

MOODY STILL LIVES

WORD PICTURES OF D. L. MOODY

by

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CHAPTER FOUR

BEGINNINGS OF SPIRITUAL POWER, 1854-73

THIS chapter spans nineteen years of Mr. Moody's life, from the time he left Northfield in 1854 until he embarked on his unexpectedly phenomenal evangelistic career in Great Britain and Ireland in 1873.

The chief source of autobiographical material is a number of his letters found in a small bag of his mother's after she died in 1896. The earliest letters were from Boston, where he spent the years 1854-6. He went to Chicago in the fall of 1856, and that was his base until he left for England. Other autobiographical material is found in the many personal anecdotes he used in his sermons.

BOSTON

During the years in Boston he was only an unsophisticated country lad of 17-19 years. His letters home are short. They tell of experiences in city life, and how he was getting along in his shoe store job, and make enquiries about home affairs; such as the planting, the corn crops, the potatoes and similar topics. After he was converted a religious note is seen in his letters.

The light of heaven that flashed upon him at his conversion never afterward even flickered or grew dim. His whole life was changed, as well as his outlook on life. Religion and the Church had meant little to him before, but now they began to loom large in his daily life. Stories may be found in print of one and another trying to rebuke young Moody for speaking at prayer meetings and seeking to repress his zeal. It can easily be credited that he was whole-hearted and active in religion just as he was in other things. But Mr. Kimball, whose interest in his Sunday school scholar never abated, said that while the lad attended the Friday evening church prayer meetings quite regularly, he had no recollection of hearing him speak except a few times when he was invited by the leader of the meeting to take part.

"I can truly say, and in saying it I magnify the infinite grace of God as bestowed upon Mr. Moody," wrote Mr. Kimball, "that I have seen few persons whose minds were spiritually darker when he came into my Sabbath school class, or one who seemed more unlikely ever to become a Christian of clear, decided views of gospel truth, still less to fill any sphere of extended public usefulness."

He sought membership in Mount Vernon Congregational Church in May 1855. A minute in the committee book indicates that while he had something to his credit in personal belief and practice, he was not sufficiently instructed in routine doctrine to satisfy the committee. His case was therefore deferred, and three members of the committee were appointed to instruct him as needed. A second minute, dated March 12, 1856, is more satisfactory; he was apparently recommended for membership, for his name appears on the roll of members under date May 3,

CHICAGO

His restless ambition to get on in business soon yielded to the lure of Chicago. This young city, so strategically situated between the East and the expanding West, offered boundless possibilities to an energetic and pushing young man like Dwight Moody. Boston was too conservative, and perhaps his relations with his uncles had not been too pleasant. In September 1856 he was in Chicago.

He soon found a position in a leading shoe store, and began to make good money. When a jobbing department was added to the business he had fuller opportunity for his own initiative and push, and presently was a travelling salesman covering the adjoining states. He stayed in the shoe business, with three successive firms.

But neither his determination to get on in business nor the stirring current political agitations crushed out his religious impulses. He brought his religion with him to Chicago, and put it in practice immediately. His first Sunday there he attended a Baptist Sunday school in the morning. He also joined a Methodist Young Men's Mission Band which visited boarding-houses and hotels early Sunday mornings with tracts and invitations to church services. Sunday afternoons he identified himself with a mission school on the North side. We have no record of such interdenominational activities in Boston. Denominations never did mean much to him, however. He used to say he had not a sectarian hair in his head.

Apparently he obtained a letter of transfer from Mount Vernon Church before leaving Boston. He joined Plymouth Congregational Church immediately, and in 1863 he transferred to New England Congregational Church. When Illinois Street Church was organized for converts of his own Sunday school and religious meetings in 1863, he joined it. This church was started only on the advice of several church friends and ministers whom he consulted. His converts were non-church-going people, who would not be at home, even if they were welcome, in any existing church.

His Sunday school, first held in a vacant saloon, had to seek larger quarters in the North Market Hall in 1858, and became the largest school in the West, second in size only to John Wanamaker's school in Philadelphia.

All things flourished until 1860, when Mr. Moody was led to give up business and devote all his time and effort to Christian work, as told in Chapter II. He now became a recognized religious leader, independent, and without salary or assured support.

He was able to push his Sunday school activities with increased zeal, and to add evening and prayer meetings, welfare and recreational work, with new pastoral opportunities and responsibilities. He became associated with a group of active Sunday school men, including John H. Vincent and B. F. Jacobs, who promoted organization and advance in the Sunday school and conceived and started the International Sunday School Lesson system. A Young Men's Christian Association had been started in Chicago, and there also Mr. Moody found a congenial outlet for his burning enthusiasm. Soon he was dominant there, for in those early days the "Y" was a simple religious and social institution, an interdenominational center for lay members, and he had the will, the ability and the time to push it. A minute spread on the records of the Chicago Y.M.C.A. at the time of his death reads:

"It will ever remain a precious memory of this Association that he began here his larger ministry. He was active in securing its first, second and third buildings. The first Farwell Hall, which was also the first Association building in the world, was opened in 1867 when Mr. Moody was president. The Chicago Association honors and cherishes the memory of Dwight L. Moody for what he wrought here, and for the greater work which he has since pursued with such success for the world's evangelization."

When the Civil War broke out and thousands were called to the colours, he assisted in forming an Army and Navy committee of the "Y," which later was affiliated with the Christian Commission. He held meetings with soldiers passing through Chicago and in the army camps, in due course went to the front, nine times in all, and later visited camps of Confederate prisoners.

After Mr. Moody's death I interviewed several men who had grown up with him in the business and religious life of Chicago, but I gained nothing essential not already found in the biographies. I know one gentleman who boarded at the same place as Mr. Moody during his first years in Chicago, and who is still living. Mr. James M. Hitchcock, an intimate associate of his in his Sunday school and church work and in the "Y," once regaled me with stories of devices he tried for raising money for the "Y," including the sale of soaps, perfumes, and what not. Apparently he never lost his Yankee instincts as a trader.

As with his boyhood contemporaries in Northfield, these Chicago friends somehow did not realize at the time that here was a great man in the making. It was because he was so natural, so unassuming, so free from self-seeking, so generous to others, so intent on his sole purpose in life, to win men to Christ. During the years I was with him, when I might have been his Boswell, he never once tried to create a sense of self-importance: it was so foreign to his character that I feel I was lacking in appreciation of his genuine greatness. Great characters are not self-obtrusive. They do not need to be such.

Another friend who attended the Chicago "Y" about 1865 wrote me:

"Mr. Moody was greatly misunderstood and reviled in the city because his desire to win souls made him aggressive, and he disturbed the calm serenity of careless and indifferent souls, and made them angry. I heard the severest criticisms of him everywhere, until the people began to understand that his deep hunger for souls made him ask searching questions.

“His deep inward feelings were expressed in his face. He seemed to me earnest and sorrowful and profoundly anxious for souls.”

GROWTH IN TECHNIQUE

While prosecuting activities in these various lines Mr. Moody was himself being developed as a Christian leader. He got his gait in Chicago. This young city had amazing growth in the sixties. Business was rushing. Men acted quickly in seizing opportunities.

After Mr. Moody laid down his business career he was never tempted to take it up again, but he found its equivalent in Christian activity that was an outlet for his tremendous push and energy.

His Sunday school work called for the greatest alertness and ingenuity in handling the tough crowds he gathered in. He learned the value in dealing with them of novelty, publicity, devices that would challenge their attention. His organizing ability was also exercised to the limit in promoting the activities that centered in the “Y.” In the parlance of to-day, he transferred his ability as a shoe-salesman to selling the gospel.

Mr. Hitchcock, referred to above, told me that at the first Mr. Moody did not think he could teach a class or give an address but he could always hold the rowdiest audience by telling a story well. Perhaps he felt disqualified by his limited education, and he had not taken time even to make systematic study of the Bible. But in the nature of the case the time came when he must preach and teach the Bible.

All these years he was gathering a large stock of first hand anecdotes and illustrations. Read his early sermons and you will find numerous references to his own early experiences. Later on he drew upon his hectic Sunday school experiences. The Civil War greatly enlarged his fund of pathetic stories and cases of decision for Christ. He was adept in the faculty of seeing illustrative material all along the way, and skilful in the use he made of it. His liberal use of telling, unhackneyed illustrations made his sermons most popular, understandable and persuasive. His use of humor was never artificial.

He once said, “People don’t seem to understand why I use these stories. It is to touch the heart, and while it is softened, send right in the arrow of truth.”

He used to say that his first attempt at a Bible reading was with his own church people. The subject was “The Bible.” He would hand out slips of paper with texts written on them, and would then call upon someone to read a certain text. He would say a few words to explain and open it up and apply it to themselves. Then he would call for other texts, on which he would continue his comments. It was a new, simple and effective cooperative plan, and the people liked it. Before long he received an invitation from Dr. E. P. Goodwin of the First Congregational Church to repeat one of these Bible readings in his church.

“I rubbed my eyes to see who I was,” he said.

Invitations to give Bible readings and to conduct meetings soon began to come from other city pastors and from outside the city. He also came to be in demand as a speaker at Sunday school and “Y” conventions, where his unconventional addresses, bursting with good ideas and gospel appeals and fine illustrations, often swept the conventions into evangelistic channels and sent the delegates home fired with soul-winning fervor. I have talked with many who never forgot some of those conventions.

When the time came to preach formal sermons and undertake series of meetings, he devised a system for preparing sermons which served him well all his life.

Having decided upon a text or topic, he would take a large blue linen envelope, of which he kept a stock on hand, measuring about 9 by 6 inches, and write on it the title or the Scripture reference: “Sowing and Reaping,” “Psalm 23,” and so on. In these envelopes he stored his own thoughts, outlines and anecdotes, cuttings from papers, extracts copied from other men’s sermons and from commentaries and other writings, newspaper reports of a sermon whenever it got into print, anything that had bearing upon the subject of the envelope.

When he wished to preach on a subject he would go through the contents of the envelope as an auxiliary to his study of the Bible itself, and organize his address. Then he would take double sheets of writing paper, write on these in his large script catchwords or phrases that would recall his prepared material, and slip these sheets in his Bible under elastic bands which Mrs. Moody had fastened there for him.

Thus, with his open Bible in his hand or on the pulpit as he preached, he had before him the outline of his sermon. He never memorized a sermon verbatim, and was of course free to improvise on his feet. Many of his most effective epigrams were born in this way.

Though he repeated many of his sermons hundreds of times they always sounded fresh and spontaneous, and were actually that. After the address he would place the sheets of notepaper in the envelope, and write on the outside of it the name of the town or church where the address was delivered. This enabled him to see at a glance where it had already been given. The plan fortunately enabled his biographers to check up evangelistic tours and campaigns after the lapse of years.

But he was no slave to any one method of preparing sermons. Once he preached a sermon on the compassion of Christ, “under which the great audience was moved like the forest swept by winds,” said Dr. J. E. Roy, a former pastor of his at Plymouth Church, who was present. When Dr. Roy asked him how he prepared that sermon he answered:

“I got to thinking the other day about the compassion of Christ, so I took my Bible and began to read it over to find out what it said on that subject. I prayed over the texts as I went along until the thought of his infinite compassion overwhelmed me, and I could only lie on the floor of my study, with my face in the open Bible, and cry like a child.”

Mr. Moody’s life and ministry were founded on the Bible.

He believed it “from cover to cover,” and made it central in his own conduct and preaching and planning. He had the faculty of making Bible incidents as real as daily life. His imagination was vivid, but it never ran away with him into improbabilities; perhaps spiritual insight would be a better word here than imagination. He was well grounded in Bible narrative and history, and did not split hairs on doctrinal issues. Speaking continually to new audiences, he never exhausted the broad lines of Bible history and of the plan of salvation. He preached the gospel from Old Testament incidents and texts, as well as from the New Testament. He found God’s love there, as well as in the New Testament, where of course Jesus of Nazareth exemplified it in the full measure of substitutionary self-sacrifice. He also introduced neglected Bible themes, such as the doctrine of the Holy Spirit and the personal second coming of Christ.

He was always ready to learn from others. At the Northfield conferences he would often leave the platform before an address and sit right under the speaker, notebook and pencil in hand. As a young man he spared himself no trouble to gain instruction.

Harry Moorehouse of England, who taught him the fulness of the Bible and of the love of God, also gave him light on the second coming of Christ. He asked Harry if he knew of anyone who was well posted on it. Harry told him of a Mr. Richard Owens, a Dublin man, a floor-walker in A. T. Stewart’s dry goods store in New York. He found Mr. Owens, who referred him to a Dr. Inglis in Philadelphia, so Mr. Moody went to see him. That was the beginning of his study and teaching of that glorious theme.

In his earlier years Mr. Moody is said to have talked like greased lightning, but I have no recollection that he talked unduly fast, or that he made serious verbal and grammatical mistakes.

He still used New England colloquialisms and pungent phrases which a pedant or a purist might avoid, but there was never anything out of place in popular address. He could still pronounce “J’ru-s’lem” and “Dan’el” in two syllables, but one hardly noticed such small things in the absorbing earnestness and inspiration of his preaching. His sermons were easily reported, and required no more editing for publication than other preachers’ extemporaneous sermons.

BEYOND THE CONFINES OF CHICAGO

Before the close of this period in Mr. Moody’s career which we have under consideration, he had become a definite religious force, well known in the East as well as in the Middle West.

His war work had brought him to the notice of multitudes from all over the North, and gave him many dear and lifelong friends. After the Civil War he became a member of the Illinois Sunday school executive committee, and went throughout the state to attend county and district conventions. His success brought invitations from nearby states.

The Y.M.C.A. also opened wide doors and effectual for him, bringing him before another influential element in the nation. He attended state and international conventions in Pittsburgh (1867), Albany (1868), Baltimore (1869), Indianapolis (1870), and many other cities.

It was in Indianapolis that he first met Ira D. Sankey, who was a delegate from New Castle, Pennsylvania. Impressed with his singing, he asked him there and then to come to Chicago and join him in the work. So these two men with complementary gifts became yokefellows in the gospel with such rich harvests of souls.

“This looks like slow work,” remarked Dr. Theodore L. Cuyler to Mr. Moody in the little prayer room of Calvary Chapel in Brooklyn one day during the winter of 1871-2.

“Yes,” responded Mr. Moody, “it is slow, and it looks like a small work. But if you want to kindle a fire you collect a handful of sticks, light them with a match, and keep blowing until they begin to blaze. After the fire is once fairly started you may heap on as much wood as you can get. So I am working here with a handful of Christians endeavorings to consecrate themselves fully to Jesus, and if they get well warmed with divine love I have no fear but that a genuine revival will begin, and sinners will be converted.”

He was right. The handful of believers in that meeting did receive a fresh baptism, and within two months over a hundred were converted and received into the fellowship of Lafayette Avenue Presbyterian Church.

This incident gives a clue to Mr. Moody’s strategy in his evangelistic campaigns, and shows that his success was not accidental. The climax of this period was the accession of new spiritual power and vision that came to him later in 1872, as recorded in Chapter II. He was on the threshold of much greater experiences as an evangelist.

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