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Robert G. Cousins

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THE PALIMPSEST

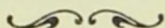
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Robert G. Cousins

"Lest we forget — lest we forget." . . .

His deep rich voice, vibrant with feeling, swelled to the corners of the great Hall of Representatives and died away. Silence echoed an instant while the speaker, young and tall and impressive, resumed his seat. Somewhere in the audience a man coughed nervously, suggesting a sob. A nose was blown. Dry throats murmured in audible swallowing. Then a gust of heavy applause rose and fell and rose again thunderously. The orator bowed his dark, well-shaped head in acknowledgment.

Robert G. Cousins, United States Representative from Iowa, had just concluded his speech on the sinking of the *Maine*. In scarcely more than five minutes, he had deeply stirred the hearts of his fellow Congressmen. With a few beautiful words he had plead powerfully for an appropri-

ation to relieve the families of the victims of the *Maine* disaster. Grimly his tribute recalled the tragedy of the great battleship to those in whom lay the power of making reparations for a grateful nation "to its dead defenders and their living kin" — a feeble sort of recompense. "Human nature does, in human ways, its best, and still feels deep in debt."

The classic speech, so scant in length, so rich in eloquence, was speedily reported on the front page of newspapers all over the country. Almost overnight, Representative Cousins found himself the popular author of an address which critics were exalting to oratorical heights. "Silver-tongued", "golden-voiced", he was called. Stacked into a column, the clippings quoting and commenting upon his *Maine* speech might have approximated his own towering height of six feet two.

Editor Medill of the *Chicago Tribune* declared, closing an editorial of March 22, 1898, "Like Lincoln's speech at Gettysburg, Mr. Cousins' brief address will be preserved as one of the gems of American oratory." Unqualified admiration came from Democratic Kentucky in the article of "Savoyard", Louisville *Courier-Journal* reporter, when he affirmed: "I have been about this capitol the most of the last twenty years but I have never

seen nor heard anything on that floor that even approached this gem of a speech." And nearer home, expanding with pride at the prowess of a native son, yet attempting to remain clear-visioned in its praise, the Des Moines *Iowa State Register* commented: "We do not exaggerate when we say that Mr. Cousins' speech on the wreck of the *Maine* has been more commented upon and has received more praise than any one other speech delivered during the present controversies over Cuba . . . We believe that Mr. Cousins has made a place for himself in school books of the future and in the histories of two republics."

Thrilled by the Congressman's brilliant flight into Websterian realms, his friends at home in Tipton, Iowa, staunchly declared they "always knew Bob Cousins would do something someday." Of course it was a little hard to reconcile their recollections of a sunburned youngster, who used to race bare-legged through his father's hay fields, with a dignified, earnest political figure swaying multitudes with his eloquence. But then, "Bob" had worked hard and learned much since those hay-field days.

Until he was twenty-one, life had consisted mostly of schoolbooks and farm chores for Robert G. Cousins. He was born on January 31, 1859, in the Red Oak Grove community five miles north

of Tipton. Pioneer blood flowed in the veins of the son of James and Mary (Dallas) Cousins: both grandfathers, Robert Cousins and Robert Dallas, had been among Cedar County's earliest settlers, the former coming in 1841, the latter in 1839.

After tramping to school in the winter and making hay and plowing corn on his father's farm during the summer until late in his 'teens, "Bob" entered Cornell College at Mount Vernon, fifteen miles away. He graduated in 1881 as a Bachelor of Civil Engineering and three years later, having "sustained a good moral character" and "pursued professional or scientific studies", he was awarded the degree of Civil Engineer.

But meanwhile engineering seems to have lost its appeal for the scholarly young man. He had probed into musty old law books and found them fascinating. Suddenly he decided to become a lawyer. Colonel Charles A. Clark, a Cedar Rapids attorney, offered to let Engineer Cousins study in his office. Cousins did, passed the state bar examinations in 1882, and established a law office of his own in Tipton. Even at this profession he was but a half-hearted practitioner. He found it ever so much more interesting to pore long hours over Thackeray or Kipling or Dickens than to ferret out nice legal distinctions from tedious re-

ports. His literary reading encroached alarmingly upon business hours and consumed too much of the normal time for sleep.

Politics lent a new zest to his legal activities. In 1885 he tossed his hat into the political ring, campaigned vigorously, and won a seat in the House of Representatives of the Twenty-first General Assembly. Full of ambition and enthusiasm, he commenced his public career at Des Moines in January, 1886. Though not particularly influential as a legislator, he performed his duties faithfully and creditably — introducing a few bills, participating effectively in debate, serving on important standing and special committees, and presenting numerous petitions including one to require public school instruction in the effects of alcohol on “the physical, mental and moral nature”, a measure for which he voted. Perhaps the most significant recognition of his talent, as well as an opportunity to demonstrate his professional ability, was his election by the House to be one of the seven managers of the impeachment prosecution of the State Auditor. His brilliant conduct at that trial caused enthusiastic journalists and veteran legislators to prophesy a glorious future for this “coming American statesman”.

The eloquence of Robert G. Cousins was utilized to good advantage in the campaign of 1888.

Harrison carried the State by a large majority and Cousins had the honor of casting one of Iowa's electoral votes for him. The following year he was elected prosecuting attorney of Cedar County and served one term. But he aspired to higher office. In 1892 he defeated the Democratic incumbent from the Fifth Congressional District and began his long period of service as United States Representative in March, 1893.

Handsome, eloquent, and charming in manner, he was promptly accepted in congressional circles as a potential leader. His debut in Washington society was equally propitious. If he had set the hearts of Tipton belles a-flutter when occasionally he had whisked them away on Sunday evenings for a buggy ride, his presence at a ball made the Washington belles quite as twittery.

For eight consecutive terms Congressman Cousins represented the Fifth Iowa District. During those sixteen years he delivered speeches that are generally regarded as among the most finished and beautiful bits of oratory ever made on the floor of the House. He often addressed exclusive clubs in large cities. Erudite, subtle, persuasive, emotional, he was something of an enigma even to the friends who knew him best. "A mystery", the *Louisville Courier-Journal* once called him. "He seldom speaks, but is the finest orator

in congress." Commenting upon his flare for brilliant repartee, the paper continued: "If remarks Cousins makes in the cloak room were uttered on the floor and put on record, he would be as famous as Blaine was in the early '70's." Then, as if to qualify the praise, the writer added skeptically that it would be better for Mr. Cousins if he had family responsibility.

But he never married. As he had buried himself among the books and memoirs of his bachelor apartment in Tipton and shut out romance, so he withstood the charms of hopeful young ladies at the capital. Society gossip once rumored that he was engaged to the daughter of Thomas B. Reed, but the report was apparently unfounded. By and by eligible debutantes, spinsters, widows, and whatever began to smooth their crinolines resignedly and guess that "Bob Cousins was a confirmed old bachelor after all."

In 1909 Congressman Cousins, then apparently at the peak of his career with a glamorous future blazing on the horizon, declined to run for a ninth term as Representative. Being extremely sensitive, he may have been deeply offended by some unwarranted criticism or partisan gibe. Perhaps he visioned a gradual decline of his faculties and influence that pointed to ultimate defeat. A philosopher at heart, he had always clung rigidly to

principles, never compromising his political, financial, or intellectual honesty — though he could not control his own appetite. At last the time had come when past accomplishment and promise of achievement in the years to come seemed to afford him little satisfaction. He had made a name for himself. He had served on several important House committees, been chairman of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, and promoted the interests of his constituents. He had given requests for service his solicitous attention, whether they came from the White House or a prairie farm. These notes were together among his papers:

Montour, Ia.

Hon. Robert G. Cousins,
Dear Sir:

Please send me a book about chickens and a book about squirrels, and some about birds, and some onion seeds, and a book about wild animals.

White House
Washington, D. C.

My dear Mr. Cousins:

I earnestly hope you can give us those two big ships. I do not feel that we are excused as a nation if we fail to provide for them now. I look confidently to the House Committee for helping the navy at this time.

Faithfully yours,

Theodore Roosevelt

But eventually he tired of public life. He wanted to be back home alone with his books and music and old friends. He wanted solitude, and a life of quiet and contemplation.

After his sudden retirement at the age of forty-nine he never again actively engaged in politics. Nevertheless he was a familiar figure on lecture and chautauqua platforms for many years. And occasionally he lent his eloquence to public causes, particularly during the World War.

Stirring and elegant, Orator Cousins's speeches never failed to move his audience. He could plead a cause with tremendous power; he could rise to emotional heights in flights of pure oratory. Harvey Ingham regarded him as the greatest "ornamental" orator of his time, William Jennings Bryan and Jonathan P. Dolliver not excepted. Whereas the latter were generally arguing a controversial question, Cousins's orations were more often oratory for its own sake.

The power of his eloquence, the perfection of his diction, and the nobility of his thought is well demonstrated by the opening words of his eulogy of a martyred President on the day of McKinley's funeral at a memorial service in Cedar Rapids.

"When the noise of earthly things is hushed; when all the nations of the earth display their ensigns at half-mast; when belts are taken off of

wheels and factories are silent as the grave; when Mammon locks his doors of trade, and commerce calls a halt; when rushing engines on great railway systems pause and hold their fiery breath; when labor lets its hammer fall or leaves the plow half through the furrowed field, and all together come, with solemn tread and tearful eyes, into the sanctuaries of the world — how vain and helpless then is human speech. The best there is in feeling and in thought must remain inarticulate.”

Congressman Cousins's charm lay not alone in his polished diction. He possessed, in the words of his intimate friend, W. R. Boyd of Cedar Rapids, “all the equipment, natural and acquired, of a great orator. In form an Apollo — handsome as a god; a voice like the tones of a great organ, ‘most strangely sweet;’ ‘his stature molded with a perfect grace;’ a mind enriched with all that the best literature of all times could give to one capable of the keenest appreciation; a memory which caught and held everything worth while; a wit as keen as that of Burns; a knowledge of the common man, whence he came — for, to use his own language, he ‘came out of the loins of labor and out of the heart of a continent’ — as inherent, as sympathetic as that of the Scotch bard himself. Small wonder that he could charm and ‘hold spell-bound’ any audience, anywhere, and upon almost

any theme — from Shakespeare to free silver and the tariff.”

After 1911, when he delivered a eulogy of Jonathan P. Dolliver at the memorial services of the Pioneer Law Makers' Association, he withdrew from platform life. His had been a relatively brief career, but full — from the earliest campaigning for James G. Blaine in 1884 to the glorious tribute to the crew of the *Maine* at the summit of his career, and the later mellowed special-occasion addresses. Scarcely a year passed without his taking the stump for some Republican candidate; sometimes he made as many as seventy speeches in a single canvass.

From the time of his retirement, life held for him mostly books and music and the “poison that lurks in the heart of a grain of corn”. He loved music passionately. That he might enjoy the masterpieces whenever he pleased, he bought one of the earliest phonographs in Cedar County. On summer evenings he would stick its big horn in the window of his downtown room, and the strains of a Bach or Grieg or Beethoven composition would float out over the courthouse square across the street. The classics never wearied him; he hated jazz. He refused to remain in hearing distance of popular tunes — just as for a long time he refused to ride in an automobile.

Besides the phonograph, his bachelor rooms held a fascinating collection of curios, including ponderous swords salvaged from distant wars, Indian relics, bizarre basketry, and souvenirs from famous friends. There were stacks of musty legal documents, some valuable, some worthless, yellowed letters from notables in the political and literary world, copies of his own best speeches.

Rarely were persons invited to visit his sanctum. He sat alone in its shadows, generally, reading by the glow of a bare electric bulb, until cataracts grew over his eyes. Gradually the printed pages became dim, blurred, and finally obliterated as the shadows deepened into darkness. Friends offered to read to him. He listened to their recitals of news impatiently, and longed for Shakespeare or whimsical Burns, but he did not bother the willing friends to read from them.

It was during this time of his affliction that the government called for volunteers to help sell Liberty Bonds. Cousins responded. Though it had been five years since he had retired from the lecture platform, the partially-blind orator left his seclusion to perform this duty. Twenty-three times he journeyed across Iowa, speaking daily. In appreciation the Treasury Department awarded him a much-prized medal "For Patriotic Service in Behalf of the Liberty Loans".

Finally the cataracts were removed; and he returned feverishly to his reading — and to his hermitage. . . . On a January morning in 1931 he was found at home, unconscious. Friends took him to the University hospital at Iowa City. There he remained the rest of his life.

The "Bob" Cousins whom Tipton callers found when occasionally they visited him in the darkened hospital room was far different from the silver-tongued orator who had once swayed vast audiences, and different too from the quiet, bookish scholar who used to come home from Congress and shut himself alone in his rooms for weeks at a time. Enfeebled, a little wasted, he lay for two years staring into the past. Only vestiges remained of the dominating speaker that he had once been. His voice still rolled, deep and resonant. The hair was still thick, but grizzled and white. Usually a fat cigar burned on the table beside him.

He would talk musingly, a bit wistfully, of things as they used to be, of the days when he and Tom Reed were intimates down in Washington, of his library which he sadly missed. Suddenly he would inquire: "And who won the declamatory contest at home?" or, "What was the senior class play?" He followed the activities of young people with almost childlike eagerness,

with more interest indeed than he evinced toward any one else in his home town.

Several months before his death he prepared an oration to be read at his funeral. Mrs. Mildred Yule Phelps of West Branch, whose father had been an intimate friend of Mr. Cousins, was selected by the dying man to read his posthumous address.

The closing lines of his final message contain something of the thought he had so often expressed for others on similar occasions. In death he turned from his past and spoke of the future. Yet there is a hint of futility and resignation in his words. "And so to-day at the last parting of the ways, we have done all that can be done for our friend — we have come to go part way home with him; all that can be done by mortal man until immortality in whatsoever form or essence shall reveal what the living cannot know of vital existence beyond our ken, and until we shall be like unto him in state, and participate in whatever vision dawns at the inexorable door of death."

He died on June 19, 1933.

VIRGINIA MAXSON