

A VOICE FROM THE PAST

A PAST CHALLENGE BY AN AGNOSTIC TO DEBATE DR. HARRY IRNSIDE

by E. Schuyler English

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One Sunday afternoon Mr. Ironside was walking along Market Street and noticed a sizable crowd gathered at the corner of Grant Avenue. He realized by the sound of the band and the singing that this was a Salvation Army meeting, and he joined the circle of people to enjoy the music and testimonies.* The lassie captain knew him immediately, for it had hardly been more than a year since he left the Army. She asked him if he would like to give his testimony and he happily assented. While he was telling the Gospel and of his own experience of God's saving grace, he observed a rather well-dressed and intelligent-looking man in the audience, standing a little apart from others. This gentlemen took a card out of his pocket and wrote something on it and, as Ironside was concluding his message, walked up to the "ring" and handed it to him.

Still speaking, Harry glanced down at the card and promptly recognized the name of a man who had been giving widely-advertised addresses on the West Coast for some months. He was an official representative of one of the early trade unions, the I. W. W. — the Industrial Workers of the World, facetiously called by its opponents, I Won't Work. This particular man was famed for his ability to incite his hearers to class hatred and animosity toward the capitalistic system. He had passed him the card, Harry realized, for a purpose other than to give him his name, so Harry turned it over and read the penciled words, "Sir, I challenge you to debate with me the question 'Agnosticism vs. Christianity' in the Academy of Science Hall next Sunday afternoon at four o'clock. I will pay all expenses."

Harry read the card aloud to the crowd; he then answered his challenger, "I'm very much interested in this challenge. Frankly, I've already been announced

as the speaker at another meeting next Lord's day afternoon at three o'clock, but I think it will be possible to finish in time to reach the Academy of Science by four or, if necessary, to have another speaker take my place at the earlier meeting."

"Therefore," he continued, "I'll be glad to agree to this debate on the following conditions, namely that in order to prove that this gentleman has something worth debating about, he will promise to bring with him to the hall next Sunday two people whose qualifications I shall give in a moment, as proof that agnosticism is of real value in changing human lives and building true character. First, he must promise to bring with him one man who was for years what we commonly call a 'down-and-outer.' I'm not particular as to the exact nature of the sins that wrecked his life and made him an outcast

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from society — whether he was a drunkard, or a criminal of some kind, or a victim of any sensual appetite. He must be, however, a man who for years was under the power of some evil habits from which he could not deliver himself, but who, on some occasion, attended one of this gentleman's meetings and heard him speak, glorifying agnosticism and denouncing the Bible and Christianity, and whose heart and mind as he listened to such an address were so deeply stirred that he went away from that meeting saying, 'Henceforth I, too, am an agnostic!' or words to that effect, and as a result of embracing that particular philosophy he found that a new power had

come into his life. The sins that he once loved, now he hates, and righteousness and goodness are henceforth the ideals of his life. He is now an entirely new man, a credit to himself and an asset to society — all because he is an agnostic."

"Secondly," Ironside went on to say, "I would like this gentleman who has challenged me to debate to bring with him to the hall next Sunday one woman — and I think he may have more difficulty in finding the woman

than the man — who was once a poor, wretched, characterless outcast, the slave of degrading passions and the victim of man's corrupt living." "Perhaps," said Harry, nodding in the direction of San Francisco's infamous Barbary Coast, which was only a stone's throw from the spot where he was speaking, "perhaps one who had lived for years in some notorious resort down there on Pacific Street, or in some other hell-hole, utterly lost, ruined, and wretched. But this woman also entered one of this gentleman's meetings and heard him loudly proclaiming his agnosticism and ridiculing the message of the Holy Scriptures. As she listened to him, hope was born in her heart and she said, 'This is just what I need to deliver me from the slavery of sin!' She followed this teaching, then, until she became an intelligent agnostic or infidel. As a result, her whole being revolted against the degradation of the life she had been living. She fled from the infamous place where she had been captive so long and today, rehabilitated, she has won her way back to an honored position in society and is living a clean, virtuous, happy life — all because she is an agnostic."

"Now, sir," Harry continued, "if you will promise to bring with you two such people as examples of what agnosticism will do, I will promise to meet you at the Academy of Science Hall at the hour appointed next Sunday, and I'll bring with me at the very least one hundred men and women who for years lived in just such sinful degradation as I have tried to depict but who have been gloriously saved through believing the message of the Gospel which you ridicule. I'll have these men and women with me on the platform as witnesses to the miraculous saving power of Jesus Christ, and as present-day proof of the truth of the Bible."

Quickly turning to the Salvation Army captain, Ironside asked, "Captain, have you any who could go with me to such a meeting?"

"We can give you forty, at least," she exclaimed enthusiastically, "all from this one corps, and we'll furnish a brass band to lead the procession."

"Fine!" Harry said, "Now, sir," facing his challenger, "I shall have no difficulty in picking up at least sixty others from various missions, gospel halls, and evangelical churches. So if you promise faithfully to bring two such 'exhibits' as I have described, I will come marching in at the head of such a procession, with the band playing Onward Christian Soldiers, and I'll be ready for the debate."

His opponent, who had at least some sense of humor, smiled rather sardonically and, with a wave of the hand as if to say, "Nothing doing!" walked away from the scene of the meeting — while the crowd applauded and cheered the street preacher who had met the challenge of the agnostic and put him to flight. They recognized immediately that no philosophy of negation, such as agnosticism, could ever make bad men and women good, and yet they knew from observation and experience that this is exactly what Christ has done for centuries and is doing every day. ■

This is excerpted from the book, *Ordained of the Lord: A Biography of Harry Ironside* by E. Schuyler English (Loizeaux Brothers). Dr. Harry Ironside (1876-1951) served the Lord as an evangelistic, prolific author, and pastor of Moody Memorial Church. He was one of the most respected Bible teachers of his day.

* The Salvation Army is today almost exclusively devoted to a social gospel, with little emphasis upon the salvation of souls. It is very interesting to hear what William Booth had to say years ago as recounted by Harry Ironside himself: *I recall hearing William Booth, the first general of the Salvation Army, say, when explaining his "Darkest England" scheme, that its real objective was, not just the amelioration of social conditions, but first and foremost the bringing of men to repentance that their souls might be saved. I can recall the flash in his eye, and the noble bearing of his commanding figure as he exclaimed, "Take a man from the filth and squalor of the slums, exchange his rags for decent clothing, move him from the stifling stench of the city tenement to a neat little cottage in the pure air of the country, put him on his feet economically where he can make a decent living for himself and his family, and then let him die in his sins, unsaved, and be lost forever at last—really it is not worth while, and I, for one, would not attempt it."* (Cited by Harry Ironside, *Except Ye Repent*, pages 181-182).

**"If every person in the world had adequate food, housing, income;
If all men were equal;
If every possible social evil and injustice were done away with,
Men would still need one thing—CHRIST! --J.W. Hyde**