NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

COL. INGERSOLL AT HOME

Biographical Notes, Occasional Utterances, Characteristics.

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ROBERT G. INGERSOLL.

ROBERT G. INGERSOLL, who is known throughout the length and breadth of the United States as a freethinker of the boldest type, as a public speaker of fine intellectual endowment, possessing in a rare degree the gifts of eloquence and wit, and above all, as a man of high character, is the son of a New-School Presbyterian Minister. He was born in Western New York, but his father moved, when his son was very young, into Ohio, and thence into Illinois, both of these States not being "howling" wildernesses at the time, because American forests are oppressively silent—but regions almost wholly uninhabited. Robert's early years were thus passed face to face with the unsubdued forests and prairies, and this life doubtless helped to form his habit of independent thought and utterance, and to give him a physical constitution that can endure extreme and continuous toil when he chooses to test it.

Col. Ingersoll has been a freethinker from his earliest boyhood. He says, "I can't remember when I believed the Bible doctrine of eternal punishment. I have a dim recollection of hating Jehovah when I was exceedingly small." Before he was 10 years old he had repeated discussions with his father, in which he argued against his father's creed. The conditions that make one man a freethinker and another a chief among believers are not easily traced. Somewhere in the physical organisation they lie; it may be a mere difference of weight of brain. The freethinker will spring from the most unlikely stock, and more than one stout Calvinist tree has borne infidel fruit. It certainly cannot be said that

Robert's scepticism was the result of a stern upbringing, although the austerity of an old-style Presbyterian household, especially on Sundays, undoubtedly intensified his natural unbelief in any form of faith that causes a man to seek anywhere but in his own heart or in nature for truth, scientific, religious, or ethical. An early recollection bearing on this period is attributed to Robert's brother. The old clergyman once got a little angry at his son's inborn infidelity, but when the boy 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," the wise father preferred to have a sincere child rather than a hypocrite. Before his death, the father gave up the idea that this life is a period of probation, abandoning the doctrine of eternal punishment.

When still a mere boy, Robert left home, wandering in the west, and working at various places, until he contrived to educate himself for the legal profession. He soon became famous in his district—that of Southern Illinois—as a lawyer of unmatched eloquence and influence with juries. Probably he is without an equal as a jury-lawyer in the country to-day. Certainly he has no equal in the West. Stories are told in Illinois of his power over juries that rival the strongest illustrations of the influence of eloquence in the annals of the English or American bar. His marvellous power of drawing poetical pictures of domestic life, and of arousing sympathy on behalf of his client, enabled him to carry the toughest cases. The jury were emotionalised, and consequently impervious to the most skilfully put legal arguments from the opposite side. He abandoned criminal practice, because "it wore on him so much." When he had an uncertain murder case on hand it absorbed him; all his sympathies were enlisted; he could not sleep or take up any other work until his client was safe. This absorption is almost suicidal to an emotional nature, especially if it is a large nature.

Of Col. Ingersoll's war record very little has been made known. When the war broke out, his constitutional detestation of slavery in every form found outlet in the active work of raising 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. The following narrative should be taken as showing the popular estimate of his character, as a man of ready wit, and of infinite good-fellowship, rather than as being literally accurate. On one occasion he was ordered to guard a ford, with instructions to delay an advancing army of Rebels as long as possible, in order that the army of the North might make certain counter movements. He held his position for some time, but the enemy came up in such overwhelming force, that he had no course left but to order a retreat—every man as best he could to save himself. It was devil take the hindmost. As Col. Ingersoll was galloping away with his men as fast as their horses could get over the ground, his horse stumbled in a lane and threw him. Just as he fell several balls struck the logs, near him, and on looking up he saw some Rebels raising their carbines at him. With characteristic quickness and presence of mind, he shouted at the top of his voice ; "Hold on there ! Don't make blank fools of yourselves. I've been doing nothing else for the last five minutes, but wishing for a good chance to recognise your blank Confederacy." A southern officer ordered the men to stop, and laughing at the unknown Yankee's impudence they took him prisoner. At that time he was little known outside Illinois and Indiana.

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 favourite, 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 he was getting so popular with the Rebels that he began to doubt the fidelity of his own men.

The following remark touching Ingersoll's military career is, without doubt, a true utterance of the tender great-hearted gentleman. 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."

As a lecturer Col. Ingersoll's career has been an unqualified success. By his anti-Christian themes, and his reputation as an infidel, he necessarily drove from him a very large part of

the ordinary lecture-goers, because the majority of these are church-going people. But, on the other hand, he called around him a new class everywhere,—mostly men, and chiefly young men or old ones; not so much middle-aged men. The young men wanted to hear him, the old ones were the confirmed free-thinkers. The ordinary lecture audience, everywhere in the east, is composed of about equal numbers of the sexes, generally more women than men; but Ingersoll's audiences showed something like five men to every woman, and sometimes the disproportion was even greater. The women in America, as in Great Britain, are the chief supporters of the church, and tend to Conservatism in everything. But when women did go to hear his lecture on "The Liberty of Man, Woman, and Child," they were the most delighted and enthusiastic listeners ever seen in any audience. They forgave his poor opinion of the church for his good opinion of the women. No more popular lecture has perhaps ever been delivered than this magnificent plea for human liberty. The same lecture has been delivered under the titles of "Intellectual Development" and "Skulls," and the substance of it has been reprinted in England with still another title; but everywhere, whether spoken or read, it has commanded admiration. To his more recent lectures, notably to the powerful discourse, "What shall I do to be saved?" delivered in Chicago, women have been attracted in large numbers, and have evinced the liveliest interest. The generous passion, the tremulous sympathy, the truth and poetry of feeling which mark Col. Ingersoll's addresses, remove from Freethought the reproach of being a synonym for intellectual baldness. He has elevated womanhood; and in winning the heart and arousing the active emotions of women he is preparing the final victory of Freethought.

The business side of Col. Ingersoll's lecturing career has been thought worthy of special notice by his numerous critics. It is believed that some of his audiences have yielded more money than has ever before been recorded, even in a country of phenomenal lecturing successes. Accordingly he has been taunted with aiming merely at popularity, and of roystering around as the popular advocate of Atheism at 25,000 dollars

a year. To this Col. Ingersoll has made the following pungent reply:—"Is it honest in Dr Collyer to assail my motive? Let him answer my argument. Is it honest and fair in him to say I am doing a certain thing because it is popular? Has it got to this, that in this Christian country where they have preached every day hundreds and thousands of sermons,—has it got to this, that infidelity is so popular in the United States? If it has, I take courage. And I not only see the dawn of a brighter day, but the day is here. Think of it! A minister tells me in this year of grace, 1879, that a man is an infidel simply that he may be popular. I am glad of it. Simply that he may make money. Is it possible that we can make more money tearing down churches than in building them up? Is it possible that we can make more money denouncing the God of slavery than we can praising the God that took liberty from man? If so, I am glad."

If Freethought advocacy brings Colonel Ingersoll a handsome income, it is no more than a fitting reward of his splendid gifts and services. It is not surprising that this should be grudged by clergymen, who envy him his liberty as well as his power and success; just as ineffably dull and stupid critics are chagrined at the popular response to his swift and incisive wit. But if common report be true, Colonel Ingersoll spends as handsomely as he earns. He has a theory that the moment a man starts out to save, he becomes selfish, and begins to petrify. He says, "I despise a stingy man. I have known men who would trust their wives with their hearts and their honour, 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!" This is a philosophy, however, by no means incompatible with a very shrewd outlook upon the outgoings and incomings of the dollars.

In the conversational art Colonel Ingersoll is said to be as striking as he is in oratory. Indeed, except in his great passages, his private talk excels in pathos, in rare insight, in poetic imagery, and in delicate fancies. He has often an oriental style of rhetoric in his most familiar conversations. He employs such phrases as abound in Hafiz, and Saadi, and in many of the sacred books of the East, phrases that blend mental states with the memory of familiar things. For example, if an ultra conservative had to be described, an ordinary speaker might say that he is a man of stubborn prejudices who refuses to listen to argument, and then says that because he never makes any progress, the world stands still. The oriental singer would, however, say something like this: "He stretches himself on the couch of contentment, and draws the cap of prejudice over the eyes of reason, and swears that the car of progress is shackled by the gods in the streets of eternal repose." Of course, this illustration is absurdly exaggerated, but it suggests the oriental imagery, of which Ingersoll's talk is full. In his lectures this rhetorical artifice is generally most effective, although by repetition it becomes transparent, and tends to degenerate into mere use of stock metaphors. On the other hand, his humour is western, and wholly American. He is swift as lightning in repartee, keen and also kind in his wit, unless he is talking of religious dogmas, and then his sarcasm is merciless, and meant to wound, and no woman is quicker to respond to the gentlest breath of pathos. Often after his lecture of two hours, delivered after travelling a long distance in the cars, he has sat up talking with friends until past midnight; and his talks on such occasions are remembered as being better on the average than his best public orations, though possibly friendship has helped this opinion by kindly exaggeration. His conversation is full of phrases that would be conceded gems in a great writer. Speaking of a sanguine man, he said, "Show him an egg, and instantly the air is full of feathers." He has remarkable power of concrete illustration, and ripples with bright sayings. Then, again, his conversation has a breadth that pertains rather to the men of old, and the listener constantly wonders whether

Burns, Rabelais, Voltaire, or Shakspeare has had the greatest effect in forming his spoken style.

It needs no special art to divine that in his family life, Col. Ingersoll is blessed among men. An unfriendly reader might charge him with being unable to keep women out of his lectures. Every freethought speech he has delivered contains some splendid pleadings for the full freedom and equality of woman. When he speaks on this subject, or of fireside joys, his words have a deep and homely eloquence, that reveals the heart firmly resting on tried affection. He is remarkable among Americans in having preserved his family life sacred from the eye of vulgar curiosity, and only in so far as he has himself permitted the public to cross the threshold shall any reference be made here to a side of his life which should be free from the intrusion either of praise or blame. His residence in Peoria, Illinois, and latterly in Washington, is dedicated by gracious presences to a simple and cordial hospitality, to the charms of friendship, and the freedom of an abounding comradeship. With intellectual and untrammelled life, a generous, wise, and genial host, whoever enters finds a welcome, seasoned with kindly wit and Attic humour, a poetic insight, and a delicious frankness, which renders an evening there a veritable symposium. The wayfarer who passes is charmed, and he who comes frequently goes always away with delighted memories. What matters it that opinions differ; such as he and his make common life the sweeter. An hour or two spent in the attractive parlours of the Ingersoll homestead, amid that rare group, lends a new meaning to the idea of home, and a more secure beauty to the fact of family life.

It is not amiss to say that a man's conduct in his home is the true test of his character. To his family, to his immediate relatives, and the friends who are his daily companions, Col. Ingersoll is as nearly perfect as any man can be. His home is his heaven, and he wants no other heaven. There is probably no happier family group to be found anywhere, and had he been a Christian his home would have been held up as a model Christian household. He has himself made public reference to his daughters. Neither of the two young ladies

has ever been inside a church. The Colonel said that one night when the children—they were quite young at the time—were in bed, and he supposed them to be asleep, he was reading a sermon about the torments of hell to his wife. Suddenly one of the girls rose up in bed and asked, "Who said such things about God?" He told her it was a sermon, and that the doctrine was taught in the church. "Then," said the young girl, "I'll never go inside of one." And she has never been within a church, although, when in Europe, her father advised her to visit some of the old cathedrals.

In the world of politics Colonel Ingersoll fills a unique position. Holding no office, he nevertheless, by his mastery of the public ear, wields a power hardly inferior to that of politicians of the first rank. He enjoys the friendship of Secretary Blaine and other members of the Government, and in the stir of the presidential elections the principles and men of the Republican party have no more eloquent advocate and defender.

In free America as well as in England to avow free thought is to place a barrier in the path to political honours. Col. Ingersoll has already had a taste of martyrdom. It will be remembered that some years ago he was appointed American Ambassador to the Court of Berlin, but had to forego the preferment on account of the active bigotry of the orthodox. An incident is told which further illustrates this: 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.

On that evil day when Garfield was shot, Colonel Ingersoll was in the Station-house at Washington, and is reported to have sprang forward to interpose between the assassin and his victim. The exciting three weeks that followed found him a busy man. It was well that amid the first fierce fury of anger and excitement, and the subsequent more bitter, if not as noble outpouring of faction's suspicions, and inuendoes, so manly a man, so sagacious a counsellor, was enabled to hold so positive a balance. Cabinet officers, legal

functionaries, detectives, citizens—all felt his wise humane instincts and capacious brain, influencing for fair equipoise and calmer judgment.

In 1876 Colonel Ingersoll in a short, but finely conceived, oration, proposed Mr Blaine as the nominee of Illinois for the Presidency. In this speech, as well as those delivered in the contest in 1880, which resulted in the return of Garfield, an English reader will perceive a certain extravagance of eulogy as well as a subordination of close argument to rhetoric. But America's problems are not ours, and Colonel Ingersoll's mode of political persuasion is manifestly well suited to the temper of his audiences, and nicely calculated to win votes. His political meetings in the fall of 1880 elicited a quite unprecedented enthusiasm. At a great meeting in Brooklyn he was introduced by the Rev. H. Ward Beecher as "the most brilliant speaker of the English tongue of all men on this globe," and a great wave of emotion seems to have swept over the vast audience at the spectacle of freethinker and clergyman occupying a common platform in a spirit of liberty and fraternity.

As a politician, Colonel Ingersoll grounds his faith on certain broad principles, to the enunciation of which, and ignoring small party shifts, he bends his oratorical art. He is a Republican because that party crushed the infamy of slavery; because it is in favour of free speech, and honest ballot; because it is honestly redeeming the public debt; because it everywhere fosters humanising influences; because it secures the equal rights of all under the great Republic. Flashes of humour, familiar references, flights of imagination are in turn at the command of the orator to drive these principles home to the minds and hearts of his hearers. His skill in putting his points reminds one of the best models of ancient times. He is supporting the candidature of Garfield:—"I belong to a party that is prosperous when the country 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 the 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."

Hardly less neatly planted is this blow at the Democrats and their candidate:—"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.'"

His fertility of illustration is remarkable. In the interminable discussion of the currency question, there has not yet been placed upon record a wittier, truer, or more luminous passage than the following:—"The greenback, unless you have the gold behind it, is no more a dollar than a bill of fare is a dinner. You cannot make a paper dollar without taking a dollar's worth of paper. We must have paper that represents money. I want it issued by the Government, and I want behind it either a gold or silver dollar, so that every greenback under the flag can lift up its hand and swear, 'I know that my redeemer liveth.'"

Of the alertness of a memory, richly furnished with capital stories, and the irresistible way in which they are used as apt illustration of a position or principle, every discourse of Colonel Ingersoll furnishes proof. Speaking of the Democratic party in connection with the collection of the revenue, he recounts:—"Two ministers were holding a revival meeting in a certain place. After the services one of them passed around the hat. When it was returned, he found in it pieces of slate pencils and nails and buttons, but not a solitary cent, and his brother got up and looked at the contribution and said, 'Let us thank God!' 'What for?' said the other. 'Because we've got the hat back.'" The moral was obvious.

He has moreover a power of lucid, pithy, and quaint

phrasing that fixes a truth on the memory. "The Republican party lives on hope; the Democratic on memory; the Democrat keeps his back to the sun, and imagines himself a great man because he casts a great shadow;" this is a definition which combines literary charm and argumentative force. Or take this utterance on money, which is not unworthy to stand with the epigrammatic endeavours of Emerson and Ruskin on the same subject: "Money is the most social thing in this world. If a man has a dollar in his pocket, and meets another with two, the solitary dollar is absolutely homesick until it joins the other two."

The weapons which Col. Ingersoll draws from his intellectual armoury to smite the giant orthodoxy are generally common sense and wit. He evidently cares little about the results of Biblical criticism, or refinements in theological belief. He pins the Christian down to the Bible and says: "Do you believe this book inspired by God? Answer yes or no. Don't tell me it is a poem, or that it is to be taken in spirit, and not in fact. It is the word of God, or it is not the word of God. If it is the former you must accept the burden of its falsities, and immoralities. If the latter, be honest, acknowledge that the world has been mistaken, and let us unite in driving the cloud of superstition from the heart of man." This is the answer he furnishes to critics of every hue—Unitarian, Liberal Christian, Moodyite. It is a matter not of theology, but of plain honesty.

His common-sense, sledge-hammer-like logic would, however, not be the unique thing it is were it not allied to a keen sense of drollery, and a swift wit. He has subjected so-called sacred themes to a breadth and boldness of treatment that startles readers out of their conventional propriety. Christians who find nothing shocking in the idea of a hell, profess to be horrified by a non-theological use of the name. You may speak of flames, but you must not mention brimstone. Even freethinkers have a gingerly way of touching Bible themes; some from an affectation of superiority; others out of supposed respect to dominant opinion. No Bible personage, or subject has immunity from Col. Ingersoll's onset. The lightnings of his wit play around the once

august figure of Moses. Deity itself is made to enact the comic *role*. In the words of one of his critics, Col. Ingersoll seems to say to orthodoxy, "I will dethrone your God to-day amid pleas of laughter; blow his being down the wind on the wings of my epigrams." The sting of all this lies in the fact that the wit tells, that the laughter becomes contagious. Clergymen in the States have confessed that they are ashamed longer to preach the doctrine of hell. Theology may resist grave argument, it may even bear up under eloquent denunciation, but when it becomes a subject for a people's laughter its days are numbered.

This humoristic method is not less effective when dealing with church rites, as the following quotation may show:—

"Roger Williams was a Baptist, but how he, or any one not destitute of good sense, could be one, passes my comprehension. Let me illustrate:

"Suppose it was the Day of Judgment to-night and we were all assembled, as the ghosts say we will be, to be judged, and God should ask a man:

"'Have you been a good man?'

"'Yes.'

"'Have you loved your wife and children?'

"'Yes.'

"'Have you taken good care of them and made them happy?'

"'Yes.'

"'Have you tried to do right by your neighbours?'

"'Yes.'

"'Paid all your debts?'

"'Yes.'

And then cap the climax by asking:

'"Were you ever baptised?'

"Could a solitary being hear that question without laughing? I think not. I once happened to be in the company of six or seven Baptist elders (I never have been able to understand since how I got into such bad company), and they wanted to know what I thought of baptism. I answered that I had not given the matter any attention, in fact, I had no special opinion upon the subject. But they pressed me, and

finally I told them that I thought, with soap, baptism was a good thing."

Of course Col. Ingersoll has been decried as a mere iconoclast.

To this he has replied :—

"I have just published a little book, entitled 'Some Mistakes of Moses,' in which I have endeavoured to give most of the arguments I have urged against the Pentateuch in a lecture delivered under that title. The motto on the title page is, 'A destroyer of weeds, thistles, and thorns is a benefactor, whether he soweth grain or not.' I cannot for my life see why one should be charged with tearing down and not rebuilding simply because he exposes a sham, or detests a lie. I do not feel under any obligation to build something in the place of a detested falsehood. All I think I am under obligation to put in the place of a detected lie is the detection. Most religionists talk as if mistakes were valuable things, and they did not wish to part with them without a consideration. Just how much they regard lies worth a dozen I don't know. If the price is reasonable I am perfectly willing to give it, rather than to see them live and give their lives to the defence of delusions.

"Most of the clergymen envy me; envy my independence; envy my success; think that I ought to starve; that the people should not hear me; say that I do what I do for money, for popularity; that I am actuated by hatred of all that is good, and tender, and holy in human nature; think that I wish to tear down the churches, destroy all morality and goodness, and usher in the reign of crime and chaos. They know that shepherds are unnecessary in the absence of wolves, and it is to their interest to convince their sheep that they—the sheep—need protection. This they are willing to give them for half the wool. No doubt most of these ministers are honest, and are doing what they consider their duty. Be this as it may, they feel the power slipping from their hands. They know that they are not held in the estimation they once were. They know that the idea is slowly growing that they are not absolutely necessary for the protection of society. They know that the intellectual world

cares little for what they say, and that the great tide of human progress flows on careless of their help or hindrance."

The Church long enjoyed the right to brand the intellectual freeman as infidel, unbeliever. But the rolling years have brought a sweeping revenge. Who are now deemed the believers; Bruno, Galileo, Servetus, Darwin, or the priests that have burned, persecuted, and mocked? The freethinker to-day has a different charge laid upon him. Disintegration is not enough, he is told; he must also be a system-builder. Perceiving the ruins of the great temples of the past, is it surprising that he is infected with no desire to raise fabrics of his own? "Liberty," says Ingersoll, "is the shrine at which I worship, and will ever worship." For the fetters of dogma he substitutes intellectual freedom; for the love and service of God he substitutes faith in man and work for man. No narrower creed contents him.

Physically as well as mentally, Col. Ingersoll is a massive man. His face is one of marked intellectuality and feeling, and bears out what his discourses have already evinced, that his is a rounded, harmonious nature. As a speaker he is distinctly an original. His style is akin to that of Mr Bright in the qualities of stately simplicity, homely pathos, and generous passion. He lacks Mr Bright's perfect dignity. His humour is too active for the sustainment of a mien implying some amount of outward passivity. In the blending of sound human sense, invective, and wit, he has no rival; and the word-paintings, the sustained flights of imagination, and the march of the rhetoric in his great passages are a revelation in the use of the English tongue.