

## Master of Oratory

Young Jonathan P. Dolliver already had a reputation as an orator when he came to Iowa. He was twenty then, but his brilliance, his ease on the platform, and his attractive youth had won him such enthusiastic praise that his native State wanted more of him, and two years later he "stumped West Virginia" for Garfield and Arthur. He was reported to be the "sensation of the campaign". In his new home his talents and his strong personality were in themselves sufficient to start him quite afresh on that political career for which both his tastes and his qualities had fitted him so well. Fort Dodge, the Tenth Congressional District, and all Iowa were not long in hearing of the magnetic young lawyer with a genius for the platform.

Now the greatest opportunity which Iowa offers for the display of oratorical ability in politics is the position of temporary chairman of a State convention, and Dolliver had been only a few years in Iowa when, at the age of twenty-six, he was made temporary chairman of the Republican State convention held in Des Moines on August 20, 1884. His speech was an extraordinary success. Again and again the audience was swept by laughter and applause. Few who heard that address ever forgot its keen satire and flashing wit.

The objects of his thrusts were the Democrats — the chief victim their standard-bearer, Grover Cleveland. A man who, three years before, had never held any office except that of sheriff of Erie County, New York, had received the Democratic nomination for President of the United States. His name, said Dolliver, “might have been used until four years ago to travel incognito all over the world, except in the fifth ward of the city of Buffalo, New York. To elect him as President would be like lending money to a stranger on the train. I thank God we belong to a party that saves the crowns of its public honor for the brow of its leadership. With the Democrats, nominations are made not so much to represent the party as to disguise it.”

Of course the orator referred also to the tariff. The Democrats, he said, “approach that question, and nearly every other, like a man emptying hard-coal ashes in a high wind, with their eyes shut and their backs to the subject.” When the laughter and applause had subsided, he went on. “The history of this generation of Democrats”, he declared, “is an obituary notice, both of men and of doctrines. Yet even here in Iowa there are men who have got themselves galvanized into the belief that the time has come in the course of human events for the procession to turn out and let the corpse take the road.”

Iowa resounded with Republican praise of the speech, but the Democrats who read it in the papers didn't like it. Which was quite to be expected.

They said it was shallow. As a matter of fact, it was by no means profound; but it fulfilled its purpose — the enthusiastic rallying of true believers — superlatively well. It also exemplified very well some of the rhetorical devices that Dolliver was to use throughout the whole of his notable career as an orator.

Perhaps the most important of these devices is the use of similes and metaphors in which more or less abstract and complex principles of government and economics are illustrated by things of everyday life. His simile of the hard coal ashes is a case in point. Others are very numerous. In his speech on the Dingley tariff, in the House of Representatives on March 23, 1897, he said metaphorically, "a nation like this, that goes past the closed doors and broken window lights of its own factories to the ends of the earth for what it buys, invites a condition speedily fatal to all commerce, domestic and foreign." Later in the same speech is the telling assertion: "The roar of furnaces that are now cold, the noise of looms that are now silent, will mean a good deal to the working people of the United States." And again, "We have a favor to ask of this Congress, and it is to give us back our customers. We need families for our customers instead of tramps, men with time checks in their pockets instead of soup tickets."

In that valuable branch of practical learning known as arithmetic, we are taught to take some

such incomprehensible fraction as  $\frac{4368}{17472}$  and by applying a common divisor reduce it to its lowest terms, so that we get the quite comprehensible figure  $\frac{1}{4}$ . It is something like this that the Dolliver speeches so often show us. When he was arguing, in his Senate reply to President Taft's Winona speech, that the Payne-Aldrich tariff reductions involving an alleged "consumption value of \$5,000,000,000" were so small on particular items that the new schedules did not constitute a "reduction downward", he made the graphic statement that a citizen, in order to eat himself into possession of a dollar from the five cents on the hundred pounds tariff reduction on sugar and molasses, "would have to eat a ton of sugar, and even then the trust might not give him the money."

In this speech there was an effective metaphor regarding President Taft. The doctrines of the Winona speech were called "vagrant children, introduced into the President's intellectual household by interested parties". A figure like this is so full of suggestion that it seems almost an allegory. Another metaphor deals with Senator Nelson W. Aldrich who, Dolliver felt, had not only been entirely too dictatorial and domineering but had also during the debate on the cotton schedule led his committee to make use of the unreliable statements of highly prejudiced customs officials. When a mildly critical attitude was assumed toward this practice, said the speaker, "the Senator tried to baffle my purpose by

gathering the spring chickens of his committee under a motherly wing and retreating to the protection of the New York custom-house. . . . I remember very distinctly that one of the most lusty of the brood, my honored friend from California, stuck his head out of the feathers, even while the storm was raging, with the reassuring remark that the same thing was true of all the other schedules." The picture of the dignified old Senator from Rhode Island as a brood-hen seemed at once so incongruous and so appropriate that it caught the fancy of more than one cartoonist of the time.

Senator Dolliver's humor often had somewhat of the cartoon in it. Another example is found in a speech at Sheldon, made when the Senator was campaigning for his old friend and colleague during the Allison-Cummins Senatorial nomination contest. In this campaign Dolliver made effective use of the famous "Torbert letter", in which Governor Cummins appeared to have promised not to become a candidate against Allison, but he did not use it until Cummins had been repeatedly charged with having made such a promise and had repeatedly denied it. When asked why he had not exhibited the Torbert letter before, Dolliver said, "I waited for the governor to wade in up to his chin so that when I should go after him there would be more fun watching him climb up the bank."

In presenting Allison's name to the Iowa Republican convention as a candidate for the Presidential

nomination in 1888, Dolliver pictured the situation of the Democrats. "They may not be permitted to eat," he said, "but they are not denied the privilege of standing near enough to the table to keep the salivary glands active."

It must be admitted that the level of some of Dolliver's great discussions of public affairs is lowered by partisan attacks. He seldom if ever spoke of the Democratic party except in language of ridicule and accusation. An opponent in one debate said truly that the Democratic party was Dolliver's *bête noire*. In spite of the growing seriousness of his speeches, he continued all his life to poke fun at the Democrats. Even in that fine, masterful, characteristic speech on the Porto Rico Bill in 1900, he consumed much time in that way. Of course the House floor was the familiar forum of that kind of debate, and one is never sure how much is meant for earnest and how much for fun.

As a rule, Senator Dolliver did not condense sufficiently to make the best epigrams, if the test of the old quatrain be accepted.

The qualities rare in a bee that we meet  
In an epigram never should fail:  
The body should always be little and sweet,  
And a sting should be left in the tail.

Occasionally, however, he hit off an almost perfect example, as when he insisted in his Dingley tariff speech that Congress was not able to make prosperity merely by legislation, and then added, "the

most that is done for us we have got to do for ourselves"; or, in his latter days, "An insurgent is a member of Congress who wishes to read a bill before he votes for it." In 1884 the first great advertising campaigns were attracting attention, especially those of the baking-powder companies. The Democrats, said Dolliver, in his convention speech of that year, "solemnly protest that everybody's conscience has alum in it except theirs."

Of irony and sarcasm, effective weapons of the political speaker, Dolliver was a master. In his speech on the cotton schedule of the Payne-Aldrich tariff, he complained of Senator Aldrich's misconceptions in regard to the Dingley tariff. "We have two Dingley laws", he said, "one existing on the statute books, and one in the imagination of the Senator from Rhode Island", and a year later on the same floor he declared that the past year had "witnessed two events of unusual interest—the discovery of the North Pole by Doctor Cook and the revision of the tariff downward by the Senator from Rhode Island—each in its way a unique hoax". Of a certain Bostonian who appeared before the Ways and Means Committee of the House during the hearings on the Dingley tariff, Dolliver said he "complained in the Boston newspapers that the committee laughed at him, and I am sorry they did, for the sight of the only surviving friend of the present tariff law ought not to have excited laughter, but sympathy rather, on account of the unique if

not splendid isolation of that serene and imperturbable soul."

The importance of the wit and humor in Dolliver's speeches should not be exaggerated. He was never a "funny man" and he never even verged upon the field of the professional humorist, but it was the brilliance of his sallies of wit that first brought him into repute as a speaker, and continued throughout his career to add effectiveness to his oratory. They never cheapened or vulgarized it. There are few funny stories in Dolliver's speeches. The present writer recalls but two, and one of them was drawn from Aristotle's *Politics*.

That Dolliver was never tagged and classified by his colleagues as one of the humorists of Congress (and his career thereby ruined) was due principally, no doubt, to the fact that he was too big a man for such a category, but it was due also, in some measure, to the timely advice of Senator Allison. Dolliver had not been in Washington long when his friend warned him that mere humor and eloquence would not go far in Congress and suggested that he acquire by rigorous study a command of reliable information. The first fruits of this counsel, Dolliver afterward said, were to be seen in his famous reply to Bryan in 1894.

All this should not mislead the reader to the belief that Dolliver was no more than a wit before 1894. He was always much more than that. His maiden speech in the House of Representatives on April 4,

1890, was a really fine oration. It was on the subject of pensions, and in all the volume of pension oratory, this speech is probably the high-water mark. Indeed, Dooliver seldom or never surpassed it in brilliant oratory.

“The old soldiers stand before the public Treasury”, he exclaimed in his fervid peroration, “not as paupers, not as mendicants, not even as beneficiaries. They are the preferred creditors of the nation of America. They hold the bonds of the real national debt. To its payment the public faith is sacredly pledged. We must not question it. We can not without infinite penalties repudiate it. Nor ought we to go into partnership with the grave and plead the precedent that enables us to drive a hard bargain with old age. Now is the accepted time to complete the act of national gratitude. Within twenty years most of the veterans will be gone. Already the great commanders, except one, have joined the innumerable company of their comrades on the other shore.

“Every year time touches the wasting ranks with a heavier hand. Soon the last will have departed, and little children playing upon the streets will hush their laughter to look with curious reverence upon bent and white-haired men, the last of the Grand Army of the Republic. I do not know what others may think, but in that day I want to feel that public faith has been kept in the ample measure of gratitude and of justice. I shut my eyes while the busy

fingers of calculation compute the cost. It makes absolutely no difference what it costs. The defense of the Union was an undertaking so vast that no worldly arithmetic can estimate its expense. But the American people, with eager patriotism, were ready to pay all that it cost to the last farthing. Nay, more, they were willing to bury their dead; they were willing to put the signs of mourning upon nearly every family altar; they were willing to take back their loved ones from the hospitals of disease, from the stockades of merciless prisons, that the flag of the great Republic might live through the storm of battle.

“My countrymen, it was a costly sacrifice, but it was worth all it cost, and infinitely more. And to-day there is not in all our borders one veteran of the civil war but we are his personal debtor; not one woman whose broken heart gave to the nation husband, or son, or brother, but we are her personal debtor; not one old man, stricken by years, the staff of his support taken away by the service of his country, but we are his personal debtor.

“I am glad that in all the earth there is no bank, no bourse, no narrow street of speculation that questions the credit of the United States of America. But, before God, I had rather see the whole framework of our financial system put to an open shame before the world than to see the care-worn remnant of the Union Army driven from the public Treasury by the money power of the United States, holding in

their trembling hands the broken promise of Abraham Lincoln.”

Three qualities which always characterized his oratory both in and out of Congress are noticeable in this maiden speech: first, emotional power; second, a habit of going to the historical sources of a question, illustrated in the first half of this speech; and third, a fine idealistic philosophy of government.

His emotional power depends to some extent on the introduction of specific individuals as the objects of emotion. In the paragraphs just quoted there are the tottering remnants of the Grand Army, gazed upon with “curious reverence” by the children in the street. In his speech on the Wilson Tariff Bill there are the unemployed workmen who appeared before the committee to implore aid. It was this liking for personal instances which made Senator Dolliver such an accomplished eulogist: his memorial orations on Allison and McKinley are among his finest utterances.

At the time of the Philippine insurrection grave charges were circulated in the United States concerning the conduct of the American army and instances of alleged cruelty to the natives were exploited for partisan purposes. On several occasions Senator Edward W. Carmack viciously attacked the administration of affairs in the Philippines. Dolliver replied to one of these tirades. “The time may come, as the Senator seems to think, when we will in sheer exhaustion abandon our work

in the Philippine Islands", said he. "And in after years when nations more robust, moved by other motives, have taken up the burden which was greater than our strength, we will ask permission to go back to the harbor where our volunteers first heard the cheers of Admiral Dewey's squadron, to gather up the ashes of our dead — the poor boys who had faith enough in their country to give their names to its enlisting regiments, to follow its officers with soldiers' reverence, and to die if need be in its service.

"If such an experience should come to us within my lifetime I hope to be spared the humiliation of recalling one word uttered here or anywhere that would warrant the surviving comrades of these men in reproaching me for having passed judgment upon them without hearing the evidence, without knowing the circumstances by which they were surrounded, the provocation by which they were inflamed, and the military necessities under which they obeyed their orders."

He never omitted the historical bearings of the situation. "I have studied the history of the United States with a good deal of care", he once said. "I have learned to love it". In his pension speech he traced the development of that species of legislation in America from its beginning; in his speeches on the Wilson and Dingley tariff bills he discussed the history of the tariff; in the debate on the Hepburn Railroad Rate Bill he talked about the history of

transportation; and even in that picturesque and able speech on the oleomargarine bill he related the history of the oleomargarine industry. History with Dolliver was truly the handmaiden of government. He would have subscribed heartily to Sir J. R. Seeley's aphorism:

History without political science has no fruit;  
Political science without history has no root.

In the closing sentence of his Wilson Tariff Bill speech he said, after an exhaustive analysis of tariff history, "I beg of you, gentlemen, by the counsel of every great statesman the country has produced, from Washington to Lincoln, to save the American people from reënacting the folly which has already four times in our history destroyed our industrial and commercial prosperity."

Doubtless his predilection for history helped to make Dolliver more than a politician — helped to provide a statesman's perspective. In the debate on the Wilson Bill there is an illustration of that wider view. "I believe", he said, "that if our civilization is ever destroyed it will be by the degradation of American wages. This Government has no facility for any length of time to take care of universal popular discontent. In other countries it may be done with armies. In this country it may be done for months with soup-houses and with the bread of charity; but in the long run the idleness will destroy the fabric of our institutions and produce the irresponsible and uncontrollable forces that may shake

the structure of modern society to its foundation.”

His political philosophy was decidedly of the idealistic type. This fact is illustrated again and again — in the address at the laying of the cornerstone of the Liberal Arts building at the State University of Iowa in 1899, in the pension speech, and in the speeches on Spanish-American affairs. On January 25, 1899, he stated his attitude admirably, in answer to a bitter speech of Representative Henry U. Johnson of Indiana on the Philippine question: “He says the highest duty of a nation is to take care of itself. I would have the American Republic take care of itself, but I do not recognize that that is the highest type of manhood which simply takes care of itself. If a man does that, providing for himself and for his family, you say when he dies, ‘That was a good man, a good citizen.’

“I like a man rather”, he continued, “who is able not only to take care of himself, but to do something for the unfortunate who surround him in this world, and when you bury a citizen like that you do not call him a man, you call him a lover of mankind, and you build monuments to him in the streets of your great cities. I say that a nation in that respect is like a man. It is the noblest dogma of political science that a nation is a moral personality in the exact sense in which a man is a moral personality, and it is true of nations as it is true of individuals that no man liveth to himself alone. Therefore, I feel that the American Republic has come into a position

where it can afford to do a little something for the human race.”

Such an utterance as that serves as a reminder that Senator Dolliver came of a family of Methodist preachers. Quotations and paraphrases of Scripture are numerous in his speeches, and his belief in God as the Supreme Ruler of all is restated again and again. Referring to Buchanan's acts on the eve of the Civil War, Dolliver says, “If he fell short in the crisis, it was because he was dealing with a situation in which the Supreme Governor of the Universe had put his hand upon American society to revolutionize and reform it, and I believe the human race never produced a man strong enough to stand erect in that storm and come between Providence and the divine purpose.” And in the days after the war with Spain he gave voice to the following declaration of his faith in divine guidance: “It is not hard to see the dangers that beset us; it is not hard to point out the cares that are upon us; it is not hard to fill the future with the creations of doubt and uncertainty and fear; but none of these things can move us if in the midst of all dangers and all burdens and all doubts and fears we recognize the hand of God, stretched forth from the stars, touching the American republic on the shoulder and giving it a high commission to stand in the arena of the world's great affairs, living no longer to itself alone, but in willing submission to the divine appointment, ready at last to become the faithful servant even of the

lowliest and most helpless of his children." Such an utterance would not have been unworthy the mind and faith of Abraham Lincoln.

The reader of Dolliver's speeches is sure to note a steady and continuous increase in seriousness. The convention speech of 1884 is a shower of sparks; the reply to Taft in 1910 is a steady flame. The speeches on the Wilson and Dingley tariffs show the change in process of evolution: both are high-spirited and not without badinage, but the latter is soberer — it has been called a masterpiece of deliberative oratory. It shows the young statesman at his high tide of success and ambition, enjoying the greatest respect of his colleagues, filled with energy and hope. In the ten years that passed between the Dingley and Payne-Aldrich debates, Dolliver learned much — too much to allow him to keep that youthful lightness of heart. His speech on Schedule I (he was an expert on the cotton tariff) was a much greater speech than the one on the Dingley Bill so far as information and solid argument are concerned, but the buoyancy of youth and the light-hearted confidence were gone. To fight his old friends was hard for a man like Dolliver. It is one thing to come up from the ranks as an insurgent without alliances; it is quite another thing to break ties of long standing with the leaders of the government and form new ones. Many of his former friends regarded Dolliver as a traitor and wished to make him bitterly feel their displeasure. In the face

of actual pleading by Dolliver in the open Senate, Senator Aldrich and his committee refused to remain in the chamber to hear his speech or to debate the cotton schedule with him, until, with a flash of wit like the Dolliver of other years, he exclaimed, "I will say publicly I do not give five cents a square yard and five per cent cumulative ad valorem whether the committee is here or not!"

Never, even in the face of such circumstances, did his speeches lose their force or effectiveness, or the brilliant metaphor and irony that lighted them up, and there is, in retrospect at least, a certain moral grandeur in his position. It is impossible to read his speeches during the period of his insurgency without believing in his absolute sincerity: it was honest conviction, not politics, that prompted the new alignment — the conviction that tariff-making was not being honestly done, that "the most important business of the people has come down to the bargain counter," and that he, for one, could not be a party to such sordidness. Though Dolliver lost many satisfactions when he stood up against the Payne-Aldrich Bill, he at least retained a conscience which was, to use his own old jest of 1884, free from alum.

His reply in the Senate to Taft's Winona address was in reality a personal defense. "I have had a burdensome and toilsome experience in public life now these twenty-five years", he said. "I am beginning to feel the pressure of that burden. I do

not propose that the remaining years of my life, whether they be in public affairs or in my private business, shall be given up to a dull consent or to the success of all these conspiracies, which do not hesitate before our very eyes to use the lawmaking power of the United States to multiply their profits and to fill the market places with witnesses of their avarice and of their greed. I am through with it." One does not need to be a partisan of Dolliver to admire these words. When he uttered them, he stood on the Senate floor broken in health and deserted by his oldest friends. Four months later he was dead.

The student thinks of Burke — his unpopular causes, and his isolation. Perhaps as a young man Dolliver resembled Charles James Fox more. But he was like Burke in some of his methods, and in his moral integrity. Yet one invokes the name of the great English orator with hesitation, for it must not be forgotten that when Senator Carmack's home paper compared him to Edmund Burke, Dolliver remarked in the Senate, "If Ed Burke can stand that the junior Senator from Tennessee ought not to complain of it."

Dolliver was one of the few Congressmen who at times commanded absolute silence. His readiness of tongue, his vivid language, his smooth diction, and his masterful presence were the instruments of the true orator.

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