

REMARKS OF
CLARENCE DARROW

at

Memorial Services to

George Burman Foster

and at the Funeral of

John P. Altgeld



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GEORGE BURMAN FOSTER

a Memorial Address by

CLARENCE DARROW

Garrick Theater

Sunday, January 12, 1919

It is hard to realize that George Burman Foster is dead. Even now, on this platform, where I have so often met him in debate, I feel that he will rise and speak; that I will see his tall frame and his Jove-like head—a beautiful head which shone as the light played around it and within it. He had the head of a god and the heart of a child.

Here we discussed the problems of life and death—and whether there was a purpose in it all. He said there was. But the answer is that George Burman Foster is dead and that his brain, today, is less potent than the puny babe's; that all that was stored within during a long and useful life, is dead.

Nature has found no way of passing the genius or character or learning of one generation to another. Every child, whether sired by a philosopher or an idiot, comes into the world without a scrap of knowledge and with a brain of clay. It must learn the whole lesson of life anew, the same as the first child that was ever born.

He and I debated the meaning of life. I remember hearing him say on this platform, in almost a burst of

frenzy: "I am the captain of my soul!" But, George Burman Foster is dead! No man is captain of his soul; he is not even a deck hand on a rudderless ship; he is a bubble cast up for an instant on an angry sea, then lost in the air and waves, to be seen no more.

I would not pretend to give his religious faith. He was puzzling; sometimes changeable, almost chimerical in his views; here and there perhaps not daring to follow his farthest thoughts as to faith and life and death.

I was at his memorial services some days ago in church. Theological gentlemen said that Foster was a religious man. I would not say that he was not. Whether he was, depends on the definition of religion. If religion means creeds and dogmas, he was not a religious man. If it means specific belief in a supreme being, he was not. If it means a firm conviction of immortal life, he still was not; but if it means infinite love, gentleness, charity and kindness to all living things, George Burman Foster was the most religious man I ever knew!

He sometimes seemed to me to hold fast to things of which his judgment did not approve. I have often heard him say from this platform—that the function of faith began where reason ended; that because you could not prove a thing, was the real reason for faith and he tried to cling fast to faith where reason could not aid. To me, this statement is without foundation in philosophy or fact. If faith could be bought like a suit of clothes, we might choose our faith. But it comes from some conviction; and to me, at least, it cannot be an act of will.

Of course, he believed in no personal god. But, if there is no personal god, there is no god; and if there is no personal immortality, there is no immortality.

No man could quarrel with him as to his convictions. He was so tender and kindly, even to those with whom he disagreed, that often he left you with a belief that he felt and thought as you felt and thought. He was the fairest man in his attitude of mind that I ever knew. I seldom met him in debate that I did not afterwards apologize for something that I had said wherein I thought the lawyer had overcome the man. But, I can never remember the time where I thought any apology was due from him for any statement that was not absolutely fair and just. In fact, I used to think that he ought never to debate. His mind was so fair, so free that he knew there was no theory that could be proven true.

He knew that reason was as feeble as religion; and he knew that truth has many sides and many angles. He could state his opponent's side as fairly as he could his own, and when he had stated the question for debate, he had put my side as well or better than I could have stated it myself. A philosopher cannot be a partisan, and, of course, a partisan cannot be a philosopher. A Catholic, a Methodist, a Christian Scientist, a Socialist, or a Single Taxer, cannot be a philosopher. If he could be, he would understand the uncertainty of truth, the relationship of all things, the differences that all men give to values, the many-sidedness of the human mind and human things, and he never could content himself with one corner of the universe or one small creed.

George Burman Foster above all other things was, an intellectual man and a philosopher; he could neither take sides with the religionist nor the rationalist, because he knew that religion furnished no means of getting at the truth. He likewise knew that the human intellect had left man just as he was born, with no chance to get at the eternal things of life. But, he did believe that the human feelings, emotions and intuitions of man are truer guides than religious systems or mental conclusions.

He was the wisest man that it was ever my fortune to intimately know. And in many ways, I never had a friend whom I will miss as much. When I talked with him on philosophy, I was always sure of a free, open discussion, and I always knew when he had finished that he had said the last word that could be spoken; that he said it openly, fairly, freely and with no bias of any sort. I never knew a man who could do this as Foster did.

I remember the last discussion I had with him. It was not a dispute, but one of those talks that men at our time of life have with each other, which we withhold more or less from the public. It was on the old time riddle: "If a man die, shall he live again?" As to what death meant and its deep importance to the world and the human race; how in every religion, the joy of life was overshadowed by the fear of death. On this he had no conviction. He had hope and he never gave it up. I am glad for him that he never gave it up, for life is hard to all; if there is any hope or dream or illusion, true or false to which man can cling, he should cherish that hope or dream or illusion

while he can. Death is the ever-present thing, and the thoughtful man with all his longings cannot blot it out.

For me I cannot go beyond the facts; and the lines of the "Shropshire Lad" tell how I feel:

"With rue my heart is laden
For golden friends I had,
For many a rose-lipt maiden
And many a lightfoot lad.
By brooks too broad for leaping
The lightfoot boys are laid;
The rose-lipt girls are sleeping
In fields where roses fade."

At a time like this, the mortality of things is brought home to all and there is no chance to close our eyes. When one so near and dear is gone, the calamity has a personal tinge. It is as though you were standing by one in the trenches and a bullet, meant for you, had taken him.

George Burman Foster was one of the rarest men I ever knew. He was tolerant to all who lived. He was as broad as the human mind, and what is better, the human sympathies could make him. He had no use for any of the creeds that bind, and fetter man. He believed in freedom. He believed that the greatest thing was to be an individual and to live your own life unafraid. He was impatient of all those reformers who tell men what they must do and what they must not do. He did not believe in reforming by fear. He aroused the ire of the Prohibitionists because he said that a man should not be sent to jail for choosing what he should eat or drink. He would rather a man lived

free and wrong, than to be bound to the right. He knew that no man could be good unless he had a chance to be evil. And that without the actions of men at least seeming to be free, there could be no good conduct and no bad. He believed that men should make their own mistakes and blunders, and that their bodies and souls should be left unchained.

Few men who were ever born lived as bravely, thought so fearlessly, were so tolerant and kind and charitable to all, as our dead friend. As a philosopher, I never knew his equal. He had an intimate acquaintance with the works of all the great thinkers of the world. If he had never studied any books, he would have been a philosopher just the same. He had the habit of going to the bottom of every kind of teaching. He had a way of balancing one thing against another and trying to find out which after all was best and how far the mind could go before it reached the end of human knowledge.

There were things that he hated. You cannot love without hating, and he was not a colorless man; he had opinions on almost everything, but did not always offend you by stating them, nor did he always please you by giving them. I remember hearing him talk about a Prohibition procession that went down Michigan Avenue. He read the sign, "Down with Rum" on a banner and remarked: "Why is it in this Christian world, that you could not get a procession and have a banner that would say: "Down with Anger", or "Down with Back-biting", or "Down with Bearing False Witness Against Your Neighbor", or "Down with Nagging", or "Down with Unkindness and Up with

charity or love you could not get a dozen people in Chicago to march behind banners like that!" And, you could not.

Our friend taught us many lessons. He has given us the example of his great life. He was a joy to us while he lived and his memory will abide with most of us until the end. Yet he is dead, and I cannot reconcile it with any belief in the purpose of the universe. Talk of Omnipotence and the goodness of God, and I must answer: George Burman Foster is dead!

I have seen much of life and death. When useless men are saved and priceless ones like him lost to the world, I am not in harmony with the idea of eternal justice and a benign power. Life and death are facts and that is all. No mummery or ceremony can make death anything but death.

“There sun nor star shall waken,
Nor any change of light;
Nor sound of water shaken,
Nor any sound or sight.

Nor wintry leaves nor vernal
Nor days nor things diurnal,
Only the sleep eternal,
In an eternal night.”

Is there any real hope in it all? I see little for those who feel and think. Housman gives us the only fleeting ray of light that life holds out to man. This he puts on the lips of his Shropshire Lad:

“Loveliest of trees, the cherry now
Is hung with bloom along the bough,
And stands about the woodland ride
Wearing white for Eastertide.

Now, of my threescore years and ten,
Twenty will not come again,
And take from seventy springs a score,
It only leaves me fifty more.

“And since to look at things in bloom
Fifty springs are little room,
About the woodlands I will go
To see the cherry hung with snow.”

We have emotions and feelings, and all that is left for us, is to go out and see “the cherries hung with snow”. Get what you can—get it kindly—because it is the best—but get it while the day is here for the night comes on apace. I can see no other philosophy of life and no other hope in it.

This is no great consolation for Foster’s death. It is little for me who loved him as I seldom loved any other man. It seems to me that in the spring the grass and leaves will never be so green again; that summer will lose the golden hues that mark the ripening grain; that autumn leaves no more will have the old time glorious tints of red and brown. The winter will be longer and colder, and the summer be shorter now that he is dead. The stars in heaven will never shine so bright again. The day will lose its old time glory. The sun will fade faster, the twilight fall quicker, and the night close deeper since he is dead!

JOHN P. ALTGELD

Address of Clarence Darrow, at the Funeral

Friday, March 14, 1902

In the great flood of human life that is spawned upon the earth, it is not often that a man is born. The friend and comrade that we mourn today was formed of that infinitely rare mixture that now and then at long, long intervals combines to make a man. John P. Altgeld was one of the rarest souls who ever lived and died. His was a humble birth, a fearless life and a dramatic fitting death. We who knew him, we who loved him, we who rallied to his many hopeless calls, we who dared to praise him while his heart still beat, can not yet feel that we shall never hear his voice again.

John P. Altgeld was a soldier tried and true; not a soldier clad in uniform, decked with spangles and led by fife and drum in the mad intoxication of the battlefield; such soldiers have not been rare upon the earth in any land or age. John P. Altgeld was a soldier in the everlasting struggle of the human race for liberty and justice on the earth. From the first awakening of his young mind until the last relentless summons came, he was a soldier who had no rest or furlough, who was ever on the field in the forefront of the deadliest and most hopeless fight, whom none but death could muster out. Liberty, the relentless goddess, had turned her fateful smile on John P. Altgeld's face when he was but a child, and to this first, fond love he was faithful unto death.

Liberty is the most jealous and exacting mistress that can beguile the brain and soul of man. She will have nothing from him who will not give her all. She knows that his pretended love serves but to betray. But when once the fierce heat of her quenchless, lustrous eyes has burned into the victim's heart, he will know no other smile but hers. Liberty will have none but the great devoted souls, and by her glorious visions, her lavish promises, her boundless hopes, her infinitely witching charms, she lures her victims over hard and stony ways, by desolate and dangerous paths, through misery, obloquy and want to a martyr's cruel death. Today we pay our last sad homage to the most devoted lover, the most abject slave, the fondest, wildest, dreamiest victim that ever gave his life to liberty's immortal cause.

In the history of the country where he lived and died, the life and works of our devoted dead will one day shine in words of everlasting light. When the bitter feelings of the hour have passed away, when the mad and poisonous fever of commercialism shall have run its course, when conscience and honor and justice and liberty shall once more ascend the throne from which the shameless, brazen goddess of power and wealth have driven her away; then this man we knew and loved will find his rightful place in the minds and hearts of the cruel, unwilling world he served. No purer patriot ever lived than the friend we lay at rest today. His love of country was not paraded in the public marts, or bartered in the stalls for gold; his patriotism was of that pure ideal mold that placed the love of man above the love of self.

John P. Altgeld was always and at all times a lover of his fellow man. Those who reviled him have tried

to teach the world that he was bitter and relentless, that he hated more than loved. We who knew the man, we who had clasped his hand and heard his voice and looked into his smiling face; we who knew his life of kindness, of charity, of infinite pity to the out-cast and the weak; we who knew his human heart, could never be deceived. A truer, greater, gentler, kindlier soul has never lived and died; and the fierce bitterness and hatred that sought to destroy this great, grand soul had but one cause—the fact that he really loved his fellow man.

As a youth our dead chieftain risked his life for the cause of the black man, whom he always loved. As a lawyer he was wise and learned; impatient with the forms and machinery which courts and legislators and lawyers have woven to strangle justice through expense and ceremony and delay; as a judge he found a legal way to do what seemed right to him, and if he could not find a legal way, he found a way. As a Governor of a great State, he ruled wisely and well. Elected by the greatest personal triumph of any Governor ever chosen by the State, he fearlessly and knowingly bared his devoted head to the fiercest, most vindictive criticism ever heaped upon a public man, because he loved justice and dared to do the right.

In the days now past, John P. Altgeld, our loving, chief, in scorn and derision was called John Pardon Altgeld by those who would destroy his power. We who stand today around his bier and mourn the brave and loving friend are glad to adopt this name. If, in the infinite economy of nature, there shall be another land where crooked paths shall be made straight, where heaven's justice shall review the judg-

ments of the earth—if there shall be a great, wise, humane judge, before whom the sons of men shall come, we can hope for nothing better for ourselves than to pass into that infinite presence as the comrades and friends of John Pardon Altgeld, who opened the prison doors and set the captive free.

Even admirers have seldom understood the real character of this great human man. These were sometimes wont to feel that the fierce bitterness of the world that assailed him fell on deaf ears and an unresponsive soul. They did not know the man, and they do not feel the subtleties of human life. It was not a callous heart that so often led him to brave the most violent and malicious hate; it was not a callous heart, it was a devoted soul. He so loved justice and truth and liberty and righteousness that all the terrors that the earth could hold were less than the condemnation of his own conscience for an act that was cowardly or mean.

John P. Altgeld, like many of the earth's great souls, was a solitary man. Life to him was serious and earnest—an endless tragedy. The earth was a great hospital of sick, wounded and suffering, and he a devoted surgeon, who had no right to waste one moment's time and whose duty was to cure them all. While he loved his friends, he yet could work without them, he could live without them, he could bid them one by one good-bye, when their courage failed to follow where he led; and he could go alone, out into the silent night, and, looking upward at the changeless stars, could find communion there.

My dear, dead friend, long and well have we known you, devotedly have we followed you, implicitly have

we trusted you, fondly have we loved you. Beside your bier we now must say farewell. The heartless call has come, and we must stagger on the best we can alone. In the darkest hours we will look in vain for your loved form, we will listen hopelessly for your devoted, fearless voice. But, though we lay you in the grave and hide you from the sight of man, your brave words will speak for the poor, the oppressed, the captive and the weak; and your devoted life inspire countless souls to do and dare in the holy cause for which you lived and died.

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