

When Barnum Came to Iowa

“Thanksgiving evening was a stirring occasion to the *elite* of Cedar Falls and vicinity. There was a general rally of intelligent citizens and ladies to the Baptist church, which was completely filled. Yet so perfect and beautiful were the arrangements, that all were seated in their several purchased and numbered seats, without the least confusion or friction. Never did a large public occasion in any city pass off in a more happy and splendid style. The scene did great credit to the officers of the Association, and to the fame of our infant city. Over 250 reserved seats were sold beforehand, and the lecture will net to the Association \$100 profits. This is doing very well for a beginning.”

When the enthusiastic devotees of lyceum endeavor were all seated, the president of the lecture association announced that the Cedar Falls lecture season of 1866-67, so auspiciously inaugurated, seemed destined for success. Patrons were promised that they would soon have the pleasure of listening to Theodore Tilton and other contemporary giants of the platform. The amiable guest of the evening, P. T. Barnum, was then introduced as the “Prince of Humbugs” who would speak on the perplexing but ever interesting subject, “Success in Life, or the Art of Money-Making”.

With his usual good-natured demeanor and animated style the famous showman launched into his favorite topic. Those who came to learn the secret formula of personal prosperity were probably disappointed, for the lecturer revealed no open sesame to wealth. But he did expatiate at length upon general morality, the evils of whisky and tobacco, the true nature of economy, uprightness in trade, the value of advertising, and other canons of success. Much of what he said was threadbare platitude, yet the well-known maxims which he propounded were so embellished with illustrations drawn from his own checkered career and enlivened by his happy sense of humor that the audience listened in rapt attention with never a thought of being humbugged. There was not the faintest doubt of the sincerity of the speaker.

While he presumed that the subject of his lecture had engaged the attention of all, he hoped to be able to present a few valuable ideas. The art of making money was not sordid, he insisted. Despite the fact that avarice is eternal, that sermons have been preached against money as "the root of all evil", and that the means of acquiring wealth have been satirized, still everybody works early and late to obtain as much as possible. After all, money is the motive of most of human endeavor. In this connection he mentioned a certain New York millionaire who, being admonished by a friend against the evils of great wealth, replied, "All this may be true, but

I have been poor and am now rich, and I certainly prefer to be rich."

Money, Barnum argued, is the key to progress. Where trade has been most prosperous, there have the arts and sciences flourished. With the exception of a few misers, men of great wealth have been benefactors of humanity. And in this country, where there is no law of entail, we have the comforting reflection that some day the old skinflint will die and his heirs will scatter his money to the winds.

As a general thing it is not hard to get money, but the difficulty is to keep it. Nevertheless, the road to wealth, according to the speaker, is broad and plain — "spend less than you make." Most people, he declared, "have a mistaken idea of economy, and believe it consists in saving candle ends, cheese bags, or cutting down the servant's wages 25 cents per month, whereby they probably save three or four dollars in a year, and think they can be liberal in everything else". Some men who save a few cents by taking care of every scrap of paper think in consequence that they can afford to drive fast horses. They are "penny wise and pound foolish." That is the kind of economy practiced by the man who bought a red herring for his dinner and hired a coach and four to carry it home. Many people, Barnum said, make a great mistake of keeping themselves continually in debt "by endeavoring to prove that they are 'just as good as their neighbors' whom they imitate by dressing richly and riding in fine

carriages." It is the same attitude that prompts a man to want to be President, or expect his son to be — rather an empty honor at that time in the opinion of the father of the dime museum.

"The foundation of success in life", continued Barnum, "is good health." Here was an opportunity for a sermon on temperance and the speaker made the most of it. "Never establish an artificial appetite", he warned his auditors. "No one has a natural appetite for tobacco and when a man once acquires it, the habit becomes second nature and he can sooner dispense with his meat than his quid or pipe. To succeed in life these artificial habits should be overcome; conquered at once and not by degrees, which would be like shooting a gun off by inches." The same principles apply even more forcibly to the use of strong drink. The scathing yet happy way in which P. T. hit off whisky and tobacco as ruinous to health, wasteful of money, and detrimental to success in life was "calculated to do much good", in the estimation of one who heard him.

Other things being equal, a young man's success depends upon his selection of an occupation for which his natural talents seem adapted. A man with mechanical ingenuity had better be a blacksmith than a preacher. Having found congenial employment, and mastered the trade, the next essential is to secure a favorable location and go to work. "Three removes", said Franklin, "are as good as a fire", and wise people keep out of the fire. Waiting

to inherit a fortune with which to start in business is usually futile or unfortunate, for "rich old aunts or uncles are likely to be most unaccommodating" and sons are frequently ruined by having money left to them.

Another good rule is to keep out of debt. "Pay as you go" is "nearer the philosopher's stone than any alchemist has yet discovered." Those who think they can eat and drink to-day and pay tomorrow will find that tomorrow has its wants and that "they are continually working for a dead horse." Money, like fire, is a good servant but a very bad master.

But above all else the person who hopes to succeed in business must advertise. Advertise continually and boldly. If a man does not advertise his goods the sheriff will. Of all who might give advice on the subject of advertising, Barnum could speak with the greatest authority, for the amazing success of his American Museum was almost entirely due to his ability of arousing public curiosity. He continually resorted to all sorts of devices of attracting attention: printing screaming advertisements in the newspapers, circulating flamboyant hand bills, erecting signs, and decorating the walls of the building with pictures of monstrosities. He was the man who started parades. When he was fined two dollars for putting up a sign contrary to law, he immediately paid \$200 in advance for a hundred days' immunity. People called him a fool, but flocked to his museum to see what he was fooling about.

Of course, Barnum explained, advertising to be effective must be persistent. He calculated that the first time an advertisement appears in a newspaper "a man does not see it, the second time he notices it, the third time he reads it, the fourth he thinks about it, the fifth he speaks to his wife about it, and the sixth or seventh he is ready to purchase." He personally preferred "a dashing style" of advertising which some people disdained as humbug. "Humbugging", he said, "consists simply in putting on glittering exteriors to attract public attention." He frankly acknowledged with an air of pride that he himself was one of the most noted humbugs of the day.

For two hours and ten minutes the "king of showmen" charmed his Cedar Falls audience "with coruscations of wit and wisdom." Wherever he spoke in Iowa he met the same generous and enthusiastic response. In Davenport the people listened so expectantly for the secret password to fortune that they scarcely noticed when he talked half an hour overtime. His audience in Muscatine "manifested its pleasure and appreciation by a frequent exercise of the risibilities and demonstrations of applause." About five hundred people who heard him in Iowa City were kept "fully alive" by "one of the most entertaining and instructive lecturers they have ever had." The editor of the Keokuk *Gate City* was particularly pleased with Barnum's emphasis upon advertising, while at Washington he was regarded as

highly as Theodore Tilton, Clara Barton, or Ralph Waldo Emerson.

On Saturday evening, December 1st, Barnum lectured to a large audience in Lincoln's Hall at Waterloo. The next morning he attended the Congregational Church and addressed the Sunday School, while in the evening he delivered a free temperance lecture. The hall was packed and ministers of most of the churches flanked the "Prince of Humbugs" on the stage! Under such favorable circumstances he spoke eloquently upon human improvement in matters of abstinence and purity, much to the delight of his auditors.

Years later many people in Iowa were proud to recall that they had heard P. T. Barnum, the showman — though probably those for whom his maxims of success had opened the gates of fortune were relatively few.

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