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Ingersoll.

Selections from Ingersoll. Edited by Ram Gopal. With Foreword by Har Bilas Sarda and Appreciation by G.R. Josyer.

"Selections from Ingersoll," is an encyclopaedia of Humanism, the quality of which is equaled by only one other book known to me—*Leaves of Grass*. There are certain writers so broad in their view-range, so philanthropic in sympathy, that it is impossible to imagine them as belonging to any sect; they are the common property of all humanity, and upon all humanity they shower their gifts. Hated only by puritans, pietists, sectarians and bigots, such rare writers are Rabelais, Shakespeare, Ben Johnson, Voltaire, Ingersoll, Whitman. I say here nothing about the quality of these men's work. What they have in common is the humanist attitude that embraces all humanity, with entire understanding of, and absolute forgiveness for, all that humanity's foibles and imperfections.

Of Ingersoll's genius there has never been any serious question; he was a natural wit, and a prose-poet of unequal though unique caliber. His faults—so utterly honest is he—are as obvious as his qualities. Both as writer and orator he has, indeed, only two defects, both the result of the largeness of his heart and brain—they are a tendency to redundancy in words, and a leaning towards sentimentality in expression. Having said this, let it be affirmed, with perfect truth, that Ingersoll is one of the wittiest, noblest, gentlest writers who ever covered a sheet with those invincible marks that somehow, in due season, change the course of world-history.

In this volume of over a thousand pages the reader will find all Ingersoll's views on life and its workings digested by an Indian Barrister. So full a life, such copious oratory, had necessarily to be very considerably repetitive; and this book actually gains in force and impressiveness by its omissions.

Ingersoll's message to mankind is a simple one; all great messages are ultimately simple. It is the muddle-minded who make mental complications. Word-spinning is the amusement

and vocation of the moral spiders who try to lure unfortunate human flies into their fatal webs. To this species belong nearly all metaphysicians, who have been the jest of the humanwise from Lucian to Anatole France. Red tape is the adornment of the supermutt, who adores, for their own evil sakes, subdivisions, class-distinctions, grades, race-differences, and all the dreary petti-foggy dom wherewith the race of Green Baize Fools maintains itself at the cost of a bamboozled humanity.

All this mass-and-class business was nonsense to Ingersoll. His quarrel with religion—in all its disguises—was not so much because of its own native absurdity, as because of its snobbish and fatuous insistence upon its own exclusive claims to “save” mankind from the imaginary terrors of Bogeydom. Ingersoll’s idea was that, out of some hundreds of creeds, each one claiming to be right at the expense of the rest, it was probable that all were wrong. His thesis has not been disproved; nor will it be, until one of the thousand religions produces a real live god to pronounce in its favour. That is why Humanism is immortal; and why the work of the great Humanists, Ingersoll, of course, included, always survives. With the progress of science, as Ingersoll is continually pointing out, gods tend to become extremely rare.

Like Burns, one of his idols, Ingersoll could never admit that the purpose of life was to “save” one’s own personal “soul.” To him such an idea was selfish, stupid egotism, calling itself religion. My own experience of life, if I may mention it here, tallies with Ingersoll’s. I’ve never yet met a decent human who was worried about his “soul.” Nor have I ever met a “soul”-merchant who was a decent, average human. “Personal religion,” as the Victorians called it, is merely glorified egotism masquerading as “spirituality.”

Continually this great and good writer laughs in his kindly, human way at the queer little bipeds who go strutting around, crowing about their “saviour” and their “salvation,” and the rest of the meaningless jargon that has hypnotized uneducated Europe for centuries. Ingersoll’s burning love for humanity burnt-up also, in its progress, the wretched rags wherewith cowering, untaught men strive to protect themselves from the assaults of their brutal, sentimental and silly deities—exaggerated simulacra of themselves. Those rags are the bloody, clinging, foul superstitions of the past; sodden in the dirty backwash of human slavishness and terror. Ingersoll spent his life in proving the inefficacy of such rags as a protection. He would have none of the god-idea. To Ingersoll religions were

mental boundaries, separating man from man. He was unquestionably right. No one has yet explained satisfactorily what good, if any, religions do that could not be done immeasurably better without them. The very word "religion" is a Philistine term denoting a back-age mentality. And this, too, is Ingersoll's message. Jews, Negroes, Chinese, Americans, he ranked as equals, on the score of the common inheritance of red blood. If Europe is not to revert to barbarism, she will be forced to accept in its fullness Ingersoll's view. The alternatives before us, as foreseen and foretold by Ingersoll, are barbarism or humanism. Ingersoll insisted that science be harnessed in the service of all humanity. The correctness of his vision is manifest to-day to every thinking human. We are on the verge of chaos; only a humanism as wide and kindly as Ingersoll's can rescue us from the possibility of civilization dropping back into the abyss.

Ingersoll's creed was Agnosticism; his claim being that real knowledge of gods—if any—is impossible to mankind. To be ignorant of gods is usually to serve humanity faithfully and well; and herein Ingersoll assuredly did not fail.

There is not a page in this book that does not contain quotable and "final" epigrams. When Ingersoll writes of his heroes—Shakespeare, Burns, Lincoln, Whitman, Paine, Voltaire—he gives a picture of the real man, the man himself. He is incomparably more accurate psychologically than the scores of lumbering, overeducated University pedants, who clod-hop with heavy boots and muddy minds over the fields sown by the hand of genius. Ingersoll was not in the least erudite. He was wise instead, with the unerring, clairvoyant insight of genius. This I could prove hundreds of times by the mere process of transcribing his own words. But I shall resist almost entirely the temptation to quote. One quotation only do I permit myself:—

Men and women desire each other, and this desire is a condition of civilization, progress and happiness, and of everything of real value. But there is this profound difference in the sexes; in man this desire is the foundation of love, while in woman love is the foundation of this desire. Tolstoy seems to be a stranger to the heart of woman.

Here, for the discerning, is a whole treatise on evolutionary sociology in sixty-two words, with a penetrating and final thrust at the rankly-puritan Tolstoy thrown in. This concentrated, swift, unanswerable criticism is genuine. It is nothing else. And

to Ingersoll was given by Nature the full, free, happy genius of Humanism. He is among the great hearts and great minds of humanity.

Those with hearts and brains in full working order will adore—"adore" is not here too strong a word—Ingersoll's fierce flings, cast in passionate scorn, at the hyper-sadist Calvin, founder of a new Terror; and the bleakly-stern Tolstoy, denier of Love and of happiness. To those who denied Humanity and Humanity's heritage of love Ingersoll was intellectually and emotionally merciless. He could not have hurt a fly; he was merciless to creeds and ideas that he knew to be noxious to humanity. He was a forerunner of the larger and happier and wiser race whereinto our present humanity is evolving. Physically, mentally and morally he was a great man; and he had no sort of use for any kind of gods.

The last thirty years of the nineteenth century saw a flood of Ingersoll pamphlets. A dozen publishers in England and Scotland turned out fresh pamphlets and new editions in scores. A complete set of every issue would run into six or seven hundred items; and possibly more. This noble book should bring about a revival of interest in the work of a man whose influence is to-day needed more greatly than it has ever been needed in the past.

Outwardly Ingersoll's life was uneventful. He served in the North-and-South War; he was absolutely happy domestically; and he was a very successful lawyer, whose advocacy was invariably on the right side. But there is no need here to repeat what has been so admirably said in the Ingersoll number of the *Freethinker*. A thousand pages of Ingersoll, and about Ingersoll, for six shillings is an "event" in publishing history. No reader of this journal can afford to miss this chance; it is a gift.

Victor B. Neuburg