CHAPTER IV
THE YEARS OF INDECISION
I. SACRAMENTO: 1862–1864

In the cloistered security of Yale and even on the long, untroubled sea voyage, California had been a misty land beyond the horizon offering Sill the promise of adventure, renewed health, spiritual assurance, and a career which would give freedom to his talents. Yet when he landed in San Francisco in March, 1862, he was sharply aware that the “friends, books, leisure, & fair hopes”\(^1\) of the voyage were behind him and before him an unfamiliar land and uncertain prospects. At a distance it had seemed simple to find a place as a teacher.\(^2\) In college he had not questioned the validity of Carlyle’s comment:

> Of all paths a man could strike into, there is, at any given moment, a best path for every man; a thing which, here and now, it were of all things wisest for him to do... to find this path and walk in it, is the one thing needful for him.\(^3\)

But as he wandered with Shearer around busy, mercantile San Francisco, the “best path” must have seemed difficult to fix upon. Certainly the society into which he had come struck him as far removed from perfection. It was a world of things ignoring thoughts. His first reaction to the new land was wonder that any one could live where there was “no culture, no thought, no art.”\(^4\) He who dreamed of being one of the “world’s school-teachers”\(^5\) now found himself in a “raw state” where “every hope & interest centers in Money.”\(^6\) As his dismay at the temper of his surroundings became more fixed, he grew intemperate in his condemnation: “It is horrible to be set down & forced to stay among a set of people who have... almost nothing to make them more valuable than brute beasts, on this earth.”\(^7\) His disappointment

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over the arid spiritual and intellectual climate was shared by Shearer. Even though the latter had attractive prospects, a delightful family, and a law office in which to begin his studies, he too wrote disparagingly of his society:

I don’t like San Francisco. Better a lentil in [the] States than a brawling ox in this town....I absolutely loathe it—when I give a glance at the rascality & heartlessness of people here, for the first time in my life I’m homesick somewhat.  

Much as both young men disliked San Francisco, they had at least companionship there. But even that pleasure was of short duration for Sill. Unable to find work that would support him near Shearer, he travelled up river to Sacramento where his uncle George Rowland was postmaster. Comparing their progress to the journey of Bunyan’s Christian, the two friends had dismissed San Francisco as a “Slough of Despond.” The metaphor would have been literally apt for the state capital, for when Sill arrived late in March Sacramento was devastated by a major flood, one of the worst ever experienced in the state. To the visitor the young city looked like a “dismantled wreck,” a “sort of muddy Venice” where boats supplanted buggies and a young man looking for work could do no better than turn gondolier. That Sill was not being merely literary in his description is demonstrated by the vivid picture of the stricken city appearing in the journals of William H. Brewer, a young geologist who visited Sacramento earlier in the month:

Such a desolate scene I hope never to see again. Most of the city is still under water, and has been for three months.... No description that I can write will give you any adequate conception of the discomfort and wretchedness this must give rise to.... Not a road leading from the city is passable, business is at a dead standstill, everything looks forlorn and wretched. Many houses have partially toppled over; some have been carried from their foundations, several streets (now avenues of water) are blocked up with houses that have floated in them, dead animals lie about here and there—a dreadful picture. I don’t think the city will ever rise from the shock, I don’t see how it can. 

The city was to rise again; but with all the efforts of its citizens turned toward rebuilding, Sill was struck by the absurdity of his