

---

# Robert G. Ingersoll

by Eugene V. Debs

Published in *American Journal of Politics*, vol. 2, no. 2 (Feb. 1893), pp. 198-202.

Good actions crown themselves with lasting bays;  
Who well deserves needs not another's praise.<sup>1</sup>

I do not overlook the fact that to write properly of Robert G. Ingersoll would demand intellectual gifts of that high order which qualifies one to have correct and lofty conceptions of all that is good and beautiful and true in human nature, coupled with genius as inspiring and aspiring as animated a Hugo or a Raphael.

The life of Robert G. Ingersoll has been one of exceeding activity and success. I do not claim for it perfection, because to err is human, and it would be in the nature of a miracle if a man could be found in whom there is no fault — and when it is remembered how often the “Pandora box of contumely” has been opened on the head of Mr. Ingersoll, it becomes a mystery to all, except to those who have been admitted within the charmed circle of his confidence, how he has preserved that almost divine equanimity which makes him cheerful and forgiving amidst volleys of cruel criticism.

I write of Mr. Ingersoll because I have had repeated opportunities to know and to study his acts and utterances away from the glare and blare of great assemblages where his splendid oratory and magnetism compel applause — where every appearance secures an ovation and where men and women of great intellect and refinement deem it a privilege to pay him such tributes of esteem and affection as only genius commands.

It were needless to write of such occasions. The civilized world is familiar with the exuberant satisfactions which the people display when Mr. Ingersoll's oratory touches all the keys of the heart and mind, compelling responses akin to those which the great masters extort from cathedral organs.

---

<sup>1</sup> From “Clarastella” (1650) by **Robert Heath** (c. 1636-1659).

In the role of orator Mr. Ingersoll has

Trod the way of glory  
And sounded all the depths and shoals of fame.<sup>2</sup>

In that direction there is nothing left to tempt his ambition. The world has crowned him as the most daring in the flights of fancy and poetic imagery. His soarings are those of the bird of Jove, and in the domain of his imagination he

Wings his course from star to star,  
From world to luminous world as far  
As the universe spreads its flaming walls,<sup>3</sup>

And brings back gems of truth and justice which dazzle and bewilder beholders. His are

Thoughts that breathe and words that burn.<sup>4</sup>

And for the time being his audiences under the spell of his enrapturing oratory are molded and fashioned into worshipers such as the modern world has seldom been called upon to contemplate.

It may be said, and should be said, that Mr. Ingersoll's life work has been to destroy degrading shams and superstitions. In this iconoclastic crusade he has kindled the fierce furies of bigots and won the implacable hatred of hypocrites, and he would long since have worn the jeweled crown of martyrdom, except for the enlightening influence of Truth, which, here and there, along the track of centuries has redeemed men from bondage compared with which death would have been a benediction.

---

<sup>2</sup> From *Henry VIII* (1613), Act 3, Scene 2, by **William Shakespeare** (1554-1616).

<sup>3</sup> From "Paradise and the Peri" (1817) by **Thomas Moore** (1779-1852). The original stanza reads:

*Go, wing thy flight from star to star,  
From world to luminous world, as far  
As the universe spreads its flaming wall;  
Take all the pleasures of all the spheres,  
And multiply each through endless years,  
One minute of heaven is worth them all!*

<sup>4</sup> Definition of poetry by **Thomas Gray** (1716-1771).

In this connection I introduce the testimony of Rev. Thomas Dixon, of New York, who declares that Mr. Ingersoll "has done much to rid the world of the superstitions, lies, shams, humbugs, traditions, and pretenses that used to pass current as orthodox truth." Such is the admission of an orthodox clergyman, who has published a book of ten sermons to arrest the conquering mission of Mr. Ingersoll.

If it be true that a man who makes two spears of grass grow where before but one was found, is the benefactor of his race, what must be the estimate of a man who uproots a superstition, unshackles the immortal mind, sets the imprisoned soul at liberty, and wrests from bigotry its worse than murderous weapons? This work of wondrous good and glory the Rev. Mr. Dixon says Mr. Ingersoll has performed. Coming from an orthodox pulpit, it has startling significance. It shows that the bulwarks of superstition, bigotry, intolerance, and ignorance are tumbling down as do walls and buildings when in the grasp of an earthquake. It presents Mr. Ingersoll in his sacred mission, on the stage, with his needle of satire, stringing orthodox theologians on the thread of his masterly logic as if they were so many gnats or tarantulas. It is that refinement of torture bigots feel when one by one their superstitions take wings and fly away to return no more while the stars shine and the tides ebb and flow.

As I write of Mr. Ingersoll I am tempted to turn to his published utterances and select gems of thought which everywhere abound, with which to embellish this imperfect tribute of his well-earned fame and to show the "mighty wrongs" he has assailed and the "petty perfidies" he has overcome. In such a task I could easily find a beginning, but embarrassments would multiply when a conclusion was sought. Fortunately such a labor of love is not required since in ten thousand memories "the Niagara of gems" which has flowed from Ingersoll's brain and heart, flashes and blazes with ever-increasing luster.

To see Mr. Ingersoll on the rostrum when his aroused genius "courts the sunbeam's fire," when he wears his dagger in his mouth and the enemies of Liberty and Truth fall before him like shanties in the pathway of a cyclone, is to behold a revelation of power which bewilders the senses and in the presence of which exaggeration has no mission ; but after all, it is not on the rostrum where the gifted American shines in his full-orbed splendor. To see him at his best is to see him at his home. It is a focal center where all human affections converge, where they soothe every care, hallow every desire, elevate every thought, and subdue every trial; where every look and tone

opens the way for sunshine to the heart. There, four generations live in perpetual bliss, and every aspiration is for the happiness of all.

This home is where Mr. Ingersoll and his lovely and loving wife reign acknowledged sovereigns, twin stars in an earthly heaven never visited by clouds, where the good, the beautiful, and the true shed their perpetual radiance, where every longing of the heart and every aspiration of the soul brings ceaseless benedictions.

In the beautiful home of Mr. Ingersoll and his family there is neither artifice nor suspicion. High bred disdain banishes all disguise. Childhood and advanced years, woman's smiles and manly sympathy, the music of love and the joys which are its perpetual fruits, blend in such wonderful harmony as to constitute a vision of an earthly paradise such as angels might envy.

It would be strange, indeed, if Mr. Ingersoll were not a man of boundless charity, "the noblest impulse a generous mind can feel," or a charity bounded only by the means at his command. Benevolence is one of his distinguishing traits — quick to perceive merit, once discovered, neither hesitancy nor circumlocution marks his action. His hand quickly follows the impulse of his great, throbbing, loving heart, and such aid as he can bestow promptly relieves the victims of misfortune and sends them forth rejoicing. Truly wise, he is truly generous, and the tears he has dried would astonish his detractors ; and the songs of joy he has made sad hearts sing along their weary pilgrimage, could they be heard in cathedrals, would drown the deep-toned notes of organs.

What more need I say to impress the reader with the conviction that Mr. Ingersoll is worthy of loftier praise than I am capable of bestowing? Well may it be said that

He that has light within his own clear breast  
May sit i' the center and enjoy bright day.<sup>5</sup>

And this light, in such effulgence as falls only to the lot of the few, Mr. Ingersoll possesses. It makes him serene when others exhibit unrest. In the mature prime of his manhood, the path-way he has trod is luminous with the victories he has won and the kind and gentle acts he has performed. His conscience, which is "the oracle of God," is not of the scorpion tribe to lash him into disquietude. In his imagination no angry gods are dreaded and no hells here or hereafter, are pic-

---

<sup>5</sup> A fragment from *Comus* (1634) by **John Milton** (1608-1674).

tured. There are no ghosts or goblins he dare not challenge and smite down. He is forever leading men away from the jungles of superstition and despair to those highlands of vision and thought where great and good men and women live above the polluted air of the bogs and fens of ignorance and intolerance.

If fate decrees long life to Mr. Ingersoll, what he has accomplished for man's redemption from debasing superstitions is but as A in the alphabet of coming triumphs — if, however, his brilliant light is to be eclipsed by death before other victories are inscribed on his conquering banner, then let it be believed that like all the world's valiant men, "he will die but once," and that the scene will be like one "who wraps the drapery of his couch about him and lies down to pleasant dreams."

*Eugene V. Debs.*

*Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport*

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