

## La Follette Wins

On Wednesday evening, May 7, 1879, the Interstate Oratorical Contest was held at Iowa City. While the University of Iowa was the official host, the whole town was agog with interest. The exigencies of the occasion were met in a "liberal and gracious spirit." Women threw open their spare bedrooms to the visitors, and cooked savory dinners which were calculated to tempt even a nervous orator's frail appetite. Seats were reserved at the bank on Friday morning, and the men bought tickets until there was "standing room only" in the Opera House. A local florist shop advertised that it was "the floral magazine whence will come the bouquet ammunition used at the oratorical contest on Wednesday night, and those who want bouquets on that occasion must order them early."

There was a reason for all this activity. The Intercollegiate Oratorical Association consisted of ten thousand students in fifty colleges of the Middle West. Numerous orators had been eliminated in the preliminary contests until only six remained to compete for the final honors, representing the States of Indiana, Ohio, Illinois, Iowa, Wisconsin, and Missouri. Hence Iowa City was prepared for a burst of "silver-tongued" oratory which would satisfy the audience "that the

rare gift of human eloquence has not been denied to the present age."

Iowa City was full of people on Wednesday evening. There were visitors from the four corners of the State, from outside the State, and from the neighboring towns. Large groups came from Iowa Wesleyan at Mount Pleasant, Grinnell, and Mount Vernon. The Cornell delegation arrived in buggies and one long wagon. During the evening the "four-in-hand of the Cornell boys got tired of gnawing hoop iron, wrought nails and hitching posts, and before they left had a little run down College, Dubuque, and Burlington streets, but being strangers lost their way and were captured" in time for the return trip.

The Opera House looked its prettiest for the occasion. Aisles, stairs, and lobbies had been newly carpeted, and additional scenery and many other improvements added. "The stage presented a strikingly beautiful scene, rich in color and perfect in arrangement, a fitting surrounding for this feast of mind, voice and gesture." A capacity audience had "come to see the intellectual struggle."

At the appointed moment the buzz of conversation died down, and Reverend W. B. Craig rose to pronounce the invocation. A male quartette then sang "Who will o'er the Downs", and following this President J. L. Pickard gave a short speech of welcome in behalf of the University. "Inspired by the young

hearts about him, he assumed the right of a boy and said 'we are right glad to see you'."

After a response by Albion N. Fellows who was President of the Association, the first speaker, B. C. Cory, of Cornell College, was introduced. His oration was entitled "Science not the Soul's Teacher", and was "delivered in a manner something akin to that of Wendling, with considerable force and an easy and graceful style of gesture." The subject was one which was beginning to bother the minds of men, and the orator handled it in a way which seemed to please most of his auditors.

"The study of science," he said, "or the origin and laws of existing phenomena, is the ruling intellectual passion of this age. And false to humanity's best interests is he who would seek to check the impulse of that passion in its proper course. Grand, indeed, are the true ends of Science; for she is laying bare the foot of the statue of eternal Truth, which Sphinx-like, has lain hid from men throughout the ages. But let her votaries remember that this marvelous statue towers above the reach of spade, of chisel, and of crucible, up into the realms of mystery, yet of undimmed fact, above us, unmeasured by, and unmeasurable to our sense-bound faculties."

In poetic language the speaker went on to draw the bounds beyond which science could not pass, and slowly worked up to his conclusion. "Science may amaze.

Philosophy may astonish. Art and music may enchant. But religion alone awakens purity, fills the bosom with hope, and springs over life the halo of immortality."

The second speaker was Robert M. La Follette, of the University of Wisconsin. He spoke on "Iago", that satanic character in Shakespeare's *Othello*. From the first sound of his voice he held the undivided attention of the audience. He was "a young man rather below the ordinary height, of slight stature." His voice was "wonderfully flexible and his gesture and facial expression faultless. His analysis of the great conception of Shakespeare was grand, displaying at times the finished actor, in fact almost personifying this human type of the Devil. The audience breathlessly followed his *frappant* similes and deductions and he retired amid a storm of applause."

The subject of Iago was a daring one, for it had intrigued and baffled Shakespeare critics for years. The youthful orator gave a splendid analysis of the man's character, and clothed a very workable argument in words which were apt to the theme and sometimes touched with fire. He wasted no time in announcing his theme. "Shakespeare's Iago personifies two constituents of mind — *intellect* and *will*. These alone are the springs of his action, the source of his power. What he lacks in emotion he has gained in intellectual acuteness, but the result is deformity."

With this idea as a key, La Follette proceeded to

explore the nature of Iago's character. "The emotions are the native soil of moral life. From the feelings are grown great ethical truths, one by one, forming at last the grand body of the moral law. But Iago is emotionally a cipher, and his poverty of sentiment and wealth of intellect render him doubly dangerous. Here we have the key to his character — he is possessed of an inflexible will, of an intellect, pungent, subtle, super-sensual. He not only knows more than he feels, he knows everything, feels nothing." The speaker elaborated and illustrated these tenets with incidents from *Othello* and comparisons with *Richard III*.

He grasped the significance of Shakespeare's vague allusion to Iago's coming punishment, saying: "Iago is just beyond the reach of death and we can fancy him disappearing in the darkness of which he is a part." To have conceived "a being so super-physical, so positively devilish, so intensely infernal, that his death would be pathos — this is genius."

The conclusion was delivered with a dramatic rhythm of voice and gesture which emphasized the literary quality of his words. "And this Iago. The polished, affable, attendant; the boon companion; the supple sophist, the nimble logician; the philosopher, the moralist — the scoffing demon; the goblin whose smile is a stab and whose laugh is an infernal sneer; who has sworn eternal vengeance on virtue everywhere; who would turn cosmos into chaos. This compound of

wickedness and reason, this incarnation of intellect, this tartarean basilisk is the logical conclusion in a syllogism whose premises are 'Hell and Night'. He is a criminal climax: endow him with a single supernatural quality and he stands among the devils of fiction supreme."

The Light Guard Band struck up a lively piece, and when the audience had quieted down Miss Emma C. Bulkley, of Shurtleff College, Illinois, was announced as the next speaker. "Unsolved Problems" was the title of her oration, and "gracefully and forcibly, without fright nor fear, she soon won the rapt attention of the audience." Her premise was that "in the whole range of influences awakening human interest and affecting human welfare, none plays a more important part than the unknown. However vital and absorbing the positive elements of life and thought, they can not exclude the no less powerful impressions received from the occult and negative."

"Indeed," she concluded, "the conception of a Newton, deeming all the vast accumulations of knowledge hitherto attained as a mere handful of pebbles, gathered from a boundless shore, is far more just, more true to the relations of man with his surroundings, than that of an Alexander, sighing for other worlds to conquer."

N. B. Anderson, of Wabash College, Indiana, then spoke on "The Decay of Institutions". It was reported that he had a "capital voice and an earnest, convincing style of speaking." He held that the decay of institu-

tions was but a part of the natural progress of man. "Institutions," he said, "must conform to the growth of the people — peaceable, if possible; forcibly, if necessary. The landmarks of human progress are the bloody fields on which were fought the unnatural battles between the progressive and the conservative forces and on which the progressive always triumphed. Yet, in defiance of these facts, this interminable conflict is still kept up. There are those to-day in this enlightened age, when every impulse in man is toward progress, who are the slaves of a stupid and unreasonable conservatism."

The Quartette Club next gave the audience "musical aid to intellectual digestion". Following this, Miss Ida M. Miller, of Drury College, Missouri, spoke on "Unlimited Culture". One who was present said that "a graceful brunette bowed to the audience and delivered an earnest plea on behalf of her sex. Her voice is good and well modulated, and at times she fairly thrilled the audience with her brilliant climaxes, and the explosion of gorgeous rockets of rhetoric." Her impassioned declamation ended with these triumphant words: "The shadowy clouds that for ages have hung threateningly over us, enveloping us in their dismal, chilling folds, are lifting; and through the riftings of their murky masses, see! The Star of Promise. That Star — Unlimited Culture — Bright Star of Promise! Harbinger of our deliverance! Universal education! We hail thee!"

The last speaker was J. A. Barber, of Oberlin College, Ohio, whose topic was "Mahometanism and its Enemies". The young man "rushed impetuously through and made a strenuous effort to command that general attention given the others." He contended that Mahometanism had exerted a beneficial influence upon mankind. After mentioning numerous examples, he made an effective plea for religious tolerance. "Although we may not understand why the Saracen sword glittered in the once fairest portion of our earth; although we may not understand, why the blazoned banners of the Moslems waved over the birth-place of the Christian religion, why the columns of Mahometan Mosques now cast their shadows over so large a section of the world; — yet, after all, would it not be better to conclude, with Richelieu, the old white-haired cardinal of France:

Come, let us own it; there is One above  
Who sways the harmonious mysteries of the world."

While he was speaking, the audience was trying to decide upon the winning orator. During the interval while the markings of the judges were being computed, the band played and the audience anxiously awaited the verdict. At last President Fellows stepped forward, the murmuring ceased, and he announced that the gold medal was awarded to Robert M. La Follette, of the State University of Wisconsin. This statement was received with spontaneous and hearty applause. J. A. Barber, of Oberlin College, Ohio, won the silver medal.



The judges, Wm. T. Harris, C. W. Slagle, Wm. H. Gibson, and Geo. J. Boal, marked the orations on thought, composition, and delivery. On the composite score, Robert M. La Follette, of Wisconsin, ranked first; J. A. Barber, of Ohio, second; A. B. Anderson, of Indiana, third; Ida M. Miller, of Missouri, fourth; B. C. Cory, of Iowa, fifth; and Emma Bulkley, of Illinois, sixth. Thus in a moment was written the result of weeks of preparation, practice, and anxiety. The Interstate Oratorical Contest was over.

On the following morning a convention of the delegates was held and new officers of the association were elected. It was decided that the next contest should be at Oberlin, Ohio, in 1880, on the first Wednesday in May. The Iowa City contest was reported to be "a success, intellectually and financially". Over \$400 was taken in, and after "all expenses were paid, the sum of \$150.00 remained; enough to purchase the "medals" for this year and last."

Reverend F. L. Kenyon of the Congregational Church delivered a timely sermon on the oratorical contest. Commending the effort he said, "It speaks of an awakening desire for excellency in the art of oratory. It looks to greater care and more assiduous attention to the manner as well as the matter of speech." Of La Follette particularly he spoke with approbation. "He who by the verdict of all took the first prize was the most natural in action and therefore the most ef-

fective. His words fitted his thought and his thought filled his words, so that they came to the auditor not harsh and piercing, but round and full. The image of Iago was so in his soul, the truth concerning Iago was so in his mind, that he was able to present to the hearer the truth and the image in such a way as to make them appear living realities."

It proved to be a happy circumstance that young La Follette won the coveted medal. Years later in an autobiography he wrote: "When I returned to Madison, university feeling ran to so high a pitch that the students met me at the train and drew the carriage up the hill to the university where I was formally welcomed; and that evening I was given a reception in the State-house at which there were speeches by William F. Vidas, the foremost citizen of Wisconsin and afterward United States Senator, by members of the university faculty, and others."

All this was reported in the papers, and a few years later the notoriety thus gained helped La Follette, then a penniless law-graduate, to win his fight for the office of District Attorney of Dane County, Wisconsin. The triumph in the Interstate Oratorical Contest at Iowa City had given him "something of a claim to recognition" on his "own account". It had started the political ball rolling which culminated in his leadership of the Progressive faction in the United States Senate and his candidacy for the Presidency of the United States.

PAULINE GRAHAME