

## When I Heard Moody, Stebbins, and Sankey

by H. A. Ironside



It is impossible for me to express in any adequate manner my indebtedness to many of the Lord's well-known servants for help received in early days, which opened up to me the Word of God and suggested methods of presenting His truth to others. I have always been most grateful to Him, especially since becoming pastor of the Moody Memorial Church of Chicago, that He permitted me to hear His devoted servant, Dwight L. Moody, at two different periods of my life: one when I was a boy, and the other when I was a young preacher just feeling my way along, as it were, and never dreaming that the day would come when it would be my privilege to stand in the pulpit of the great church built in memory of him whom I esteem as the most outstanding evangelist of the nineteenth century.

When Dwight L. Moody and George C. Stebbins came to Los Angeles for a great campaign in 1888, I was only twelve years old. But already I had been under considerable exercise about spiritual things, and thought myself to be a Christian, although it was not until two years later that I came to a definite saving knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Moody meetings were held in Hazzard's Pavilion, a large, wooden structure with two galleries, seating perhaps 8,000 people. I shall never forget my first night there; it made an indelible impression on my mind. Arriving after the song service had begun, I found apparently every seat taken, and many people standing up. I made my way to the first gallery, and then to the upper one, looking for an unoccupied place, but found none.

Then I observed that another lad had crawled out on one of the great, wooden girders supporting the roof. These were heavy box-like supports, composed of three 4 x 12 planks spiked together like immense troughs, extending at an angle from the gallery to the center of the roof, and then on down

to the opposite side. I crawled out on one of these and, lying in the trough, was quite secure, and able to get a good view of the great audience, the choir and others on the platform, and could hear perfectly.

The singing thrilled me, but I cannot recall the titles of any of the congregational hymns used that night. Finally, a short, thick-set, bearded man arose, who seemed from my vantage point to have no neck. His head appeared to fit very closely into his shoulders as I looked down upon him from so far above. He began to speak in a crisp, business-like way, with a decided New England twang that, to use the old Scotch lady's words, "did not even hae a holy tone to it."

The text was, "Thou art weighed in the balances, and art found wanting." With telling effect he recounted the story of Belshazzar's folly and doom. I have read the sermon since and was surprised to find how little of it I had forgotten through the years. As he went on, I was deeply moved. I could see that the audience, too, was greatly stirred. I actually prayed, "Lord, help me some day to preach to crowds like these, and to lead souls to Christ." Although I was not really clear as to my own salvation, God marvelously answered that boyish petition.

So interested was I in what Mr. Moody was saying that I was amazed when he suddenly brought his discourse to an end as he exclaimed, "Mr. Stebbins will now sing one of my favorite hymns." I looked at the clock, and saw that he had been speaking less than thirty-five minutes. He seldom preached longer. His custom was to have several clear, definite points to each discourse, and to drive them home to the hearts and consciences of his hearers by remorseless logic, and clear, telling illustrations, many of which were extremely tender and homely, often moving his hearers to tears. Then he pressed upon them the importance of immediate decision for Christ — the definite acceptance of Him as Saviour and Lord.

He used a great deal of Scripture, and counted on God by

His Holy Spirit to enforce the Word and make it the instrument of convicting sinners and bringing them to repentance and to personal faith in the Lord Jesus.

Stebbins sang most feelingly, "At the Feast of Belshazzar," a song then quite new. I had never heard it before.

After the solo, Mr. Moody again rose to his feet and began to plead with men to be reconciled to God. At first there was no move, then he said abruptly, "Will every truly converted person in this building rise to your feet?" Possibly five thousand instantly arose. "Will all who were converted before you were fifteen years of age sit down?" Over half took their seats. "Now all who were saved before you were twenty please be seated." Probably half of those remaining obeyed him.

Then he went on in the same way, "All below thirty — forty — fifty." By that time a mere handful were still standing. "All below sixty." If my memory serves me aright, only three out of that vast throng continued to stand. "Now all saved before you were seventy," and the last were seated. It was a powerful object lesson, showing the importance of coming to Christ while young.

Moody pressed this home, then invited anxious souls to the inquiry-room. Many went in.

Another night I managed to get there early, with my mother and several of her friends. We sat only a few seats from the front, and so had a good view of Mr. Moody and the rest. I remember thinking, "He isn't very handsome." But when he preached on "Sowing and Reaping," his face lighted up, and he really seemed beautiful in his sincerity and kindly earnestness. Mr. Stebbins and his wife sang, "The Model Church." It was the first time I had heard it. I thought it did not have enough gospel in it. You see, I was already quite a sermon-taster and meeting-appraiser. Again many went to the inquiry-room at Moody's invitation.

On the way home a gentleman in our party remarked, "He seems just a very ordinary man. I have heard many better preachers." "Yes," my mother answered, "but he wins souls!" I have often recalled this since. It was not remarkable eloquence or superior preaching ability that accounted for Moody's success. It was a life dominated by the Spirit of God, coupled with a certain native shrewdness that enabled him to understand the needs and hearts of men as few others have done.

I did not hear him again until some ten years later, when, I was a young evangelist myself, and Moody came back to California for a few meetings in the larger centers. I heard him both in Oakland and in Los Angeles. In each place he preached almost the identical sermon, at his big night meetings. He spoke on, "Ye must be born again." Like Wesley, Whitefield, and others, he believed a worth-while message could be given repeatedly with good results.

I like to remember that up to the last Moody was emphasizing the need of a second birth, that he never turned aside to a so-called liberal theology that fails to take into account man's lost condition and the necessity of regeneration if he would ever be saved. His son, Will Moody, was with him during this California tour, and I heard him in Los Angeles in the Peniel Hall. He was a good man, but of an altogether different type from his father. He dwelt more on the practical side of the Christian life.

At an afternoon meeting D. L. Moody talked to Christian workers on soul-winning and the need of revival. I remember he spoke a great deal on the devastating effect of carping criticism, and urged, "Pray for people; do not waste time talking about them." He warned church-members against criticizing their pastors, even though the latter were not clear: criticism accomplished nothing; praying for them would be constructive. "My trouble," he said, "is not so much with the ministers as with lazy Christians in the pews."

I never saw him again. The next year he answered the Home-

call after his collapse on the platform in Kansas City. But I have always been thankful that I had these several opportunities of hearing the man God used in such a mighty way, to the salvation of many thousands of souls.

Ira D. Sankey I heard twice only. He was not with Mr. Moody at the meetings I have referred to, but he visited Oakland and San, Francisco in 1897, and I heard him in both cities. I shall never forget how he moved a great audience gathered to hear Henry Varley, as he sang, for the first time on the Pacific Coast, "Saved by grace." Other hymns that he brought out with him, that were new in those days, were, "There'll be no dark valley when Jesus comes," and, "Let the blessed sunshine in."

And, of course, he sang, "There were Ninety and Nine," as only he could sing it. I have never heard anyone else who seemed to put into it what he did, and who made it so appealing and impressive. In each meeting he sang by special request, "My Ain Countree," and told how he found it and how he came to use it. Since I myself am of Scotch extraction, I think I enjoyed this most of all. One trouble with many modern gospel soloists is, there is too little gospel and too much solo. The tendency is to perform instead of endeavoring to give a spiritual message. If either preacher or singer is more concerned about drawing attention to himself than exalting Christ and reaching the consciences of his hearers, he fails utterly in his service.