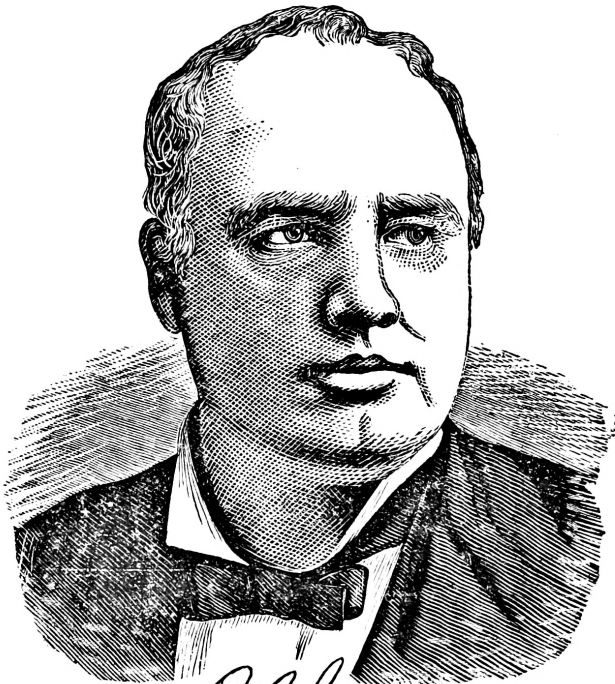


LIFE

OF

COL. R. G. INGERSOLL



R. G. Ingersoll

BY **GEO. STANDRING,**

Editor of "The Republican."

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BIOGRAPHY OF COL. INGERSOLL.

THE extraordinary and sustained popularity in this country of Colonel Ingersoll's lectures and writings affords ample justification for the publication of a biographical sketch of the distinguished orator. His works have been issued from various publishing houses in England, and have circulated by hundreds of thousands amongst the most thoughtful sections of the community. Every new effort is enthusiastically received by his innumerable admirers in this land; and, so far from his hold upon the public being relaxed, he gains every year a wider circle of appreciative readers.

Ingersoll has for many years been a well-known figure in America, and there have been frequent references to him and to his lectures in the press of that country. He is recognised there as the embodiment of aggressive Freethought; and the "righteous" of America look upon "Bob" in much the same way as the people in this country regard "Bradlaugh." The smart writers on the press quote his witty sayings with simulated censure, and they really, no doubt, admire the humorous lecturer even while they pretend to condemn him. Paragraphers take advantage of his popularity to work his sayings into their fugitive witticisms; for example, we have seen in one paper "hell" obliquely referred to as "Bob Ingersoll's no such place." This tends to show that R. G. Ingersoll has gained a wide-spread renown in his native land.

To the biographer, a very difficult task is presented when he undertakes a record of Colonel Ingersoll's career. The materials are fragmentary and scattered, and it is practically impossible to verify and correct such details as are available. We shall endeavour to make this sketch as complete and accurate as the circumstances of the case will permit.

Robert G. Ingersoll is the son of a New School Presbyterian minister, and was born in Western New York, about the year 1830. While Robert was very young, his father moved into Ohio, and thence into Illinois, at that time regions almost wholly uninhabited, and thus his early years were passed amidst the forests and prairies of the Western States. Ingersoll left home when very young, and sought his fortune in the Far West. The cause of this separation does not appear to be known, but it is not at all improbable that it was due to the lad's free-thinking tendency, which was evinced at an early age. The father, as stated above, was a minister belonging to a sect that has never been distinguished by tolerant feeling; and young Ingersoll found himself when quite a lad in active hostility to the dogmas taught by his parent. "I can't remember," he says, "when I believed the Bible doctrine of eternal punishment. I have a dim recollection of hating Jehovah when I was exceedingly small." In one of his discourses, he told his hearers this striking anecdote of his boyhood's days:—"When I was a lad I sometimes used to wonder how the mercy of God lasted as long as it did—because I remember that on several occasions I had not been at school when I was supposed to be there. Why I was not burned to a crisp was a mystery to me. There was one day in each week too good for a child to be happy in. On that day we were all taken to church, and the dear old minister used to ask us, 'Boys, do you know that you all ought to be in hell?' and we answered up as cheerfully as we could under such circumstances, 'Yes, sir.' 'Well, boys, do you know that you would go to hell if you died in your sins?' and we said, 'Yes, sir.' And then came the great test: 'Boys, if it was God's will that you should go to hell, would you be willing to go?' and every little liar said 'Yes, sir.' Then, in order to tell how long we should stay there, he used to say, 'Suppose once in a million ages a bird should come from a far distant clime, and carry off in its bill one little grain of sand, the time would finally come when the last grain of sand would be carried away—do you understand?'

'Yes, sir.' 'Boys, by that time it would not be sun-up in hell.'"*

It is not difficult to see that the relations between a clerical parent and a heterodox son of Ingersoll's bold and independent nature would soon become intolerably strained. There is, however, reason to believe that his father was by no means a bigoted man. The old gentleman on one occasion became somewhat angry at young Robert's outspoken heretical views, and endeavoured to dissuade him from uttering them. But the lad boldly said, "Well, father, if you want me to lie, you may make me pretend to believe like you, but if you want me to be honest, I must talk as I do," and the parent wisely chose the better part, the heretic rather than the hypocrite. Before his death the father modified his own views, and ceased to preach the abominable doctrine of eternal punishment.

The reason that prompted Ingersoll to leave his home is unknown, and is not a fitting subject for conjecture; certain it is that he entered on the battle of life at an age when most lads are still under domestic tutelage.

In the Western States he worked in various places, educating himself meanwhile for the legal profession. His acute, penetrating mind, combined with a power of eloquence that has placed him in the foremost rank of modern orators, soon brought him to the front, and in a few years from the time when he commenced practising he became known as a lawyer of unmatched eloquence and influence with juries. It is many years since Ingersoll relinquished criminal business. The reason he gave for this step was that it was too great a tax upon his mind. His entire energy was devoted to the interests of his client, and he observes that when defending a prisoner in a doubtful murder case, his whole mental and physical force was absorbed in his task. He could think, act, and speak of nothing else. To a man of wide sympathy and

* This ridiculous metaphor appears in one of Father Furniss's hellish works for children. Ingersoll, in narrating it, has introduced an American phrase, "sun-up" for sun-rise.

(3)
varied activity, this overpowering strain must have been as dangerous as it was inconvenient. A mind employed in different directions could not long resist the destructive influence of such toil.

On the outbreak of the American Civil War, Ingersoll naturally threw himself with enthusiasm into the cause of the North. His deep detestation of slavery in every form—mental as well as physical—impelled him to labor actively for the side that had undertaken the extinction of forced servitude in the States. It was not, however, for the purpose of gratifying his ambition or of indulging a taste for bloodshed that Ingersoll participated in the war. Perhaps no man was less fitted to engage in such unholy work. He says:—"I was not fit to be a soldier. I never saw our men fire but I thought of the widows and orphans they would make, and wished that they would miss." Despite his high-minded abhorrence of violence and bloodshed, he felt that the abolition of slavery was an end that justified the means, and he raised a regiment of cavalry, of which he was placed in command, and assigned to the Western Department. He was in the battle of Shiloh and other engagements, and subsequently fell a prisoner to the Confederates. As he is one of the wittiest and best talkers in America, in private, as well as on the platform, he was soon a great favorite, and Forrest, whose command captured him, treated him with the greatest consideration, once telling him that he would get him exchanged the first chance that offered, because the prisoner was getting so popular with the rebels that he began to doubt the fidelity of his own men.

His deep horror of warfare is a feeling to which Ingersoll frequently gives most eloquent expression in his works, but it does not proceed from physical or mental cowardice. True bravery does not exist alone on the battle-field, where so many adventitious circumstances combine to inflame the heart and steel the nerves. The brutal instinct in mankind is aroused by the blare of trumpets, the clash of arms, the fierce delight of conflict, the hope of glory, and the dread of shame. Many

men who would shrink in terror from contact with a fever patient would march without a tremor to certain death on the "field of glory." But the truest, noblest bravery is often exhibited under conditions which do not include the stimulating effect of public achievement.

That Ingersoll is a man of courage and self-devotion is plainly shown by an incident of this character. On the fatal day when the fanatic Guiteau shot Garfield, the Colonel was amongst the gentlemen in the President's company. The first shots did their fell work before any attempt could be made to protect the President; but, when Ingersoll saw Guiteau preparing to fire yet again at his innocent victim, he threw his body before him, and would undoubtedly have received the bullet had not the assassin been seized and disarmed. "Greater love hath no man than this, to lay down his life for his friend:" and that Ingersoll endeavored to shield Garfield from danger, at the risk of his own life, is an historical incident that will for ever redound to his glory.

In America, as in every other country, the avowal of heresy subjects the individual to certain pains and penalties at the hands of the bigoted. Although our Transatlantic brethren have cast off the yoke of monarchy, and for over a century have lived under the flag of the Republic, they have not yet emancipated themselves from the thralldom of superstition. It would be impossible to over-estimate the work which Ingersoll, by his wit and eloquence, has done in "breaking the fetters" imposed by the adherents of superstition upon the thought and speech of man. But in this noble iconoclastic mission the Colonel has drawn upon himself the fierce wrath of the bigots. As a politician, Ingersoll would by right of ability have taken a commanding position. But his freely-spoken heterodox views have operated against him, as may be seen from a characteristic anecdote. A gentleman went to see Colonel Ingersoll when he lived in Peoria, and, finding a fine copy of Voltaire in his library, said, "Pray, sir, what did this cost you?" "I believe it cost me the governorship

of the State of Illinois," was the swift and pregnant answer. Doubtless, however, the Colonel does not regret his exclusion from political honors. His heart is in the Freethought work of which he is the acknowledged leader in America, and his practice at the bar must absorb a great deal of his time and energy. Political life in the States is not of a nature to invite high-minded and pure-hearted men to engage in it. From various causes that are totally independent of the form of government, politics in that great country is too often a game in which dishonesty and chicanery are the leading features. Let us hope that in years to come the machinery of State will be re-organised in such a manner as to make it a credit to the glorious principles of Republicanism!

Although Ingersoll occupies no official position in the State, his ability, energy, and unsullied integrity make him a great force in politics. He is a Republican, and is a thorough "party man" in its widest, noblest sense. He described his position in a trenchant manner in supporting the candidature of Garfield a few years ago:—"I belong to a party that is prosperous. I belong to the party that believes in good crops; that is glad when a fellow finds a gold mine; that rejoices when there are forty bushels of wheat to an acre; that laughs when every railroad declares its dividend; that claps both its hands when every investment pays; when the rain falls for the farmer; when the dew lies lovingly upon the grass. I belong to the party that is happy when the people are happy; when the labouring man gets three dollars a day; when he has roast beef on his table; when he has a carpet on the floor; when he has a picture of Garfield on the wall."

Drawing the lines of distinction between the two great parties in American politics, Ingersoll remarked:—"A man is a Republican because he loves something. A man is a Democrat mostly because he hates something. A Republican takes a man, as it were, by the collar, and says, 'You must do your best, you must climb the

infinite hill of human progress as long as you live.' Now and then one gets tired, lets go all hold, and rolls down to the very bottom of the hill, and as he strikes the mud, he springs upon his feet transfigured, and says, 'Hurrah for Hancock.' "

It will be seen from these excerpts that Ingersoll's adhesion to a party is conceived in no narrow spirit of selfish supremacy or personal gain. One side represents the forward, the other the backward, movement, and to the former he unhesitatingly gives his allegiance because the progress of the people is bound up with it.

Colonel Ingersoll is admittedly the leading jury-lawyer at the American bar. His eloquence is irresistible when brought to bear upon the twelve "good men and true" who are supposed to form the palladium of the constitution. In the great Star Route case, which has recently been concluded after years of litigation and an expenditure of over two millions of dollars, the Colonel was leading counsel for the defence; and, apart from the merits of the case, it may be a source of satisfaction to know that Ingersoll's side won the day. This circumstance would seem to show that he is not only an adept at persuading a jury, but that he is also an able and profound lawyer, for the nature of the issues in this case needed all the resources that a legal mind could bring to bear upon them.

In personal appearance Colonel Ingersoll is as distinguished as his intellect and powers of expression are above the average of humanity. He stands fully six feet in height, and weighs over two hundred pounds. His head is remarkable for mental capacity, and his face habitually wears a pleasant and genial expression. The portrait which appears on the front of this pamphlet is beyond doubt the best *wood-cut* representation of his features; but even that does not convey the sunny serenity portrayed in the best photographs of him. The soft shadows and subtle tints of photography can be rarely translated with proper effect in a wood engraving, which at the best can be nothing more than an approximate

representation. In a splendid lithographic drawing that has been sold in this country, the Colonel is represented standing at full length, in a graceful negligent attitude, with one hand in pocket; and the expression of his face is extremely benevolent and good-natured.

In his domestic relations, Ingersoll is almost romantically happy. His wife and children are not regarded by him as inferior creatures, whose destiny is simply to minister to the pleasure of the "master," and to obey his behests. He is demonstrative, loving, and generous. His fire-side is his heaven, his wife and daughters the angels therein. His views with regard to domestic finance have been thus expressed upon the platform:—"I despise a stingy man. I have known men who would trust their wives with their hearts and honor, but not with their pocket-book; not with a dollar. When I see a man of that kind, I always think he knows which of these articles is the most valuable. Think of making your wife a beggar! Think of her having to ask you every day for a dollar, or for two dollars, or fifty cents! 'What did you do with that dollar I gave you last week?' Think of having a wife that is afraid of you! Oh, I tell you, if you have but a dollar in the world, and you have got to spend it, spend it like a king, spend it as though it were a dry leaf, and you the owner of unbounded forests!" A story is current that he keeps in his house a drawer filled with money, to which his family have free access, and no account is ever required of the sums taken or how they are expended. This may appear to some to be munificence run mad; but Ingersoll is not the man to act like an idiot, and doubtless he has found that, in his case at least, the plan works well. At his residence in Washington he dispenses a profuse hospitality, entertaining friends and even wayfarers with a hearty cordiality that makes every guest feel "at home" in that gracious circle.

Ingersoll is essentially a *popular* orator. There is in his speeches no shadow of obscurity, no perplexity of meaning. He speaks in short crisp sentences; and he

never involves one idea by running another into it. At the same time his simplicity never becomes jejune: one can always feel the mighty force of the orator, though his language is so vivid and clear that a child cannot mistake his meaning. Often and often he compresses into a few brilliant words an idea that other men would require as many sentences to express. This is really the secret of his success as an orator. In the crucible of his mind the metal is separated from the dross: and, just as a small nugget of fine gold may represent all that is of value in a huge lump of ore, so a single sentence of Ingersoll's may contain the whole pith and substance of a common-place discourse.

The greater part of Ingersoll's orations have been issued in this country. We believe that the Freethought Publishing Company first introduced them to English readers, in a neat volume containing many of his best works, and printed in uniform style. The collection comprises the lecture on "Humboldt," the "Arraignment of the Churches," the "Oration on the Gods," the "Oration on Thomas Paine," and others. An æsthetic edition of small size and somewhat eccentric typography, has been issued under the title of "The Leek Bijou," comprising "What must I do to be saved?" "The Christian Religion," and one or two others. Mr. Morrish, of Bristol, has also published several, including "Farm Life in America," "Breaking the Fetters," "Difficulties of Belief," &c. These lectures, though rather imperfectly edited, have had a very large circulation, and their popularity is by no means yet exhausted. Messrs. Heywood, of Manchester, have brought out several of the lectures in a neat and handy edition. More recently the "Decoration Day Oration" has been issued from the *Paine Press*, and a cheap edition, from the original stereotype plates, of "Thomas Paine Glorified." The latter has been very favorably received. The Progressive Publishing Company has introduced the latest of Ingersoll's orations under the title, "Do I Blaspheme?" One unfortunate result of the various publications is that the editions are

not of uniform size, and it is consequently impossible to make a single bound collection of the orations. Perhaps in the future some enterprising firm may find it possible to issue such a series.*

It will thus be seen that Ingersoll is a "household word" amongst English Freethinkers. Although he has never appeared amongst them, his individuality is as familiar to them as that of an old friend. If he could be induced to visit this country his welcome would be most enthusiastic. Every admirer of his wit and eloquence—and their name is legion—would flock to hear his voice and participate in the charm of his presence. There is, we fear, small chance of this ardent hope being realised. Ingersoll's work in America is of a nature that prevents him from leaving his native shores. Nevertheless, although the Secularists of England cannot reasonably anticipate the delight of personal communication with him, they send across the Atlantic their heartiest good wishes, and trust he may long continue his noble work of emancipating the minds of the human race from the detestable yoke of superstition.

* Since this was written, the Freethought Publishing Company has issued a cheap uniform edition of the lectures, paged continuously for binding.

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