

SECOND EDITION. SIXTH THOUSAND.

MR. CHAS. BRADLAUGH, referring to this Oration,
says in the NATIONAL REFORMER of July 2nd, 1882:—
"As a sample of eloquence it should be read by every
admirer of fine clear oratory.

NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

COL. INGERSOLL'S

Decoration Day

ORATION

June, 1882.



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→* INTRODUCTION. *←

DECORATION DAY, the occasion upon which the following Oration was delivered in June, 1882, is a national commemoration of the dead heroes of America, of the men who fought and died for the great republic. It is observed throughout the country, and the tombs of the departed great ones are decked with flowers and other symbols of remembrance and respect. Col. Ingersoll, whose fame as an orator is world-wide, was requested to deliver the commemorative discourse. The Colonel accepted the honorable post, and the oration given below was the result. The Academy of Music was thronged on the evening of Decoration Day. The gay dresses of the ladies and the bright uniforms of military men gave the audience a brilliant appearance. The Academy was profusely decorated with flags. Amidst thunders of applause, Colonel Ingersoll advanced to the reading desk, and delivered the

ORATION.

THIS day is sacred to our heroes dead. Upon their tombs we have lovingly laid the wealth of spring.

This is a day for memory and tears. A mighty nation bends above its honored grave and pays to noble dust the tribute of its love.

Gratitude is the fairest flower that sheds its perfume in the heart.

To-day we tell the history of our country's life—recount the lofty deeds of vanished years—the toil and suffering, the defeats and victories of heroic men—of men who made our nation great and free.

We see the first ships whose prows were gilded by the Western sun. We feel the thrill of discovery when the new world was found. We see the oppressed, the serf, the peasant, and the slavemen whose flesh had known the chill of chains—the adventurous, the proud, the brave, sailing an unknown sea, seeking homes in unknown lands.

We see the settlements, the little clearings, the block-house, and the fort, the rude and lonely huts. Brave men, true women, builders of homes, fellers of forests, founders of states!

Separated from the Old World—away from the heartless distinctions of caste—away from sceptres, and titles, and crowns, they governed themselves. They defended their homes, they earned their bread. Each citizen had a voice, and the little villages became almost republics.

Slowly the savage was driven, foot by foot, back in the dim forest. The days and nights were filled with fear, and the slow years with massacre and war, and cabins' earthen floors were wet with blood of mothers and their babes.

But the savages of the New World were kinder than the kings and nobles of the Old; and so the human tide kept coming, and the places of the dead were filled.

Amid common dangers and common hopes, the prejudices and feuds of Europe faded slowly from their hearts. From every land, of every speech, driven by want and lured by hope, exiles and emigrants sought the mysterious continent of the West.

Year after year the colonists fought and toiled, and suffered and increased.

They began to talk about liberty—to reason of the rights of man. They asked no help from distant kings, and they began to doubt the use of paying tribute to the useless. They lost respects for dukes and lords, and held in high esteem all honest men.

There was the dawn of a new day. They began to dream of independence. They found that they could make and execute the laws. They had tried the experiment of self-government. They had succeeded. The Old World wished to dominate the New. In the care and keeping of the colonists was the destiny of this continent—of half the world.

On this day the story of the great struggle between colonists and kings should be told. We should tell our children of the contest—first for justice, then for freedom. We should tell them the history of the Declaration of Independence—the chart and compass of all human rights—that all men are equal, and have the right of life, liberty, and joy.

This Declaration uncrowned kings, and wrested from the hands of titled tyranny the sceptre of usurped and arbitrary power. It superseded royal grants, and repealed the cruel statutes of a thousand years. It gave the peasant a career; it knighted all the sons of toil; it opened all the paths to fame, and put the star of hope above the cradle of the poor man's babe.

England was then the mightiest of nations—mistress of every sea—and yet our fathers, poor and few, defied her power.

To-day we remember the defeats, the victories, the disasters, the weary marches, the poverty, the hunger, the sufferings, the agonies, and, above all, the glories of the Revolution. We remember all—from Lexington to Valley Forge, and from that midnight of despair to Yorktown's cloudless day.

We remember the soldiers and thinkers—the heroes of the sword and pen. They had the brain and heart, the wisdom and the courage to utter and defend these words, "Governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed."

In defence of this sublime and self-evident truth the war was waged and won.

To-day we remember all the heroes, all the generous and chivalric men who came from other lands to make ours free.

Of the many thousands who shared the gloom and glory of the seven sacred years, not one remains. The last has mingled with the earth, and nearly all are sleeping now in unmarked graves, and some beneath the leaning, crumbling stones, from which their names have been effaced by Time's irreverent and relentless hands.

But the nation they founded remains. The United States are still free and independent. The "government derives its just powers

from the consent of the governed," and fifty millions of free people remember with gratitude the heroes of the Revolution.

Let us be truthful; let us be kind. When peace came, when the independence of a new nation was acknowledged, the great truth for which our fathers fought was half denied, and the Constitution was inconsistent with the Declaration. The war was waged for liberty, and yet the victors forged new fetters for their fellow-men. The chains our fathers broke were put by them upon the limbs of others. Freedom for all was the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night, through seven years of want and war. In peace the cloud was forgotten and the pillar blazed unseen.

Let us be truthful; all of our fathers were not true to themselves. In war, they had been generous, noble, and self-sacrificing; with peace came selfishness and greed. They were not great enough to appreciate the grandeur of the principles for which they fought. They ceased to regard the great truths as having universal application. "Liberty for all" included only themselves. They qualified the Declaration. They interpolated the word "white;" they obliterated the world "all."

Let us be kind. We will remember the age in which they lived. We will compare them with the citizens of other nations.

They made merchandise of men. They legalized a crime. They sowed the seeds of war. But they founded this nation.

Let us gratefully remember.

Let us gratefully forget.

To-day we remember the heroes of the second war with England—in which our fathers fought for the freedom of the seas, for the rights of the American sailor.

We remember with pride the splendid victories of Erie and Champaign, and the wondrous achievements upon the sea—achievements that covered our navy with glory that neither the victories nor defeats of the future can dim.

We remember the heroic services and sufferings of those who fought the merciless savage of the frontier. We see the midnight massacre, and hear the war-cries of the allies of England. We see the flames climb round the happy homes, and in the charred and blackened ruins we see the mutilated bodies of wives and children.

Peace came at last, crowned with the victory of New Orleans—a victory that "did redeem all sorrows" and all defeats.

The Revolution gave our fathers a free land—the war of 1812 a free sea.

To-day we remember the gallant men who bore our flag in triumph from the Rio Grande to the heights of Chatultepec.

Leaving out of question the justice of our cause—the necessity for war—we are yet compelled to applaud the marvellous courage of our troops. A handful of men—brave, impetuous determined, irresistible—conquered a nation. Our history has no record of more daring deeds.

Again peace came, and the nation hoped and thought that strife was at an end.

We had grown too powerful to be attacked. Our resources were boundless, and the future seemed secured. The hardy pioneers moved to the great West. Beneath their ringing strokes the forests disappeared, and on the prairies waved the billowed seas of wheat and corn. The great plains were crossed, the mountains were conquered, and the foot of victorious adventure pressed the shore of the Pacific.

In the great north, all the streams went singing to the sea, turning wheels and spindles, and casting shuttles back and forth. Inventions were springing like magic from a thousand brains. From labor's holy altars rose and leaped the smoke and flame, and from the countless forges rang the chant of the rhythmic stroke.

But in the South the negro toiled unpaid, and mothers wept while babes were sold, and at the auction black husbands and wives speechlessly looked the last good-bye. Fugitives, lighted by the Northern star, sought liberty on English soil, and were by northern men thrust back to whip and chain.

The great statesmen, the successful politicians, announced that law had compromised with crime, that justice had been bribed, and that time had barred appeal. A race was left without a right, without a hope. The future had no dawn, no star—nothing but ignorance and fear, nothing but work and want. This was the conclusion of the statesman, the philosophy of the politicians—of constitutional exponents. This was decided by courts and ratified by the nation.

We had been successful in three wars. We had wrested thirteen colonies from Great Britain. We had conquered our place upon the high seas. We had added more than two millions of square miles to the national domain. We had increased in population from three to thirty-one millions. We were in the midst of plenty. We were rich and free. Ours appeared to be the most prosperous of nations.

But it was only appearance. The statesmen and the politicians were deceived. Real victories can be won only for the right. The triumph of justice is the only peace. Such is the nature of things. He who enslaves another cannot be free. He who attacks the right assaults himself.

The mistake our fathers made had not been corrected. The foundations of the republic were insecure. The great dome of the temple was bathed in the light of prosperity, but the corner-stones were crumbling. Four millions of human beings were enslaved. Party cries had been mistaken for principles—partisanship for patriotism, success for justice.

But pity pointed to the scarred and bleeding backs of slaves; mercy heard the sobs of mothers reft of babes, and justice held aloft the scales, in which one drop of blood, shed by a master's lash outweighed a nation's gold.

There were a few men, a few women, who had the courage to attack this monstrous crime. They found it entrenched in constitutions, statutes, and decisions, barricaded and bastioned by every department and by every party. Politicians were its servants, statesmen its attorneys, judges its menials, presidents its puppets, and upon

its cruel altar had been sacrificed our country's honor.

It was the crime of the nation—of the whole country—North and South responsible alike.

To-day we reverently thank the abolitionists. Earth has produced no grander men, no nobler women. They were the real philanthropists, the true patriots.

When the will defies fear, when the heart applauds the brain, when duty throws the gauntlet down to fate, when honor scorns to compromise with death—this is heroism.

The abolitionists were heroes. He loves his country best who strives to make it best. The bravest men are those who have the greatest fear of doing wrong.

Mere politicians wish the country to do something for them, true patriots desire to do something for their country.

Courage without conscience is a wild beast; patriotism without principle is the prejudice of birth—the animal attachment to place.

These men, these women, had courage and conscience, patriotism and principle, heart and brain.

The South relied upon the bond—upon a barbarous clause that stained, disfigured, and defiled the Federal pact—and made the monstrous claim that slavery was the nation's ward. The spot of shame grew red in Northern cheeks, and Northern men declared that slavery had poisoned, cursed, and blighted soul and soil enough, and that the territories must be free.

The radicals of the South cried, "No Union without slavery!" The radicals of the North replied, "No Union without liberty!"

The Northern radicals were right. Upon the great issue of free homes for free men a president was elected by the free states. The South appealed to the sword, and raised the standard of revolt. For the first time in history the oppressors rebelled.

But let us to-day be great enough to forget individuals—great enough to know that slavery was treason, that slavery was rebellion, that slavery fired upon our flag, and sought to wreck and strand the mighty ship that bears the hope and fortune of this world.

The first shot liberated the North. Constitutions, statutes, and decisions, compromises, platforms, and resolutions, made, passed, and ratified in the interest of slavery, became mere legal lies, mean and meaningless, base and baseless.

Parchment and paper could no longer stop or stay the onward march of man. The North was free. Millions instantly resolved that the nation should not die—that freedom should not perish, and that slavery should not live. Millions of our brothers, our sons, our fathers, our husbands, answered to the nation's call.

The great armies have desolated the earth; the greatest soldiers have been ambition's dupes. They waged war for the sake of place and pillage, pomp and power, for the ignorant applause of vulgar millions, for the flattery of parasites, and the adulation of sycophants and slaves.

Let us proudly remember that in our time the greatest, the grandest, the noblest army of the world fought—not to enslave, but

to free ; not to destroy, but to save ; not simply for themselves, but for others ; not for conquest, but for conscience ; not only for us, but for every land and every race.

With courage, with enthusiasm, with devotion never excelled, with an exaltation and purity of purpose never equalled, this grand army fought the battles of the republic. For the preservation of this nation, for the destruction of slavery, these soldiers, these sailors—on land and sea—disheartened by no defeat, discouraged by no obstacle, appalled by no danger, neither paused nor swerved until a stainless flag, without a rival, floated over all our wide domain, and until every human being beneath its folds was absolutely free.

The great victory for human rights—the greatest of all the years—had been won ; won by the Union men of the North, by the Union men of the South, and by those who had been slaves. Liberty was national—slavery was dead.

The flag for which the heroes fought, for which they died, is the symbol of all we are, of all we hope to be.

It is the emblem of equal rights.

It means free hands, free lips, self-government, and the sovereignty of the individual.

It means that this continent has been dedicated to freedom.

It means universal education—light for every mind, knowledge for every child.

It means that the school-house is the fortress of liberty.

It means that "governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed"—that each man is accountable to and for the government—that responsibility goes hand in hand with liberty.

It means that it is the duty of every citizen to bear his share of the public burden—to take part in the affairs of his town, his county, his state, and his country.

It means that the ballot-box is the ark of the covenant—that the source of authority must not be poisoned.

It means the perpetual right of peaceful revolution.

It means that every citizen of the republic—native or naturalised—must be protected ; at home, in every state ; abroad, in every land, on every sea.

It means that all distinctions based on birth or blood have perished from our laws—that our government shall stand between labor and capital, between the weak and the strong, between the individual and the corporation, between want and wealth—and give and guarantee simple justice to each and all.

It means that there shall be a legal remedy for every wrong.

It means national hospitality—that we must welcome to our shores the exiles of the world, and that we may not drive them back. Some may be deformed by labor, dwarfed by hunger, broken in spirit, victims of tyranny and caste, in whose sad faces may be read the touching record of a weary life ; and yet their children, born of liberty and love, will be symmetrical and fair, intelligent and free.

That flag is the emblem of a supreme will—of a nation's power. Beneath its folds the weakest must be protected, and the strongest must obey.

It shields and canopies alike the loftiest mansion and the rudest hut.

That flag was given to the air in the Revolution's darkest days. It represents the sufferings of the past, the glories yet to be; and like the bow of heaven, it is the child of storm and sun.

This day is sacred to the great heroic host who kept this flag above our heads—sacred to the living and the dead—sacred to the scarred and the maimed—sacred to the wives who gave their husbands, to the mothers who gave their sons.

Here in this peaceful land of ours—here where the sun shines, where flowers grow, where children play, millions of armed men battled for the right, and breasted on a thousand fields the iron storms of war.

These brave, these incomparable men founded the first republic.

They fulfilled the prophecies; they brought to pass the dreams; they realized the hopes that all the great and good and wise and just have made and had since man was man.

But what of those who fell?

There is no language to express the debt we owe, the love we bear, to all the dead who died for us. Words are but barren sounds. We can but stand beside their graves, and, in the hush and silence, feel what speech has never told.

They fought, they died, and for the first time since man has kept a record of events the heavens bent above and domed a land without a serf, a servant, or a slave.

THE END.

NOTICE.

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