wellesley Typescripts.

[12](#) George Herbert Palmer to Alice Freeman, July 23, 1886. Wellesley Typescripts.

[13](#) George Herbert Palmer to Alice Freeman, July 30, 1886. Wellesley Typescripts.

[14](#) Ibid.

[15](#) George Herbert Palmer to Alice Freeman, August 15, 1886. Wellesley Typescripts.

[16](#) George Herbert Palmer to Alice Freeman, June 23, 1887. Wellesley Typescripts.

[17](#) George Herbert Palmer to Alice Freeman, August 5, 1886. Wellesley Typescripts. In *Academic Courtship* Carolyn Hazard dated this July 1886.

[18](#) The letters between George Palmer and Ellen Wellman, as well as many to his family, are part of the Alice Freeman Palmer Papers at Wellesley. He had given Alice the letters to read before their marriage. There are many similarities to the Freeman-Palmer correspondence. George wrote equally ardent letters to both women.

[19](#) These paragraphs are based on George Herbert Palmer's biography by William Ernest Hocking in the *Dictionary of American Biography*, 7:180-82; George Herbert Palmer, *The Autobiography of a Philosopher* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1930), 3-40; and George Palmer's correspondence with his family and Ellen Wellman Palmer in the Wellesley College Archives.

[20](#) Hocking, *Dictionary of American Biography*, 7:181.

[21](#) Scudder, *On Journey*, 64-65; Mitchell, *Two Lives*, 121.

[22](#) Scudder, *On Journey*, 64-65.

[23](#) Mitchell, *Two Lives*, 123. Joyce Antler in her biography of Lucy Sprague Mitchell makes George Palmer, I believe unfairly, into a pompous, self-important, small-minded man (*Lucy Sprague Mitchell: The Making of a Modern Woman* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987]), chap. 5. Lucy herself certainly did not share Antler's assessment and viewed Palmer with affection and admiration.

[24](#) George Herbert Palmer to Alice Freeman, March 19, 1887. Wellesley Typescripts.

[25](#) Scudder, *On Journey*, 65.

[26](#) Palmer, *Life*, 173.

[27](#) George Herbert Palmer to Alice Freeman, January 30, 1887. Wellesley Typescripts.

[28](#) Ibid.

[29](#) Vesey, *Emergence*, 204.

[30](#) George Herbert Palmer to Alice Freeman, April 21, 1887. Wellesley Typescripts.

[31](#) George Herbert Palmer to Alice Freeman, September 5, 1886. Wellesley Typescripts.

[32](#) Ibid.

[33](#) Alice Freeman to George Herbert Palmer, October 22, 1886. Wellesley Typescripts.

[34](#) Alice Freeman to George Herbert Palmer, September 1, 1886. This letter is found in Hazard, *Academic Courtship*, 41-43.

[35](#) George Herbert Palmer to Alice Freeman, November 7, 1886, Wellesley Typescripts; Hazard, *Academic Courtship*, 61-62.

[36](#) Alice Freeman to George Herbert Palmer, December 13, 1886. Wellesley Typescripts.

[37](#) Ibid.

[38](#) George Herbert Palmer to Alice Freeman, November 4, 1886. Wellesley Typescripts.

[39](#) George Herbert Palmer to Alice Freeman, January 1887, Wellesley Typescripts; Hazard, *Academic Courtship*, 95- 96.

[40](#) George Herbert Palmer to Alice Freeman, December 3, 1886. Wellesley Typescripts. Hazard, *Academic Courtship*, 74.

[41](#) Ibid.

[42](#) George Herbert Palmer to Alice Freeman, December 4, 1886. Wellesley Typescripts.

[43](#) George Herbert Palmer to Alice Freeman, December 3, 1886. Wellesley Typescripts. Hazard, *Academic Courtship*, 74.

[44](#) George Herbert Palmer to Mary Palmer, undated [summer 1886]. Wellesley Typescripts.

[45](#) George Herbert Palmer to Alice Freeman, August 30, 1886. Wellesley Typescripts.

[46](#) George Herbert Palmer to Alice Freeman, September 17, 27; October 6, 1886; Alice Freeman to George Herbert Palmer, September 24, 1886. Wellesley Typescripts.

[47](#) George Herbert Palmer to Alice Freeman, October 19, 1886. Wellesley Typescripts.

[48](#) George Herbert Palmer to Alice Freeman, November 14, 15, 21, 1886. Wellesley Typescripts.

[49](#) George Herbert Palmer to Alice Freeman, December 24, 25, 1886; Alice Freeman to George Herbert Palmer, December 26, 1886. Wellesley Typescripts.

[50](#) George Herbert Palmer to Alice Freeman, January 19, 24, 1887. Wellesley Typescripts.

[51](#) George Herbert Palmer to Alice Freeman, November 24, 1886. Wellesley Typescripts.

[52](#) George Herbert Palmer to Alice Freeman, 21, November 15, 1886. Wellesley Typescripts. Karen Lystra's study, *Searching the Heart: Women, Men, and Romantic Love in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989) lays to rest the myth of women's passionlessness as a characteristic of Victorian courtship and marriage. The Palmers' attitudes toward sex are reflected in a letter from George to Alice much later. He ridicules a new novel that he had just read, *The Heavenly Twins*, because "sexual desire is thought of as an incidental affair, having no necessary connection with life, but permitted by all bad men and possibly by good husbands on separable occasions." Somehow, he says, the novel makes sex about as important as a taste for sea bathing. (George Herbert Palmer to Alice Freeman, April 12, 1894. Wellesley Typescripts.) The Palmers knew better.

[53](#) George Herbert Palmer to Alice Freeman, December 15, 1886. Wellesley Typescripts.

[54](#) George Herbert Palmer to Alice Freeman, March 30, 1887. Wellesley Typescripts.

[55](#) George Herbert Palmer to Alice Freeman, May 5, 1887. Wellesley Typescripts. Hazard, *Academic Courtship*, 162-64.

[56](#) Alice Freeman to George Herbert Palmer, December 18, 1886. Wellesley Typescripts.

[57](#) Minutes of the Board of Trustees, February 3, 1887. Wellesley College Archives.

[58](#) Alice Freeman to George Herbert Palmer, January 3, 1887, Wellesley Typescripts.

[59](#) Alice Freeman to George Herbert Palmer, January 18, 1887. Wellesley Typescripts. Hazard, *Academic Courtship*, 96-98. Only part of the letter is reproduced in Hazard.

[60](#) Alice Freeman to George Herbert Palmer, January 18, 1887; George Herbert Palmer to Alice Freeman, January 19, 1887. Wellesley Typescripts.

[61](#) George Herbert Palmer to Alice Freeman, January 24, 1887. Wellesley Typescripts.

[62](#) Alice Freeman to George Herbert Palmer, January 25, 1887. Wellesley Typescripts. Hazard, *Academic Courtship*, 102.

[63](#) Alice Freeman to George Herbert Palmer, February 3, 1887. George Herbert Palmer to Alice Freeman, February 7, 1887. Wellesley Typescripts.

[64](#) Alice Freeman to George Herbert Palmer, June 4, 1887. Minutes of the Board of Trustees, June 21, 1887. Wellesley College Archives.

[65](#) Alice Freeman to George Herbert Palmer, March 30, April 1, 2, 4, June 4, 1887. Wellesley Typescripts. H. C. Wilson, "Margaret Evans Huntington," a manuscript talk in Margaret Evans Papers, Carleton College Archives. Evans had a B.A. and M.A. from Lawrence College and had studied in Paris and Berlin in 1878-79.

[66](#) George Herbert Palmer to Alice Freeman, August 6, 1886. Wellesley Typescripts.

[67](#) George Herbert Palmer to Alice Freeman, May 22, 1887. Wellesley Typescripts. Hazard, *Academic Courtship*, 175-79.

[68](#) Alice Freeman to George Herbert Palmer, July 2, 9, 10, 1887. Wellesley Typescripts. Hazard includes some of these letters, *Academic Courtship*, 196-97.

[69](#) Alice Freeman to George Herbert Palmer, December 6, 16, 26, 1886. Wellesley Typescripts.

[70](#) George Herbert Palmer to Mary Palmer, February 23, 1887. Alice Freeman Palmer Papers, Wellesley College Archives.

[71](#) Alice Freeman to George Herbert Palmer, March 12, 13, 1887. Wellesley Typescripts.

[72](#) Alice Freeman to George Herbert Palmer, March 27, 1887. Wellesley Typescripts.

[73](#) Ibid.; Hazard, *Academic Courtship*, 149-53.

[74](#) George Herbert Palmer to Alice Freeman, March 30, 1887. Wellesley Typescripts.

[75](#) Alice Freeman to George Herbert Palmer, June 25, 1887. Wellesley Typescripts.

[76](#) Alice Freeman to George Herbert Palmer, July 2, 1887. Wellesley Typescripts.

[77](#) For example, see George Palmer to Alice Freeman, October 5, 1887; Alice Freeman to George Palmer, October 4, 1887. Wellesley Typescripts. The Talmadge's two babies had both died of diphtheria at Christmas 1881, Alice's first year as president (Alice Freeman to Eben Horsford, April 13, 1882. Photocopies, Eben Horsford Papers).

[78](#) George Herbert Palmer to Alice Freeman, December 24, 1886. Wellesley Typescripts. Hazard, *Academic Courtship*, 86.

[79](#) Alice Freeman to George Herbert Palmer, November 19, 1886. Wellesley Typescripts.

[80](#) Mary Palmer to George Herbert Palmer, undated 1886. Alice Freeman Palmer Papers, Wellesley College Archives.

[81](#) Kathleen Barry, *Susan B. Anthony: A Biography of a Singular Feminist* (New York: New York University Press, 1988), 231.

[82](#) George Herbert Palmer to Alice Freeman Palmer, April 15, 1892; Alice Freeman Palmer to George Herbert Palmer, April 25, 1894. Wellesley Typescripts. George's grandniece was told by her grandmother, Eric Palmer's wife, that George did not want to have children because he felt they would interfere with the Palmers' intellectual lives but that a concern for her health was a factor in the decision (Helen Palmer Avery to Ruth Bordin, June 21, 1991).

[83](#) George Herbert Palmer to Alice Freeman, March 1887; see also February 23, 26, 28, 1887; Alice Freeman to George Herbert Palmer, February 24, 1887. Wellesley Typescripts. These letters are in Hazard, *Academic Courtship*, 124, 108, 114, 118-19, 112.

[84](#) Pauline Durant to Alice Freeman, May 23, 1887. Alice Freeman Palmer Papers, Wellesley College Archives.

[85](#) Alice Freeman to George Herbert Palmer, May 24, 1887. Wellesley Typescripts. Hazard, *Academic Courtship*, 181-82.

[86](#) George Herbert Palmer to Alice Freeman, June 5, 1887. Wellesley Typescripts.

[87](#) Alice Freeman to George Herbert Palmer, July 9, 1887. Wellesley Typescripts. Hazard, *Academic Courtship*, 201-2. Minutes of the Executive Committee, July 11, 1887, Wellesley College Archives.

[88](#) Minutes of the Executive Committee, September 14, 1887. Wellesley College Archives.

[89](#) George Herbert Palmer to Alice Freeman, September 24, 1887. Wellesley Typescripts. Hazard, *Academic Courtship*, 235-36.

[90](#) George Herbert Palmer to Alice Freeman, October 7, 1887. Wellesley Typescripts.

[91](#) George Herbert Palmer to Alice Freeman, October 11, 1887. Wellesley Typescripts.

[92](#) Alice Freeman to George Herbert Palmer, September 6, 1887. Wellesley Typescripts. Hazard, *Academic Courtship*, 227-29. Unlike Alice Freeman who had a fulfilling career that she could use to bargain with George Palmer, Helen Magill who received the first American Ph.D. given to a woman and who married Andrew Dickson White in 1890 failed to establish herself in academia. She had no such chips to use in her negotiations with White. Altschuler, *Better than Second Best*, 105.

[93](#) Alice Freeman to George Herbert Palmer, September 6, 1887. Wellesley Typescripts. Hazard, *Academic Courtship*, 227-29.

[94](#) Alice Freeman to George Herbert Palmer, July 20, 1887. Wellesley Typescripts. Hazard, *Academic Courtship*, 208-12.

[95](#) George Herbert Palmer to Alice Freeman, July 20, 1887. Wellesley Typescripts.

[96](#) Minutes of the Executive Committee, October 19, 1887. Minutes of the Board of Trustees. Wellesley College Archives.

[97](#) Glasscock, *Wellesley*, 33-41.

[98](#) Minutes of the Executive Committee, October 9, 1887; Alice Freeman to George Herbert Palmer, October 14, 1887. Wellesley Typescripts. Hazard, *Academic Courtship*, 242-43.

[99](#) George Herbert Palmer to Alice Freeman, November 1, 1887. Wellesley Typescripts.

[100](#) George Herbert Palmer to Alice Freeman, November 30, 1887. Wellesley Typescripts.

[101](#) *Diary*, December 23, 1887. Horsford also gave them a dog, Rex, that was their beloved companion until 1902. Alice Freeman to Eben Horsford, June 1887. Photocopies, Eben Horsford Papers.

[102](#) George Herbert Palmer to Alice Freeman, December 20, 1887; Alice Freeman to George Herbert Palmer, December 5, 20, 1887. Wellesley Typescripts.

[103](#) Alice Freeman to George Herbert Palmer, November 7, 1887. Wellesley Typescripts. Hazard, *Academic Courtship*, 243-44.

[104](#) Alice Freeman to George Herbert Palmer, November 7, December 21, 1887. Wellesley Typescripts. Hazard, *Academic Courtship*, 246-48.

[105](#) Alice Freeman to George Herbert Palmer, July 15, 1887. Wellesley Typescripts.

[106](#) Anna Newman to Eben Horsford, August 29, 1887. Photocopies, Eben Horsford Papers.

[107](#) Palmer, *Life*, 173. Nonetheless combining marriage and career was not easily accepted. As late as 1936 at the time Mount Holyoke College was seeking a successor to Mary Wooley, Frances Perkins, then a Mount Holyoke trustee, wrote Rowena Keyes that she thought married women with children ought not to be excluded from consideration but suggested they might better look for a woman in middle age who had childbearing behind her. Frances Perkins as quoted in Anna May Wells, *Miss Marks and Miss Woolley*, 230.

[108](#) Palmer, *Life*, 174-76.

[109](#) Abbott, *Silhouettes*, 78-80. Jessie Bernard sees the academic monastic tradition, which was especially rigid in its application to women, as triggering the public debate that attended Freeman's resignation when she married. People felt that one who had championed the education of women should not abandon the cause for personal gratification. Bernard, *Academic Women*, 206-7.

[110](#) Letter to the editor of the *Press* by J. R. Muller, unidentified clipping, October 13, 1887. Catherine McCamant Scrapbook, Class of 1887 Papers, Wellesley College Archives.

[111](#) President Eliot himself saw her as entering a whole new career and giving "the whole force of her conspicuous example" to disprove the argument of those opposed to higher education for women that advanced training would prevent marriage (Palmer, *A Service*, 76-77).

[112](#) Minutes of the Board of Trustees, February 2, 1884. Wellesley College Archives.

[113](#) *Wellesley Annals*, 1883-84. Wellesley College Archives.

[114](#) Jill Conway, "Perspectives on the History of Women's Education in the United States," *History of Education Quarterly* 14 (Spring 1974): 8; see also Solomon, *Educated Women*, 117-222; Bernard, *Academic Women*, especially 206-7; Mary E. Cookingham, "Blue Stockings, Spinsters, and Pedagogues: Women College Graduates, 1865-1919," *Population Studies* 38 (1984): 349- 64; and Barbara Sicherman, "Colleges and Careers: Historical Perspectives on the Life and Work Patterns of Women College Graduates," manuscript, 1987.

[115](#) Unidentified Clipping, December 1887, from Catherine McCamant Scrapbook, Class of 1887 Papers; *Diary*, December 1887; *Worcester Daily Spy*, December 24, 1887, Wellesley College Archives.

[116](#) Alice Freeman Palmer to parents, December 24, 1887; Alice Freeman Palmer to Anna McCoy, December 24, 1887.

[117](#) Emma Emerson [Dyer] to family, January 8, 1888. Emma Emerson Dyer Papers. Wellesley College Archives.

[118](#) Emma Emerson [Dyer] to family, January 15, 1888. Emma Emerson Dyer Papers. Wellesley College Archives.

[119](#) Ibid.

[120](#) *Wellesley Annals*, 1887-88, 4-5.

[121](#) Undated note. Helen Shafer Papers, Wellesley College Archives.