

WILLIAM B. ALLISON

BY WILLIAM R. BOYD

William B. Allison, judged by almost any standard, is the outstanding statesman Iowa has produced. Other men possessed more intellectual power than he, perhaps, among whom might be mentioned James W. Grimes, John A. Kasson, William P. Hepburn, Leslie M. Shaw, Robert G. Cousins, Jonathan P. Dolliver, Albert B. Cummins, and perhaps, one or two others, but in sustained and solid accomplishment in the realm of statesmanship he has no peer.

Senator Allison was a quiet, unassuming, studious man. He possessed none of what we call "popular gifts." His speeches were informative, matter-of-fact, absolutely without any appeal to the emotions. They were appeals to the understanding and to the reasonableness of his fellow citizens. He had none of the tricks of the orator. In private conversation he often displayed keen wit and kindly humor, but he attempted neither in his public addresses. If we had had the Primary System when Senator Allison was ambitious for a public career, he could not have gotten to first base, as the saying goes. He was obliged, toward the end of his career, to go through a grueling Primary contest. He won but that contest unquestionably hastened his death.

Senator Allison had the distinction of serving his state for more years continuously than any other man whom Iowa has given to the nation. He was elected to the House of Representatives in 1862 and was promoted to the Senate in 1873, where he served continuously until his death in 1908.

Perhaps his ideals of what a public man should seek to do and be, can be as graphically set forth as it is possible to set them forth by relating something Senator Dolliver said to me one evening as we were walking back to

Dolliver's hotel in Washington where he lived, from a dinner we had both attended, about a mile away. I had said something about the great career he had had, was having, and of his future. When I had finished he said, in effect, this: "You do me honor over much. But if I have even approximated what you say I have accomplished, I owe it all to the old Senator [Allison]." "How is that?" I asked. "It happened in this wise," he replied. "You know I entered public life as an orator. My reputation was as a speech-maker—a rabble rouser, if you want to put it that way. I was invited to make speeches here, there and everywhere, and I accepted all the invitations I could." After I had been in Congress two or three terms, I was sitting with Senator Allison out on the porch of his residence in Washington, having had dinner with him. We sat there and smoked. The Senator was silent. Following his cue I said nothing. Finally he turned to me and said: 'Jonathan, I am beginning to get worried about you.' "Worried! How come?" "Well," he answered slowly, 'you are constantly being referred to as the "brilliant Mr. Dolliver." You are brilliant, Jonathan,—but that isn't enough. I have been here a long time and I've seen a lot of brilliant fellows come—and go. Now Jonathan, if you want a long and useful public career, I think I can tell you how to go about it. Select some thing in government in which you are very much interested, and master it. Get to know more about it than anybody else knows. If you will do this, possessing your popular gifts, you can never be defeated. You can stay here as long as you live.

" 'And another thing,—don't accept all these invitations that come to you to make speeches. No one can strike twelve all the time. Make it a rule never to make a speech unless the occasion is reasonably worth while, and unless you have a reasonable time to prepare a worth-while speech for that occasion. To accept invitations to speak here, there, and everywhere will after a while cheapen you, Jonathan. Exercise self restraint in this matter. Then, whenever you do speak you will be at your best. There

will never be a chance for anybody to say "Dolliver's beginning to slip." Moreover, if you do too much speaking, you can't do very much studying.'

"I took that plain talk to heart," Dolliver told me. The sequel shows that he did take it to heart. He selected the tariff as his specialty. Finally his views on the tariff became more liberal than those of his party, but he was able to defend his position independent of his oratorical gifts. Had not sudden death taken him, he would probably have had a career in the Senate almost equal in length and distinction to that of the great Senator who gave him that advice.

In what Allison said to Dolliver on this occasion, he revealed clearly the way by which he had come to distinction, even though he did not possess anything in the way of what we call oratorical ability. Senator Allison's specialty was finance, which included the tariff. One summer afternoon, I sat in the gallery during the entire afternoon watching and listening to Senator Allison as he explained a tariff measure. He was a handsome man—rather stockily built; at that time his hair was white. He wore a full beard, closely trimmed. He was dressed in a shepherd plaid suit, without vest, and wore a white shirt with turned-down collar, with a black tie, tied in a bow with his own hand. He was a commanding figure; painstakingly he was going over this bill, section by section; practically the entire membership of the Senate were in their seats. Now and then a senator—sometimes from one side of the aisle, and sometimes from another, would rise and ask permission to ask a question. Usually the question was something like this: "Senator, will you please tell me just what this paragraph means?" Always the question was asked quietly and respectfully. Nothing that savored of sarcasm, or heckling. Senator Allison would answer without hesitation. When he had finished the Senator who made the query would say: "Thank you, Senator," and sit down. I wonder if such a scene could be duplicated now? I rather doubt it.

One day when I happened to be in Washington, Senator Allison asked me to go to lunch with him in the Senate Restaurant. When we reached the door of the restaurant, he paused for a moment and glanced over the room. Then, turning to me, he said: "There's Senator Hoar of Massachusetts sitting over there at a table by himself. He's a very interesting person. I'm sure you would like to meet him. Let's go over to where he is and I will introduce you and we'll sit down there and have a bite." The introduction had scarcely been made when someone stepped over to Senator Allison and called him aside for a few moments. Senator Hoar said to me: "You ought to be very proud of your Senator—you Iowans." "We are proud of him," I replied. "I think he is the most useful man in public life," he continued. Then followed a statement which I shall never forget as long as I live. "He (Senator Allison) has a genius for attaining the attainable. In other words, he can get the maximum of good in legislation at any given time, and that without seeming to put forth much of any effort—but of course he does put forth effort."

In his autobiography, Senator George F. Hoar, referring to Senator Allison (I am quoting from memory) thus characterizes him: "He is like the chief engineer of a great ship—seldom seen on deck—but I think it has been given to him, more than to any other man of his period, to say more often whether the ship should go on its way or on the rocks. He has pulled more poisonous fangs of legislation than any other man of his period." He then goes on to say that Allison was often called cowardly, because of his extreme caution in making commitments. "The best evidence that he is not cowardly," said Senator Hoar, "is that for years and years his name headed the roll call in the Senate. He was the first Senator to vote on every question on which there was a roll call. He never went to the cloak room. He never answered "present;" he never passed. He voted. Cowards do not do that."¹

¹Cf *Autobiography of Seventy Years*, I:238-40.

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Senator Allison was a man who didn't want to boss anybody. By nature, he was cooperative. After he had attained to undisputed leadership of his party in Iowa, and to great influence at Washington, he could, if he had been so minded, have taken over a considerable amount of patronage to himself, but he never did anything of the kind.

If, for example, a United States Judgeship was to be filled, he could have at least claimed the right to name the Judge of the Northern District of Iowa without consultation with anybody, leaving to his colleagues, who for the greater part of the period of his service lived in the southern half of the state, to have original and exclusive jurisdiction in the matter of Judges, United States Attorneys, Revenue Collectors, et cetera, claiming and exercising like prerogative for himself in the Northern District. This was not the Allisonian way however. All of these appointments were made after consultation with the Congressmen. If immediate agreement was not possible, Senator Allison always waited until agreement could be brought about. In this field, as in all other fields, he had what Senator Hoar so aptly said he had—a genius for attaining the attainable. I do not remember how long Senator Allison waited for an agreement in the matter of appointment of a Judge to succeed the late Judge Shiras. He could, if he had wished, have settled the matter immediately, but he waited a long, long time,—until there was entire agreement on Judge Reed of Cresco. Thus did he maintain harmony in the Party for many, many years, and the delegation from Iowa, because of its solidarity, became one of the most influential delegations in the nation.

Until the last nomination, after the first, Senator Allison never had any serious contest to succeed himself. I think it was during the '80's, when the Republican majority in the legislature was narrowed down to just a few, by reason of the Party's split over prohibition, an effort was made on the part of a few so-called "renegade" Republicans in the legislature to defeat Senator Allison, by uniting with the

Democrats. Two or three men were brought forward in the hope that they might receive the vote of a coalition but the effort came to nothing. In fact, at no time would it have been possible to have carried out this scheme, because there were a sufficient number of Democrats in the Legislature who were patriots before they were partisans, who would have cast their votes for Senator Allison in joint session, rather than cast them for a Republican, who would have not been the equal of Senator Allison in leadership and influence in the Senate. The then Chairman of the Democratic State Central Committee, Alexander Charles of Cedar Rapids, had this matter thoroughly in hand all the time. The sequel to this will be related later.

As has been said before, Senator Allison, while possessing keen wit and kindly humor, seldom displayed this gift in his public speeches. But in private conversation he often scintillated it. Let me give two or three illustrations:

He was a very cautious man, and never committed himself to anything rashly. Many stories were made up about him, because of this characteristic. One appeared not so very long ago, in the READERS DIGEST, featuring Jessie Jones as the hero, or whatever you want to call him. The true story was to the effect that the Senator was riding along one day in a railroad train, with a friend. Passing a field in which a flock of sheep was grazing, the friend remarked: "I see those sheep have just been sheared," to which the Senator is said to have replied: "They have been on this side anyway."

I was an eye and ear witness to something which actually took place, which I think is a far better story than the above. The Republican Convention which nominated Leslie M. Shaw for Governor met in Cedar Rapids, in 1897. McKinley had previously taken office March 4th succeeding a Democratic President, and patronage talk was very much in the air. After the Convention, Senator Allison visited the office of the Cedar Rapids REPUBLICAN, together with a number of delegates living in North-East Iowa. They

began to pump the Senator as to who he was going to name postmaster at Dubuque (his home town). Naturally, the Senator wasn't telling them who he was going to name. Finally, one bolder than the rest, a R. T. St. John, from Riceville, evidently made up his mind that he was going to make the Senator commit himself. He swung his chair around, placed his hand on one of Senator Allison's knees, looked him straight in the eye, and said: "There oughtn't to be any doubt as to who will get that postmastership, Senator, Joe Morgan [the Senator's Secretary] ought to have that postmastership. He's earned it,—don't you think so?" With that gracious smile always characteristic of him, and without waiting a split second, Senator Allison replied: "Mr. St. John, I think Joseph would agree with you precisely." This was art, wouldn't you think? The questioning ceased.

At the time when the newspapers were filled with gossip as to the probable engagement of Alice Roosevelt to Nicholas Longworth, someone asked the Senator "Is Nick going to get Alice?" The Senator's eyes twinkled, and he said: "Can he get away from her?"

Senator Allison was a philosopher. It may be recalled that shortly after Mr. Cleveland left office the last time the daughter of the Secretary of the Navy, Miss Herbert, committed suicide by jumping out of the third story of an apartment house or a hotel. I happened to be with Senator Allison at the time, and said to him: "What kind of a girl was Miss Herbert?" "She was a fine girl," he replied, "I do not know what caused her to commit this rash act, but I do know this—that it's a terrible test of character, shall I say, to throw a girl, who had led a simple life hitherto, into the social whirl of the Cabinet circle. The President's Cabinet is the only court we have, and like all other courts, it has its flatterers, its sycophants, its social climbers. The newspaper boys help along. They portray just good plain girls who are daughters of Cabinet members as beautiful and talented, and from the time of the inauguration, the lights get brighter and brighter, and the music faster and faster, until a certain twelve o'clock on a certain fourth of

March, and then—for them—the lights go out and the music stops. It is all over. It is back home, where everything is simple oftentimes, and perhaps, dull. It's a shock and, unless you are very well balanced, when on the third floor you might jump out."

—*William R. Boyd, of Cedar Rapids, Iowa, Chairman of the Finance Committee, Iowa State Board of Education, was for many years editor of the Cedar Rapids Republican and a close friend of William B. Allison.*

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