

---

# Recollections of Ingersoll

by Eugene V. Debs

Published in *Pearson's Magazine*, vol. 37, no. 4 (April 1917), pp. 302-307.

It was in the national political campaign of 1880 that Henry Ward Beecher introduced Robert Green Ingersoll to a great audience in the Academy of Music, Brooklyn, as "the most brilliant speaker of the English tongue of all men on this globe." Coming from Beecher, himself a master of language and the most eloquent pulpit orator of his day, this remarkable tribute, greeted with tumultuous cheers by the vast audience, but confirmed the popular verdict rendered long before by the American people.

Robert G. Ingersoll was without doubt the most brilliant speaker of the English tongue then living, and in another century when the ignorant prejudice that still clings to his name shall have been cleared away the world will know his true greatness and honor him as one of the foremost men of his age.

The fame of Ingersoll as an orator of surpassing eloquence and power was established as a very young man. At 27, in the campaign of 1860, he was the candidate of his party for Congress in the Fourth District of Illinois, and it was in the series of debates he had with Judge William Kellogg, his Republican opponent, that he first showed his brilliant powers to the people of his state. Curiously enough, as it now appears, Judge Kellogg, the Republican candidate, upheld the Fugitive Slave Law and defended the laws in favor of slavery, while Ingersoll as a Douglas Democrat denounced the Fugitive Slave Law in the fiercest terms and condemned slavery as the most infamous crime of the age. Colonel Clark E. Carr, the author of *Illini*, who heard these debates wrote as follows:

It may be doubted whether there was ever pronounced by any human being so terrific a philippic against human slavery and the Fugitive Slave Law. I myself had heard

Beecher and Garrison and Wendell Phillips and Lovejoy and Giddings, but I had never heard it equaled.

It was after hearing the opening debate at Galesburg that Colonel Carr said of Ingersoll: "From that hour I have always believed that Robert G. Ingersoll was the greatest orator who ever stood before a public audience."

But it was not until he made his celebrated speech nominating Blaine for the Presidency in the Republican National Convention at Cincinnati in June, 1876, that the country at large came to know him. That eloquent and thrilling speech fairly electrified the great convention and instantaneously the name of Ingersoll was flashed over the land and next morning was on the lips of millions. The national fame of the master orator was won by a single speech.

Three months later the brilliant speech to the old soldiers at Indianapolis containing his wonderful "Vision of War" was delivered and the report of it and its magical effect upon the multitude who heard it spread far and wide in all directions.

It was at this time that I first heard of Ingersoll and of his marvelous eloquence, but it was not until he made his lecture tour of the Pacific coast, a year or so later, and was assailed with such vituperative frenzy by the pulpit in every city he visited for his telling blows against orthodoxy, that I felt myself stirred by his appeal and eager to see the man who dared thus boldly to speak his honest thought and defy all the hosts of ignorance and superstition. For be it known that although less than 40 years ago, an incredibly widespread belief still existed in a literal hell of fire and brimstone.

The truth and terror of this orthodox hell had been burnt into my child-mind at Sunday school, and to deny or even to doubt it was to fly in the face of God himself and deny the beneficence of his works. The ranker a superstition, the more sacred it is held by its unreasoning devotees. Ingersoll was guilty of attacking the sacred dogma of hellfire and the eternal roasting of the race for the sin of having been created, and only a monster could be guilty of such an abominable crime. The church felt itself outraged and the priesthood and ministry turned out en masse to crush the wicked infidel and impious iconoclast. The fury of these clerical assaults upon Ingersoll now seem almost un-

believable. He was denounced in a perfect frenzy of malicious abuse as the vilest of sinners and the basest of mortals. Ingersoll, great soul that he was, stood serene and unruffled through it all, observing calmly that "these are the holy gentlemen who love their enemies and treat their neighbors as themselves."

It was while he was being thus shamefully maligned, misrepresented and persecuted for denying that God was a monster and that a roaring hell awaited most of his children, that his calm courage, his serene self-reliance, and his eloquent and fearless espousal of the truth as he saw it, enlisted my sympathy. He stood his ground alone and fought his fight without compromise to the end. I can never forget how his heroic spirit stirred me; how I felt myself thrilled and inspired by his flaming appeal and impassioned eloquence. He did more than any other man, living or dead, to put out the fires and fears of hell and rid the world of superstition. Scarcely anyone outside of an asylum any longer believes in the barbarous dogma of an everlasting torture chamber. The Reverend Billy Sunday is one of the few monuments of the stone age of theology. He plagiarizes Ingersoll to fan the dying embers into flame again and to keep salvation on a sound and paying commercial basis.

Robert Ingersoll could without doubt have been President of the United States. But not for one moment was he tempted by the lure of political preferment. The highest office the people had to bestow appeared contemptible to him because he knew it could be obtained only at the politician's price of manhood and self-respect. Above all place and power, all earthly honors, Robert Ingersoll held his principles, his convictions, the integrity of his own soul. He hated sham and superstition, he abhorred slavery in every form, he loved truth and justice with a sacred passion, and with his soul inviolate he worshiped at the holy shrine of freedom. A thousand times he declared he wanted no right, no opportunity denied any other human being on earth, and he meant it. He boldly challenged the powers that oppressed the weak; he held in lofty scorn the titled snobbery of state and church that imposed meekness and submission upon their despoiled victims, and he heartily despised the social conventions which honored idleness and parasitism and degraded useful service and honest toil.

During these years of crusade and conflict Ingersoll was the central and commanding figure in public life and the most talked about man in America. The line between his friends and foes was sharply drawn. He was either loved or hated, honored or despised. His enemies, goaded to frenzy by his merciless attacks upon their ancient Jehovah, their orthodox hell, and their pious traditions, denounced him with implacable hatred, while his friends, the people who actually knew him and who understood his pure, unselfish motives, his noble, high-souled purpose, fairly worshiped him as a savior of humanity.

He pleaded for the negro as no one ever had before, he espoused the cause of the Chinaman when it was almost treason to breathe a sympathetic word in his behalf, he protested passionately against the persecution of the Jew, he stood staunchly for the rights of woman, he thundered with a Titan's voice in condemnation of the crimes committed against childhood, he made the most eloquent, touching, inspiring appeal ever made in behalf of the criminal class, so-called, and to the hour of his death he never once turned a deaf ear to the voice of distress or refused aid and comfort to a suffering fellow-being. The weak and unfortunate, the sorrowing and despairing, regardless of color or creed, whoever or whatever they might be, had in "Bob" Ingersoll as tender a sympathizer and as true a friend as ever ministered to the needs of his fellow-men.

Garfield called him "Royal Bob" because everything he did was in royal fashion, but he was never more royal than when he poured out his great heart in loving sympathy to the poor and needy and emptied his purse to the last dollar to relieve their poverty and distress. I have borne frequent witness to Ingersoll's great-hearted love for the poor. I have more than once seen him press a five dollar bill into the hands of a chambermaid, a bellboy, or a train porter, and then raise his finger to his lips to admonish the recipient that no thanks were due and that no mention was to be made of it. Ingersoll spent what would have amounted to an immense fortune in just that quiet, unostentatious manner.

When Ingersoll had his office in New York it was always besieged with the unfortunates who reckoned on his sympathy and called on him for the aid denied them by their Christian friends and neighbors. And he never refused as long as he had the wherewithal to give. But the demands not infrequently exceeded

his means. Once he said to me with tears in his eyes: "I can hardly go to my office any more; I can't help them all and I haven't the heart to turn them away."

Among his callers one day there was a young woman whose father had been rich but had suddenly failed. She had belonged to a fashionable church but when bankruptcy came she found herself alone. Her former friends no longer knew her. The minister had told her they would see what could be done to help her — and that was the end of it. Her situation finally became desperate. She must find some way of getting a living. She had heard of Ingersoll. He was a wicked infidel, of course, but he helped the poor, and to him she went as a last resort.

"What can I do for you, my young friend?" The kind, gentle blue eyes of the great agnostic looked with ineffable tenderness into the agitated features of the young woman in his ante-room. At once her fear departed, her trembling ceased, and she briefly told her pathetic story. Tears rolled down the cheeks of the "wicked infidel." He did not tell her he would "see what could be done for her," but the first thing he did was to thrust his hand deep into his pocket, draw forth a twenty-dollar gold piece, and press it into the astonished woman's hand; he then bade her be of good cheer and return to his office at the same hour the following day. She was in a transport of delight. A new hope brightened her outlook and warmed her heart to life again. She had found a real friend, and when she returned the next day it was to be told that arrangements had been made for her for a course in stenography and typewriting, for her care while she was taking her lessons, and for a position in which she could earn her own living as soon as the course was completed. That is how Ingersoll the "godless infidel" practiced his religion while his cruel and malicious detractors mouthed their pious phrases and made loud profession of their sterile creeds.

Late in the seventies, when Colonel Ingersoll was lecturing under the management of James Redpath and packing the greatest auditoriums in the country to overflowing, he came to Terre Haute and I saw him for the first time. I met him at the railway station on arrival and escorted him to his hotel. He at once filled my eye and captivated me completely. There was something intensely fascinating in his personality, an irresistible charm in his presence, a liquid melody in his voice — and withal he bore the

stamp of genius and the towering majesty of a man! I felt that here was the greatest man in all the world.

We had in Terre Haute at that time an organization known as the Occidental Literary Club. It was under the auspices of this club, consisting of young men of literary ambition, that Ingersoll delivered his first lecture in Terre Haute — April 30th, 1878.

Ingersoll's manager, Mr. Redpath, had written me from Washington under date of April 14th: "You need not be afraid of speaking so extravagantly of the Colonel's eloquence that people will be disappointed. He is the most eloquent man now living. He astonished New England and in Boston where they hear the best oratory all the time he made the profoundest sensation of the last 15 years and drew the biggest audiences.... You will find that I have not overstated his marvelous power over audiences. Boldly announce him as the greatest orator of the world. He is."

The opera house was packed to the doors. All the surrounding towns had sent in delegations and standing room was at a premium. Many had to be turned away. The subject was "The Liberty of Man, Woman, and Child." It was my privilege to introduce the speaker to the audience.

Never until that night had I heard real oratory; never before had I listened enthralled to such a flow of genuine eloquence. The speaker was in his prime, not yet 45, tall, shapely, graceful and commanding, the perfect picture of the beau ideal of his art. Never can I forget his features, his expressive blue eyes, his mellifluous voice, his easy, graceful gestures, and his commanding oratorical powers. He rippled along softly as a meadow brook or he echoed with the thunder of some mighty cataract. He pleaded for every right and protested against every wrong; he touched every emotion and expressed every mood of his enchanted listeners. His words fell as pearls in sunshine from his inspired lips and his impassioned periods glowed with the fervid enthusiasm of their thrice-eloquent author.

Redpath was right. Ingersoll was the greatest orator in all the world. No pen or tongue could ever describe his brilliant eloquence or his matchless powers.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton wrote of Ingersoll's oratory:

I heard Mr. Ingersoll many years ago in Chicago. The hall seated 5,000 people; every inch of standing room was occupied; aisles and platform crowded to overflowing. He held

that vast audience for three hours so completely entranced that when he left the platform no one moved, until suddenly, with loud cheers and applause, they recalled him. He returned smiling and said: 'I'm glad you called me back, as I have something more to say. Can you stand another half hour?' 'Yes: an hour, two hours, all night,' was shouted from various parts of the house; and he talked on with unabated vigor, to the delight of his audience. This was the greatest triumph of oratory I had ever witnessed....

I have heard the greatest orators of this century in England and America; O'Connell in his palmiest days, on the Home Rule question; Gladstone and John Bright in the House of Commons; Spurgeon, James and Stopford Brooks, in their respective pulpits; our own Wendell Phillips, Henry Ward Beecher, and Webster and Clay, on great occasions; the stirring eloquence of anti-slavery orators, both in congress and on the platform, but none of them ever equaled Robert Ingersoll in his highest flights.

But it was not only as orator that Ingersoll was without a peer, he was great, supremely great in all his conceptions of human relationships and in his outlook upon the world. He was as modest as he was great, as simple and as unassuming as he was lofty-minded and noble-souled. He had a heart great enough for a god and he overflowed with love and kindness for his fellow-men. He was the least selfish and the most generous and magnanimous soul I have ever known. Despite his bitter hatred of mind-dwarfing and soul-enslaving superstitions, or perhaps because of it, he had a profoundly reverent nature and was saturated in every fiber with the essence of true religion, the religion of love and service and consecration to humanity.

When he was trying the famous Davis will case in Butte, Montana, he learned of a couple of orphan sisters who had been left destitute. He gave his lecture on Shakespeare for their benefit. Some \$2,000 were realized. The entire proceeds were given over to the orphans. He did this times without number during his career on the platform. I happened to be in his room at his hotel in Indianapolis when he received a telegram requesting him to deliver a lecture in Philadelphia for the benefit of Walt Whitman, and I can still see his fine features light up as he said, "Certainly I will. It will give me real pleasure to be of service to dear Old Walt."

The good Christian board of managers of the Academy of Music refused Ingersoll the use of their house because he was an "infidel," but another place was secured and the lecture given for the benefit of the good gray poet who soon afterward passed to the great beyond.

In the fall of 1878 Colonel Ingersoll returned to Terre Haute and gave his beautiful and poetic lecture on Robert Burns. On the day of the lecture it rained in torrents. We of the committee felt that we were in for a considerable financial loss. The colonel was not slow in noticing our plight. "Boys," said he, in the most cheerful voice, "don't worry in the least. If the rain keeps the people away I will charge you nothing for the lecture and pay my own expenses." That was characteristic of the great-hearted humanitarian. We were relieved of our anxiety. But in spite of the rain the house was crowded. The late Daniel W. Voorhees, United States senator from Indiana, the "Tall Sycamore of the Wabash," whose home was at Terre Haute, and myself accompanied Colonel Ingersoll to the Opera House. As we got aboard a street car the rain fell in a perfect deluge. Senator Voorhees remarked: "The rain will make no difference tonight. Colonel Ingersoll is the only man in America who can draw against the elements and fill the biggest house on the rainiest night." And so it proved to be.

From Terre Haute Colonel Ingersoll went to Cincinnati on the midnight train. I went to the depot to see him off, but when the train pulled out I was aboard with him. The Colonel was too magnetic, too kind and hospitable, and I simply had to go with him. The rain continued to fall at Cincinnati. Colonel Ingersoll looked out of the hotel window, shook his head and said: "That rain is apt to cost me \$500 and yet I haven't even been consulted about it." But it didn't, for the house could not have held more people.

The personal company of Colonel Ingersoll was a joy indeed and his conversation a continuous charm and delight. On the stage his eloquence was brilliant and sustained from his opening note to the last word of his peroration, but it was in the social circle, surrounded by the choice spirits that loved to do him honor, that the magnetism of the man and the marvelous gift of his conversation were made manifest and shone forth in all their incomparable glory. Ella Wheeler Wilcox said: "His conversation is a string of pearls." It was true. Henry Ward Beecher called him



“The golden-mouthed American.” Everyone who ever sat heart-to-heart with him will bear willing testimony to the enchantment of his personal discourse. His lips were golden and his tongue tipped with the sacred fire. He could entertain one or a hundred and charm them all with his brilliant wit, his infectious humor, and his alluring philosophy of life. The very soul of him shone from his fine countenance as he scattered with spendthrift hands the sparkling jewels of his genius. He spoke in pictures and poems about art, literature, science, philosophy, history, music, the drama — everything — and it is a thousand pities that so many of his most brilliant intellectual gems failed to find their way into print and are forever lost to the world.

Sitting in the room of his hotel at Terre Haute after his lecture one night, he was telling us about his visit abroad when a cock crowed in a nearby barnyard. He paused instantly and said, “Shakespeare called that rooster the ‘herald of the dawn’ — his genius changed a brick into a diamond in a second.”

“Wit,” said he, “is the lightning of the soul.” And this: “Think of the alchemy that turns bread into Hamlet.”

Some time later during the conversation the Colonel was asked how long his brother Ebon had been dead. The question went to his heart like a dagger. He dropped his face in his hands, sobbed aloud, and when he raised his head to answer his cheeks were wet with tears. The love these two noble brothers bore each other can never be told in words.

The sensitive nature of Ingersoll, his tenderness of heart, his overflowing pity, his boundless sympathy were all characteristic of the man. He saw much in his daily life to pain and shock him, and his tears, like his smiles, lay very near the surface.

With the whole of his great heart he sympathized with working men and women who toil. Again and again in the most thrilling eloquence he appealed to the working class to assert its rights and take possession of its own. He loathed and despised aristocratic idleness and denounced in the most scathing terms the vampires that feed upon the vitals of unrequited toil. He could not discuss the wrongs and sufferings of the poorly-paid and wretchedly-housed victims of exploitation without passionate protest and bitter resentment. He could and did put himself literally in their places, and with his sensitive, sympathetic, justice-loving nature he felt the cruel injustice they suffered as keenly as

if he shared their daily lot. The women and children in factories and sweatshops cried out to him, and with every throb of his heart he sympathized with them in their tragic struggle for existence. One evening as I sat with him he talked about the poor girls who have to sew for the pittance that keeps them alive. He had made inquiry and found that the girls who had made his shirts had received but a miserly wage for their labor. This stirred his wrath and he resolved that the wrong should be righted so far at least as the making of his shirts was concerned. Said he: "Of course I can't change these inhuman conditions, but I can and will see to it that the girls who now make my shirts are paid for their work and are no longer robbed of their honest earnings."

The birthday of Colonel Ingersoll, August 11th, was for many years the occasion of a letter or telegram of congratulation from our family. The letter that follows was received in acknowledgment of a birthday telegram:

Walston, Dobbs' Ferry-on-Hudson,  
Aug. 12, '92.

My dear Mr. Debs:—

A thousand thanks for your beautiful telegram. The years are growing short. Time seems in a hurry to bring the birthday around. Well, all we can do is to get what good we can out of the days as they pass.

Each moment is a bee that flies  
With swift and unreturning wing,  
Giving its honey to the wise.  
And to the fool its poison sting.

I hope that you and yours will have honey all your lives. We all send best regards to your father and mother— to your sisters and to Mrs. Debs and yourself.

In spite of the hot weather we are all perfectly well — including the baby.

With more thanks for your great kindness, I remain

Yours always,

**R. G. Ingersoll.**

Mrs. Ingersoll says — "Give my love to all" — and so say I.

Great as Ingersoll was in public life he was greater still in the charmed circle of his beautiful family and his happy home. Beneath the blessed roof-tree of the Ingersolls four generations dwelt together in perfect love and made home and heaven synonymous terms. Mrs. Ingersoll, her venerable mother, the beautiful daughters, the devoted sister and their husbands and children, ah, what supreme happiness reigned in that royal household! And to see them all swarm about the Colonel and cover him with caresses and kisses was a picture for the soul never to be erased from the memory. A temple of freedom, a house of love and joy, a holy shrine was the Ingersoll home when its master spirit reigned there, and they who passed its sacred portals, beheld its touching scenes of felicity and devotion, and enjoyed its hearty, wholesome hospitality visioned a veritable paradise on this planet.

Seventeen years have passed since Robert G. Ingersoll passed from among his fellow men, but the world has yet to learn of the true greatness of the man and the infinite value of his service to humanity. He freely laid his all upon the altar that those who came after him might escape the curse of slavery and the horror of superstition, and know the joy of being free. He was absolutely true to the highest principles of his exalted character and to the loftiest aspirations of his own unfettered soul. He bore the crudest misrepresentation, the foulest abuse, the vilest calumny, and the most heartless persecution without resentment or complaint. He measured up to his true stature in every hour of trial, he served with fidelity and without compromise to the last hour of his noble life, he paid in full the price of his unswerving integrity to his own soul, and each passing century to come will add fresh luster to his immortal fame.

*Edited by Tim Davenport*

1000 Flowers Publishing, Corvallis, OR · April 2017 · Non-commercial reproduction permitted.  
First Edition.