III

Circumstances and the Man: Ezra Cornell

My greatest care now is how to spend this large income to do the greatest good to those who are properly dependent on me, to the poor and to posterity.  

Ezra Cornell

I do not know why it should be so often thought necessary to slander poor people by saying of one’s hero that “he was born of poor but honest parents.” For once let us take the honesty for granted. Both of Ezra Cornell’s parents were poor, and both were of New England stock. Perhaps it should be added that both were Quakers: that admirable fellowship whose members have fared well in the world by adhering to three fundamental articles of faith—the inner light, the brotherhood of man, and, in the City of Brotherly Love at least, as I have been told, five per cent ground rent. Elijah, the father of Ezra, conformed well enough, I dare say, to the first two articles, but he had little occasion to practice the third. Born in Swansea, Bristol County, Massachusetts, he became a journeyman potter and sometime school teacher. From Swansea he moved to Westchester Landing on the Bronx River, and there, on July 4, 1805, he married Eunice Barnard, whose father belonged to the adventurous company of New England sea captains sailing out of New Bedford for the Grand Banks. It was here, at Westchester Landing, to these good people of New England ancestry and Quaker convictions, that Ezra Cornell was born on January 11, 1807.

During the boy’s early years the family moved about a good deal, seeking better fortunes in various nearby towns; but finally in 1819 they moved out west to De Ruyter, New York. Ezra was
then twelve years old, the eldest of six children, the youngest an infant in arms. The long journey was made by the family of eight in a covered wagon, drawn by two horses, and loaded with household goods and potter’s implements. Whenever possible they stopped for the night at a farmhouse; more often they had to make do with cooking their meals over a fire by the roadside and sleeping, huddled together, in the wagon. For three weeks, in the chill days and nights of November–December, they thus lived and travelled, moving on to the frontier, land of opportunity.

At De Ruyter Elijah turned to farming, and during the winter months taught the district school, with Ezra one of his pupils. Ezra tells us that “reading, spelling, arithmetic, geography, and grammar were the only branches taught, and it generally required the first month of every winter to regain the knowledge lost during the summer vacation.” We may guess that Ezra was the brightest and most diligent pupil. Then or later, certainly, he learned all of these branches of knowledge well enough. But he seems to have taken a special interest in arithmetic. At the age of sixteen, at all events, he got himself a “Cyphering Book” in which he did sums—“I have just got 503 sums to this date,” so the record runs in 1824. This was his last year of schooling, and to pay for it he and his brother cleared four acres of forest, cutting the timber for lumber and firewood, pulling the stumps and burning the brush.¹

With his formal education finished at the age of seventeen, Ezra turned to carpentry, which he picked up with such facility that during the next year he designed and built, with a good deal of neighborly applause, a very sound frame house on his father’s farm. The same year or the next he set out, with nine dollars in his pocket, to make his fortune, working for some three years at carpentry and other trades at Syracuse and Homer; and then, one day in April, 1828, with a little spare cash in his pocket and a box of carpenter’s tools over his shoulder, he walked from De Ruyter to McLean, and the next day went on to Ithaca, catching his first sight of the town, as like as not, as he came up the rise from Free
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Hollow (Forest Home) round Beebe Lake. The first thing he did, according to his brother-in-law, Otis E. Wood, was to enter a hotel and indulge in “one of his Quaker capers. He said to the landlord: ‘If a decent young man were to come along and say that he had had no breakfast and had no money to pay for one, what would you do?’ ‘I would tell him to come in and have something to eat.’ ‘Well,’ said Ezra, ‘here’s your chance.’ When he came out after he had had his breakfast, he put down twenty-five cents. ‘I thought you didn’t have any money,’ says the landlord. ‘No, I didn’t say so. I just wanted to know what you would do if I didn’t have any.’”

When Ezra Cornell came to Ithaca, at the age of twenty-one, he was a tall, angular, physically powerful man. A picture taken at the time discloses a large head, with deeply lobed, protruding ears and high cheek bones. The dark hair, carefully brushed down for the occasion, surmounts and partly conceals a high, well-shaped forehead. Beneath prominent but unaggressive brows, wide-set eyes look out with attention, appraisingly, yet with a certain detachment, as if they were reserving judgment: an impression confirmed by the strong nose and chin, and a mouth that is wide, firmly set, and a bit grim at the corners without being either tight or bitter. Altogether a face that reveals character—the self-reliance of a man who has learned to take it, who proposes to meet without fear or elation a world that he knows to be exacting and unromantic, and to make the most of whatever it may have to offer to one upon whom Fortune has conferred no extraneous favors, no favors at all except good health, tempered courage, and sound common sense.

Such qualities, however, being the essential ones, served the young man well enough. On July 16, 1828, he began to work in Mr. Eddy’s cotton mill, located on the site of the present Cascadilla Hall. The next year he obtained what proved to be a permanent job in Jeremiah Beebe’s plaster and flour mill near the Fall Creek bridge over the present lower lake road. Two years
later, on March 19, 1831, he married Mary Ann Wood, whom he had met at her home in Dryden before coming to Ithaca. To be near the mill, he built a house called "The Nook" about two hundred yards north of Fall Creek, and there his nine children were born. Since Mary Ann was not a Quaker, Ezra was expelled from the fellowship for marrying out of meeting; and it is said that a good Quaker, in the way of duty, walked the forty miles from De Ruyter to inform brother Ezra that he had committed a grave fault, but that he might be reinstated if he would say he was sorry. Ezra replied, with some firmness, that he would never be sorry for the best act of his life. The reply was characteristic. As a young man, and throughout his life, Ezra Cornell formed opinions and reached decisions with a most serene indifference to what others might think or do, and once having formed his opinion or reached his decision he was not disposed to think any better of it because others approved, or any less well because others opposed it. This trait Andrew D. White once described by saying that, in respect to a certain matter, "Mr. Cornell was what he calls 'firm,' but what we rather called 'obstinate.'"  

One essential quality of Ezra Cornell's intelligence was a Yankee flair for manipulating material things and mastering practical affairs—a talent that soon won for him the confidence of his employer and his fellow townsmen. "I commenced working for Mr. Beebe," he says, "in 1829 at repairing his plaster mill at Fall Creek. After the mill was repaired . . . I took a contract of him to grind and measure out to customers 600 tons of plaster for fifty cents per ton. . . . The next first of May, I commenced working for him by the year, taking charge of all his business at Fall Creek at a salary of $350 per annum. . . . The summer of 1830 I . . . blasted the tunnel through the rock to take water from the dam above the falls for the mill. . . . In 1831 we lowered the tunnel four feet, and built a new dam across the creek." Under Ezra's management the business seems to have prospered greatly, so that in 1838–39 he
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designed and supervised the construction of a larger factory, "the most complete of any in the state at that time."  
Meantime, the rising young business man took an active part in the affairs of the community. He subscribed for ten shares in the Tompkins County Bank. He joined the Whig party, and was often to be seen on the counter of John J. Speed's store of an evening, as Theodore Cuyler remembered him, "a shrewd, managing chap—unfolding schemes for carrying the township for the Whig ticket." He was sufficiently esteemed to be elected, in 1837, a delegate to the county convention, and to be asked, in the same year, to address an audience of business men on the subject, highly important at the moment, of bank failures.  
At the age of thirty Ezra Cornell was obviously on the way to become a leading citizen of the community; and on his record one might have expected him to be, at the age of forty-five, the rich man of the town, owner of the principal mills, trustee of the bank, local political tycoon, and no doubt the envied owner of a mansion, on Buffalo Street perhaps, more mistakenly Gothic and pretentious than any that now survive to render that noble thoroughfare gloomy and forbidding.

But this is all pure fancy. At the age of forty-seven Ezra Cornell was, as he tells us in his Cyphering Book, sunk under a mountainous debt of fifty thousand dollars.

Now this, surely, is an odd thing to have happened to a shrewd, hard-headed, prudent young business man; and we naturally ask what could have brought about such an astounding defeat of the practical intelligence and its grasp of affairs. Both circumstances and the man contributed to the defeat, but the man more than the circumstances. The initial circumstance was the panic of 1837, as a consequence of which in 1841 Ezra Cornell, at the age of thirty-four, lost his job. A reverse certainly, but surely not, at the age of thirty-four, a disaster. An ordinary shrewd, prudent young business man would have begun again, got another job in the community, saved his money, and then gone on in the conventional
way to become a solid citizen. But Ezra Cornell was not an ordinary business man, and he did not act quite as an ordinary business man would have done.

Ezra Cornell might be described succinctly as a tough-minded idealist. There are a couple of revealing letters written by him at the age of forty or thereabouts to his son Alonzo, then a lad of about fifteen. He advises the boy, as fathers are apt to do with unnecessary repetition, to study hard; but he recommends to him two rules which he thinks especially useful for the guidance of one’s life. The first is the Golden Rule: “As ye would that others should do unto you, do ye also unto them.” The second he thinks almost equally important: Keep a daily expense account book, do not spend a cent without “putting it down . . . with the name of the article.” A modern version of “trust God and keep your powder dry”! The first rule Ezra observed as well as most men, rather better, in fact; but I suspect that the second was so strongly recommended to the son because it was a counsel of perfection which the father himself could not follow. The daily expense account book is for the near in spirit, who live in hourly fear that on some unguarded occasion a nickel may slip unobserved through their fingers. Ezra Cornell was not at all that kind of man. He was too large-handed to be always pinching the pennies; his own daily expense account books—the few that have been preserved—are rather sad affairs; and even in his major undertakings he was often astonishingly casual in attending to financial details.

The point is that Ezra Cornell cared singularly little either for business or money-making. He had indeed the Yankee flair for gadgets, a hard practical intelligence, a dry salty humorous appreciation of the foibles of men, and a certain talent (not nearly as good as he often thought) for beating them (or, as he said, for “tiring them out”) at their own game. In all this he was as native to these states as Ben Franklin or the Man Who Corrupted Hadleyburg. But with all his grasp of the practical there was in him a marked strain of Quaker mysticism, a fine Quaker feeling that
success in life is not to be attained by prudential insurance against material mischances. His brother-in-law called him a “visionary”; and so, if his grand enterprises had failed, as they came very near doing, he would have been regarded. Above all he was not a prudent man intent upon a small security; or a vain man living in the opinion of others and vulnerable to ridicule; or a self-regarding man reluctant to expose himself by going out on a limb. Not the least dominant of his characteristics, perhaps inherited from his seafaring ancestor, was the impulse to chance it, the dour determination to accomplish at all hazards something out of the ordinary, something that would do him credit and the world no disadvantage. Both his failures and his successes were the result of his serene self-confidence, his willingness to back his own judgment and, throwing prudence to the winds, to gamble, win or lose all, for high stakes.

Let us now return to the activities of the young business man who has lost his job, in order to understand how these various qualities contrived to make him at the age of forty-seven a bankrupt, at the age of fifty-seven a millionaire, and from that moment until the end of his life an open-handed philanthropist.

Having lost one safe job the young man did not scurry around to find another, because a safe job was never what he had most in mind for himself. As early as 1833 he wrote to his father requesting a loan of $800 “to doo business with.” He refers to “my tavern house,” which he insured for $750, and “my barn” adjoining it, which he insured for $100. What after all was a safe job to a man of property with a tavern house and a barn? To a man who was at the same time running Mr. Beebe’s farm, buying fine stock for the farm, and hiring Henry Brooks to work for him for $19 a month, and “keep himself”—yes, and “keep my brother Benjamin” to boot! Besides, he had other interests. In 1841 he visited eastern cities, as an authorized agent, to “dispose of water privileges for manufacturing and other purposes.” He himself built a pottery factory, subscribed for shares in a new company to establish a
woolen mill at Fall Creek, and bought for $160 the patent rights, for Maine and Georgia, of Barnaby and Mooers' recently invented "double mole-board side hill and level land plow." Let the safe job go! All else failing, he would seek his fortune in Maine and Georgia with the double mole-board plow.\textsuperscript{12}

And so, late in 1841 Ezra went to Maine, and in 1843 to Georgia, walking most of the way—a means of travel he preferred to any other. And why not? A strong man, maintaining a good clip, could easily cover forty miles in thirteen hours, thus leaving, out of the twenty-four, two for meals, seven for sleep, and two with nothing whatever to do. An exhilarating and a leisurely life, really, besides enabling one to see the country to best advantage. In this leisurely and care-free way Ezra arrived, in 1843, in Georgia, but only to find, unfortunately, that the only plow needed in that great agricultural state was a hoe in the hand of a slave.\textsuperscript{13}

All this time Mary Ann and the children remained at The Nook, doing the best they could with the garden, and the income from the tavern house and the farm and miscellaneous rentals collected, or not as the case might be, from persons living in "the sellar room" and such odd places. Judging from the letters of E. L. Stuvins, to whom Ezra intrusted the management of his properties during his absence, they were not doing any too well; so that Father Wood had to "come with his lumber wagon loaded with things to carry the family along." So at least we are told by Ezra's brother-in-law, Otis E. Wood. And we are also told that when Ezra returned from Georgia, "instead of bringing at least a sack of flour or something practical, he brought a trunk full of gilt-edged books."\textsuperscript{14}

Leaving the books to the family and the family to Father Wood and Mr. Stuvins, Ezra then went a second (or it may have been a third) time to Maine, hoping to sell his plow there. In Portland he looked up his friend F. O. J. Smith, whom he found on the floor of his office trying, with a piece of chalk, to explain to another man the kind of machine he wanted devised and constructed. "Cornell," said Smith, "you are the very man I wanted to see." It seemed
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that Smith had obtained the contract for laying an underground cable of wires between Baltimore and Washington to test S. F. B. Morse’s electric telegraph invention; and for that he thought he needed two machines, one to dig the trench and lay the cable, the other to cover the cable after it was laid. Could Cornell help him? Cornell could. “A little reflection,” says Mr. Cornell, “convinced me that he did not want two machines. . . . I, therefore, with my pencil sketched a rough diagram of a machine. . . . The pipe, with the wires inclosed, . . . was to be coiled around a drum or reel, from whence it was to pass down a hollow standard . . . directly in the rear of the coulter or cutter, which was so arranged as to cut a furrow two and a half feet deep and one and one fourth inch wide. Arranged something like a plow, it was to be drawn by a powerful team, and deposit the pipe in the bottom of the furrow as it moved along. The furrow being so narrow would soon close itself.” 16 It was as simple as that, and, let us note, as simple as that to describe.

The outcome of this chance meeting was that Smith authorized Ezra to design and construct the plow, and then offered him the job of laying the pipe. Convinced that the telegraph was to be a “grand enterprise,” and that it would, if he became identified with it, lead him “on the road to fortune,” Ezra accepted the offer, and early in October, 1843, left Portland for Baltimore.

The plow worked admirably, but with some ten miles of the pipe laid it was found that, on account of defective insulation, all the work so far done was wasted effort. To let this be known would prejudice the entire undertaking, and make it difficult to obtain additional appropriations from Congress; and one day Professor Morse, in great distress, called Ezra from his plow to ask him if he could suggest any way of suspending operations without giving the true reason. Ezra’s ingenuity made little of so slight a difficulty. Stepping back to the plow, he directed the teamsters to start up the mules; and, watching for an opportunity, with simulated clumsiness canted the point of the plow into a ledge of rock and broke it to pieces. The next day it was reported in the newspapers that on
account of this “unfortunate accident” the work would have to be suspended for a few weeks. The weeks dragged on while Professor Morse and Alfred Vail and F. O. J. Smith experimented with other methods of insulating the wires in the pipe. Meantime, Ezra spent his spare time boning up on electricity, and came to the conclusion that the simplest and cheapest way would be to abandon the underground system altogether and string the wires separately on poles, insulating them at the cross bars by wrapping them around glass knobs, such as might be found on bureau drawers. After still further delay, and consultation with Professor Henry at Princeton, this method, used to this day, was finally adopted; and Ezra was employed as Professor Morse’s assistant at $1,000 a year to build the line, which he did with such dispatch and economy that the work was completed in May, 1844, without any need of an additional appropriation from Congress.  

Thus at the age of thirty-seven Ezra Cornell became identified with the “grand enterprise.” He was then, I will not say in towering high spirits, but as nearly so as it was in the nature of Ezra Cornell ever to be. To Mr. Beebe he wrote saying that he would soon be a wealthy man, and to Mary Ann saying that “Old Dame Fortune was bestirring herself to make amends.”  

His optimism was misplaced. The story of his venture on the road to fortune during the next twelve years is not one of success attained by the orderly and progressive mastery of difficulties encountered. On the contrary, it is the story of repeated and magnificent failures. The story cannot be told in detail here; but the high lights need to be presented in order to understand how Ezra Cornell acquired a fortune, as one may say, by misadventure, by violating all the rules of prudence and common sense and adhering, with stubborn tenacity, contrary to experience and all sound advice, to a settled conviction. The settled conviction was that the telegraph business was bound to be a phenomenal success; and the key to the story is that the telegraph business turned out to be something very near a complete failure while Ezra Cornell was actively engaged in
promoting it, and became a phenomenal success only after he had retired from active connection with the enterprise.

In 1844 Ezra Cornell evidently thought that his services in building the Washington-Baltimore line would make him useful if not indispensable to the men who, as owners of the Morse patent, were in a position to control the telegraph business. These men were Morse and Alfred Vail, who together owned three fourths of the patent right, and F. O. J. Smith, who owned the remaining one fourth. After the federal government had declined an offer of all rights for $100,000, Morse and Vail intrusted the management of their interests to Amos Kendall, but F. O. J. Smith preferred to manage his own. In May, 1845, Smith and Kendall organized the Magnetic Telegraph Company to complete the line from Baltimore to New York. In the years following other companies were organized by them for connecting the principal eastern cities—notably the New York, Albany and Buffalo Company. But F. O. J. Smith, who quarrelled with every one, proved to be a thorn in the side of Morse and Kendall; so that in 1847 it was agreed between them that thereafter Kendall should have the right of disposing of the patent rights for lines built in the East and South, while Smith should have a similar right for lines built in the northern states west of Buffalo. Under this agreement the patent right was variously leased, under contracts so loosely worded as to be the occasion of endless litigation, and lines were rapidly and flimsily built throughout the country.\(^{18}\)

Ezra Cornell's part in these early enterprises was less than he had hoped. He managed to scrape together $500 for twenty shares of stock in the Magnetic Company. In 1845 he supervised the construction of seventy miles of the line from New York to Philadelphia, making little or nothing from it. But in 1846 he built under contract the line from New York to Albany, which netted him the substantial profit of $6,000. This, together with some two thousand dollars in the bank, made him a capitalist, capable of venturing as a promoter on his own. He could now afford an in-
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surance premium of $34.40. He could even afford a "dress coat"—purely as an investment, no doubt, useful for making friends and influencing people with money to invest in the telegraph business. To advance his interest he formed a business partnership with his old friend and prominent Ithaca merchant, John J. Speed, Jr., who thus became one of the men with whom he was most closely associated in all of his major enterprises. Another of these associates, unfortunately, was F. O. J. Smith.

Unfortunately, because F. O. J. Smith turned out to be a man of such devious ways that he was commonly known in the trade as "Fog" Smith, and the term "fogsmithery" became current as a synonym for any kind of crookedness in the telegraph business. Cornell and Speed would have done better to have allied themselves with Morse and Kendall, even if Kendall was a bit condescending and Morse more than a bit vain and irritable. But Mr. Cornell had then a double grievance against Morse. He felt that his services in building the first line, and—as he always maintained—in improving the Morse sending instrument, had not been adequately recognized. Besides, a sending instrument which he had himself invented and patented in 1845 and urged Morse to use, was rejected by Morse on the ground that it was no more than a "clumsification" of his own. For these or whatever reasons Cornell and Speed became involved with "Fog" Smith in their two major telegraph enterprises.

The first of these was the Erie and Michigan Telegraph Company, organized to build and operate a line from Buffalo through Cleveland and Detroit to Chicago and Milwaukee. The contract, originally let by Fog Smith to Livingston and Wells, was soon taken over by Cornell and Speed, who completed the line early in 1848, and thereafter obtained a controlling interest in the Erie and Michigan and many other western lines built as feeders to it. The other enterprise was the New York and Erie, running (roughly along the route of the Erie Railroad) from New York through Middletown, Binghamton, Ithaca, and Fredonia to Dunkirk on Lake
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Erie. The disposal of the Morse patent rights in this region properly belonged to Amos Kendall; but Cornell had no wish to do business with Morse and Kendall, and Fog Smith made nothing of leasing the patent in his own or another’s territory, especially if that other was Kendall. Accordingly, on February 28, 1848, Fog Smith signed with Cornell and Speed the contract for building and operating the New York and Erie line.

Why Cornell and Speed should wish to build the New York and Erie line is obvious: linked up with their western lines it would give them a through trunk line from Cleveland and Chicago to New York. But, one naturally asks (and Amos Kendall asked it with great indignation), why should Fog Smith wish to build a line that would compete directly with the New York, Albany and Buffalo line in which he, to say nothing of his partners Morse and Kendall, had a major interest? The answer is that the New York and Erie, so far as Fog Smith was concerned in it, was a case of "fogsmithery" at its most foggiest. Evidence of this is to be found, with some difficulty it is true, in the terms of the New York and Erie contract in which Fog Smith appears as both vendor and vendee—a contract admirably designed, in short, to enable Smith to risk nothing and lose nothing himself, to do his partners Morse and Kendall out of their fair share of the patent rights, to put all the risk and labor on his partners Cornell and Speed, to take half the profits of their enterprise if it succeeded, and to leave them holding the sack if it failed.22

Ezra Cornell’s animus against Morse appears to have blinded him to the essential dishonesty of Fog Smith; but he was too astute a man to be deceived by the flagrant "fogsmithery" of the New York and Erie contract. What deceived him was his own optimism—his settled conviction that any risk in the telegraph business was bound to be a safe bet. In 1848, with the Erie and Michigan in operation and the New York and Erie in process of construction, he was therefore in a mood to see himself as the dominant figure in the grand enterprise. The tone of his letters to Alonzo, who was
then running the Cleveland office, is assured and at times magis-
terial. "I have now," he writes in December, "such advantages in
the telegraph business that I shall be able to make an ample fortune
for myself and each of my children." At that time the Erie and
Michigan was just beginning to pay expenses, the New York and
Erie still lacked two thirds of the money required for construction,
both companies were bound to Fog Smith by contracts that no
 prudent man would ever have signed—and yet Ezra Cornell could
count six ample fortunes as good as made.\textsuperscript{23}

No forecast of the immediate future could have been more com-
pletely mistaken. Within less than three years Ezra Cornell was
reduced to the humiliation of soliciting financial aid from his rival,
Amos Kendall. Writing in September, 1851, he told Kendall that
all of the real estate he possessed was mortgaged, and that he was in
debt "some $15,000 besides." For two years past, he confessed, "I
have not received the first dollar for my services, and have not been
able to contribute the first cent towards the support of my family.
They are wholly dependent on the charity of friends, and every
line of telegraph that I have any interest in . . . are [is] running
in debt for expense of working, and I can see no prospect for any
favorable change. Under such circumstances what is to be done?
For my part I cannot answer the question. My wife . . . feels that
I have followed the telegraph quite long enough, and that it would
be to our interest to abandon it, and direct my energies to some more
productive channels." But to abandon the telegraph business was,
for Ezra Cornell at least, even more difficult than to go on with it:
first, because the lines would not pay his debts even if they could
be sold; second, because they could not be sold anyway on account
of the "unsettled state of the patent question." \textsuperscript{24} He therefore stuck
it out, only to see his indebtedness mount until, in 1854, it had
reached the appalling sum of fifty thousand dollars.

The principal cause of this crisis in the affairs of Ezra Cornell
was the failure of the New York and Erie. From the first every-
thing went wrong with that most cherished of all Cornell enter-
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prises. Instead of $50,000 needed for construction, less than $20,000 was forthcoming. But by borrowing from his friends, pinching his family, personally supervising the construction of the line, working day and night, going sometimes a week at a time without taking off his clothes, he managed somehow to get the line up. To the operators along the line he was a familiar bedraggled figure, known as “Old Bones,” not infrequently to be seen rummaging in the petty cash (the only cash there was for the most part) for two bits to buy his dinner. He even managed to pay Fog Smith $4,000 on the patent-right account, which Fog Smith conveniently forgot, so that Morse brought suit against Smith for his share of the patent money, and then Smith brought suit against Cornell for the whole of it. Curiously enough, even Ezra’s flair for gadgets failed him for once. Having himself devised the simplest and best method of insulation by means of glass knobs, he now invented and used a contraption known as the “Bromstone Hat,” which was not only expensive but, in damp weather, rather worse than no insulation at all. For these and other reasons the New York and Erie was a complete failure. Sold at sheriff’s auction in 1852, it was bid in by Mr. Cornell for $7,000, and leased for two years to his rival, the New York, Albany and Buffalo Company. In 1855 it ceased to be operated, and the wires were sold to the Erie Railroad.28

Unfortunately for Mr. Cornell, the failure of the New York and Erie came at a time when all of his other lines were ceasing to pay expenses. For this he was himself in part responsible. His optimism had led him to build or acquire control of more lines than he could well manage. In any case, as a manager of complicated enterprises, Ezra Cornell had certain limitations. Generally respected by his associates and subordinates, he was not very well liked by them. He was too austere, too little disposed to take advice, a little too certain that others rather than himself were at fault, to win the warm friendship or command the loyal devotion of those with whom he worked. According to J. H. Wade, he lacked the talent for delegating authority, and as a consequence wasted his
time on a multitude of trivial details. “Your God,” said Wade, in a long, frank, and sarcastic letter in 1853, “is economy, but you make a slight mistake and worship parsimony (at a sacrifice to yourself and everything you are able to influence). . . . I have known you to economize by leaving your official chair [as President of the New York and Erie] without even a substitute, for two months at a time, and travel on foot and knee deep in mud, from New York to Dunkirk, and carry on your shoulders a 24 foot ladder, when some foolish, extravagant president would have paid an Irishman $12 a month for doing the same thing, while he was staying in his office and attending to his business.” 26

But whatever the limitations of Mr. Cornell as an administrator may have been, it must be said that his lines were not the only ones that were failing. In 1854 even the most able and prudent owners and managers of telegraph lines were facing disaster. The principal reason for this situation was the rapid duplication of competing lines throughout the country—lines using the Morse patent, and lines using the recently patented “printing” instruments of Alexander Bain and Royal E. House. The larger cities were commonly served by three, or even four, rival telegraph offices. But rarely was any of them open after nine o’clock in the evening, and at any time of day the chances were good that one would find on the door of any office the familiar notice: “Closed temporarily, gone to fix the line.” In 1854 there was scarcely a business man of credit left who still had any faith in the telegraph business. Nevertheless, Ezra Cornell’s faith remained unimpaired: with existing lines failing to pay expenses, he built or acquired control of more lines; with stocks a drug on the market, he bought more stocks. And so it happened that the six ample fortunes which, in 1848, he thought as good as made, had dwindled away to a fifty-thousand-dollar debt incurred by the failure of the New York and Erie, and extensive holdings in the Erie and Michigan and other western lines that could not be sold in the open market at any price. It was indeed
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ture, as he said himself, that if the game had ended then he would have been “swept from the board.”

From this precarious situation Ezra Cornell was rescued, one might say in spite of himself, by the formation of the Western Union Telegraph Company. Consolidation of competing lines was the obvious solution, and Mr. Cornell had himself, as early as 1851, suggested it casually in conversation with W. H. Ellsworth. But the men chiefly responsible for the formation of the Western Union were Hiram Sibley and Samuel L. Selden. In 1851, having acquired the House patent rights and $90,000 raised by Sibley from his Rochester friends, they organized the New York and Mississippi Valley Printing Telegraph Company. Sibley had the very sound idea that in any region one line, if solidly constructed and competently managed, would soon force the existing lines into bankruptcy or consolidation. By 1854 his policy had sufficiently proved its worth to make the New York and Mississippi Valley Company (or “the House Lines,” as they were called) the most dangerous competitor of all other companies. In letter after letter Mr. Cornell’s operators informed him that the House lines were gradually taking what little business remained. “The House folks,” wrote W. P. Pew from the Pittsburgh office, “like the fiends out of hell,” are “bent on your destruction.” To avoid destruction on the one hand, and consolidation with the House lines on the other, Mr. Cornell fought, as Otis E. Wood said, “with all his might”: came to terms with his old rival, the New York, Albany and Buffalo Company; with its aid acquired control of the Michigan Southern; and even attempted to form his own “grand combination” of all Morse lines against “the common enemy.”

But all without avail. The battle was virtually lost in 1854 when, either without Mr. Cornell’s knowledge or against his protest, four of his principal associates (Speed, Wade, Haviland, and Cobb) deserted him by selling their Erie and Michigan stock to the House companies and associating themselves with the Sibley crowd. Early
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in 1855 the Sibley people offered the Erie and Michigan definite terms of union, and assured Mr. Cornell that if he refused consolidation on fair terms they would run him out of business. The terms offered were, according to Mr. Cornell, all to the advantage of the House companies; but, with some modifications that made them less objectionable to him, they were formally accepted by the board of directors in August, 1855. The contract provided for the organization of a new company with a capital stock issue of 500,000 shares, of which the Sibley interests were to receive 350,000 and the Cornell interests 150,000. The new company was incorporated in March and April, 1856, and at Mr. Cornell’s request was given the name of the Western Union Telegraph Company. The merger included all of the Cornell lines except the Michigan Southern; but scarcely more than a year later, July 17, 1857, Mr. Cornell abandoned the game altogether by selling the Michigan Southern for shares in the Western Union.²⁹

When the merger was thus completed in 1857, the value of the Western Union stock credited to Ezra Cornell was estimated at $50,000. Thirteen years of incessant and heartbreaking effort to acquire a fortune in the telegraph business had brought him a property which, if it could then have been turned into cash, would barely have paid his debts. He had, at all events, the advantage, whatever that might prove to be, of being the largest stockholder in the new company, and for some years he served on its board of directors; but responsibility for the management and phenomenal success of the Western Union Telegraph Company fell mainly to other men.

In this way, not quite as he had intended, Ezra Cornell retired from the “grand enterprise”—returned home, as one may say from the wars, if with something less than a complete victory, at least with honor and peace in his time. Some years before, in the midst of the wars, he had advised Alonzo that in choosing a profession a person should consider how far its permanency “would depend on his own will and how far on the will of others.” ³⁰ Certainly Ezra
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had himself found that the telegraph business depended altogether too much on the will of others; and once rid of it he was well content to turn to other and more congenial interests—to farming and breeding fine stock, to promoting the interests of Ithaca and serving his community in the state legislature, to the affairs of the state Agricultural Society, and especially to the movement for founding a state agricultural college.

Meantime he could begin to pay his debts. One day in October, 1860, he turned up his old Cyphering Book. The last entry in it, made at the age of seventeen, was a bold heading: "Loss and Gain." Under this heading he now, after thirty-five years, thought fit to make an entry: noting that all his life had been a desperate struggle to see which, loss or gain, would win; that in 1854, sunk under a mountainous debt of fifty thousand dollars, the issue seemed a "doubtful one"; but that at the present moment, February 1, 1860, that debt "has mostly been paid . . . with 7 percent interest added, and a yearly income of $15,000 seems to be a reliable guaranty that the credit side has now the victory." Never before had Ezra Cornell been out of debt with an income of fifteen thousand dollars. Yet this was only the first slight trickle of the golden stream that was to come pouring in from the Western Union Telegraph Company. In 1862, with its capital stock raised within three years from 385,700 to 2,994,800 shares, the company paid a valid stock dividend of thirty-six per cent. In 1864, Ezra therefore thought fit to make another entry in the Cyphering Book: "My last quarterly dividend on stock in the Western Union was $35,000, July 20, 1864. The dividend for October quarter will be as large."

Thus within four years Ezra Cornell's income, without effort on his part, had jumped from fifteen thousand to one hundred and forty thousand dollars. But what would Ezra Cornell do with all this money? Live in the gilded luxury to which he was not accustomed? No. For Ezra Cornell, with his dour, hard-bitten New England conscience, with his fine Quaker feeling for justice and humanity, there was just the one obvious thing to do with his
superfluous wealth. And so he sets it down, with great simplicity, in the Cyphering Book: "My greatest care now is how to spend this large income to do the greatest good to those who are properly dependent on me, to the poor and to posterity." 31

Like many other men of that time Ezra Cornell believed profoundly in a better time coming for the poor and for posterity. Some twenty years earlier he had told Alonzo that it was clear to all reflecting minds that a great revolution was about to begin—"a revolution by which the down trodden millions will be elevated to their equal and just rights, and each led to procure and enjoy that degree of happiness that all men and women are entitled to as the fruit of their labor." 32 Among the downtrodden millions were the farmers and the industrial workers; and what better could be done to elevate them to their equal and just rights than to provide them with the means of obtaining an education suited to their needs? Having acquired an education the hard way himself, Ezra Cornell all his life believed (mistakenly, no doubt) that if books and schools were freely available to the people, any poor boy could make as good use of them as he would have done if they had been available to him. To make these advantages, which he had lacked, available to others—this, clearly, would be to use his large income to do the greatest good to the poor and to posterity.

His first notable contribution to this end was the founding of the Cornell Library (a free public library for the citizens of Tompkins County), which he built and endowed at an ultimate cost of something more than one hundred thousand dollars. As for schools, his lifelong interest in farming led him to read and reflect much on the education of farmers; and after his retirement from the telegraph business he took an active part in founding the State Agricultural College at Ovid, and was the most influential member of its board of trustees. The college first opened its doors to students in December, 1860; but eleven months later it was forced to close them because the president, Brigadier General M. R. Patrick, had been called to the army and many of the students had en-
listed. In 1863, when the Morrill Act was accepted by the state, the college was still closed. At that time it consisted of a charter, an empty building capable of housing one hundred and fifty students, and a farm of four hundred and fifty acres in good condition. The trustees estimated that the farm and building had a current value of $101,780; but against this had to be set a mortgage debt of $70,000.33 With this much to show, the trustees applied to the legislature for the Morrill land grant, and the prime mover in the business was Ezra Cornell. At that time it had not occurred to him that the Morrill land grant could be made to yield more than thirty-five or forty thousand dollars a year; but he thought that if in addition to this the legislature would pay the debt and provide adequate buildings and equipment, the purposes of the Morrill Act would be realized to the best advantage. In that case he did not know of anything better to do with his large income than to add what he could (perhaps two hundred thousand dollars) to the college endowment.

As it turned out, fortunately we must suppose, the legislature was not sufficiently interested in agricultural education to make any appropriation for it; and there were plenty of colleges in the state more than willing to accept the Morrill land grant without any additional appropriations from the legislature.34 One of these was the People's College, designed by its founders to give instruction in "those branches of science immediately and vitally essential to agriculture and the mechanic arts." The college had been chartered in 1853, but for lack of funds nothing further had been done until 1858, when Charles Cook, a wealthy resident of Havana (now Montour Falls) promised substantial financial aid if the college should be located in his home town. This offer was accepted, the Rev. Amos Brown was elected president, and on September 2, 1858, the corner stone of the main building was laid with appropriate ceremonies. The aid promised by Mr. Cook turned out to be so much less than munificent that in 1863, although the main building had been erected, no student had as yet darkened its door,
and supposing one should do so there were no adequate facilities, in fact virtually no facilities at all, for teaching him agriculture and the mechanic arts. Nevertheless, on May 14, 1863, the legislature appropriated the entire Morrill land grant to the People’s College.  

What in this instance determined the legislative mind (a difficult thing to fathom at best) is not clear. Senator Cook (as he then was) undoubtedly used all of his considerable influence (he was known as “the leader of the third house”), and it is said here and there that he even resorted to “political trickery.” That may well be, no doubt; but in any event he was unable, fortunately, to obtain the grant for the People’s College except on certain conditions. The conditions were that the college should have, within three years, at least ten competent professors, buildings adequate to house two hundred and fifty students, a farm of two hundred acres free of encumbrance, shops suitable for teaching the mechanic arts, a library, scientific apparatus, and “cabinets of natural history.”

The People’s College evidently lacked a good deal—according to the Regents’ Report two years later, what it lacked would require $242,000 to remedy; but it was generally expected that Senator Cook would donate the necessary sum, for why should he have resorted to political trickery, or whatever it was, to obtain the grant if he did not intend to put the college in a position to accept it? Senator Cook may have intended, at the time, to do just that. But then one of those fortunate odd chances again intervened to change the course of events. At exactly the most appropriate moment Senator Cook suffered a stroke of paralysis, and thereafter refused categorically and repeatedly to give any further financial assistance to the college. So long as Senator Cook remained in this unamiable frame of mind there was slight chance that the People’s College would get the grant after all. It seemed certain, therefore, that the legislature, at the next session, would have to burden its mind once more with the difficult problem; and Ezra Cornell had decided that it would be worth while to introduce a bill for dividing the grant, leaving the People’s College in posses-
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sion of one half of it, and giving the other half to the State Agri-
cultural College at Ovid.

This was the situation when, on the first of January, 1864, a newly
elected senator from Syracuse entered the chamber for the first
time and took his seat. He was a young man—thirty-one years old;
slight in stature, alert in bearing; with fine, wavy brown hair
parted nearly in the middle, worn rather long, and running to side-
burns; in appearance and demeanor a man suggesting, in some un-
definable way, the intellectual and the aristocrat. To the seasoned
senators he must have seemed somewhat fragile and a bit dandi-
fied; and I should think the more cultured among them may have
wondered whether it might not be that Mr. Matthew Arnold, mis-
taking the time and place, had dropped in to deliver a lecture on
sweetness and light. It was not so. The young senator was Andrew
Dickson White.

Taking account of his colleagues, Mr. White noticed, sitting not
far away, “a man of about sixty years of age, tall, spare, and austere,
with a kindly eye, saying little, and that little dryly. He did not ap-
pear unamiable, but there was about him a sort of aloofness: this
was Ezra Cornell.” 39 Of all the odd chances or designs of fate that
seemed in those years to be always conspiring for the public good,
this conjunction of men and circumstances was the most fruitful;
for the result of it was that Ezra Cornell and Andrew Dickson
White became fast friends, exchanged their ideas, joined their
forces, and thereby became the effective creators of Cornell Uni-
versity.