

The Man He Was

The public knows the greatness of George D. Perkins, but his intimate associates had better opportunity to know to the full his goodness. It was my privilege to know him intimately for twenty years, during which period, except for a few months, I was a member of the editorial staff of *The Sioux City Journal*. It was impossible to come into close contact with him, whether in the work of carrying on his great newspaper or in any common concern, without being impressed, not only by his great ability, but also by his kindly impulses, by the good heart of him. This side of him had much influence in making him so trusted by all who had to do with him.

Mr. Perkins was not a man who in common parlance is called a "mixer": he was too honest and sincere for that. He never would rush to throw his arms about one's neck and exclaim: "My dear fellow, isn't there something I can do for you?" Some, who did not know him or knew him only casually, called him "cold". But there was in him that which made him respond with sympathy, with loyalty, with kindly helpfulness to all who were engaged in worthy effort, especially to young men striving to get on by good work, but above all, to any one in distress or difficulty. All his life he was

most likely to be encountered where some substantial thing was to be considered or done. Those who met him in his own business or in committee, convention, or conference on any public concern — to all of which he gave unstintingly of his time and labor — could not fail to feel the kindness of his disposition toward all others likewise engaged. They came to depend on him, to turn to him in perplexity or when important decisions were to be made — sure of his warm friendliness as well as of his sound judgment.

So he was regarded even from young manhood by the leading men of his own community and of his State — by big men everywhere. His modesty made him only the more highly appreciated by such men. He was no attitudinizer, he never sought the spotlight. His sole aim was to be helpful to those who, with him, were trying to do the real and needful thing. He was careless only as to who might get the credit in rumor and public report.

When he entered Congress in 1891, Mr. Perkins did not come as a stranger to his Iowa colleagues or to the leading men at Washington. He already had a reputation reaching far beyond the West. Indeed, he was regarded almost as much a representative of South Dakota and Nebraska as of Iowa, and he was such in fact. He at once was received with confidence. Iowa then was represented by a delegation of remarkable brilliance, ability, and influence. Its Senators were William B. Allison and James F.

Wilson, while among the members of the House during Perkins's four terms were John H. Gear, George M. Curtis, Samuel M. Clarke, David B. Henderson, Robert J. Cousins, John F. Lacey, John A. T. Hull, William P. Hepburn, and Jonathan P. Dolliver. Other leading Republicans were "Uncle Joe" Cannon, John Dalzell, Nelson Dingley, and Charles A. Boutelle, while on the Democratic side were Champ Clark, Charles F. Crisp, Richard P. Bland, and William Jennings Bryan. When Thomas B. Reed became Speaker in 1895 he recognized the marked ability of Mr. Perkins even more by the confidence with which he was accustomed to advise with him than in the formal organization of the House. He was made chairman of the Committee on Printing, and was practically the whole committee, watching the vast business of the government printing as competently and conscientiously as that of his own at home. It was he who caused the installation of typesetting machines and introduced many other important reforms in the government printing office.

Mr. Perkins, as has been said, stood high in the confidence and esteem of Thomas B. Reed, Speaker of the House. I recall that one day early in the first administration of President McKinley I had occasion to go to Mr. Perkins's committee room, accompanied by Mr. E. P. Heizer, who had charge of the *Journal* when Mr. Perkins was in Washington. We were informed in the anteroom that Mr. Perkins

was engaged in a conference: the House had not yet convened. I made an excuse to go into Mr. Perkins's room, and this was the conference—four men sitting around in easy chairs, smoking and chatting. But who were the men? One was the Speaker of the House, and the other two were subsequent Speakers, Colonel Dave Henderson and "Uncle Joe" Cannon. That was the kind of men with whom Mr. Perkins kept company. And not for mere entertainment or pastime; for at that moment, as I later learned, a matter of large importance had just been decided. On the floor of the House much oratorical sound and fury were expended on it, much printed in the newspapers, but the real decision had been reached that morning at the informal meeting in Mr. Perkins's committee room.

My work as a writer of political news for the *Journal* took me to political conventions, conferences, caucuses, rallies, and "gatherings" of both the Republican and Democratic parties, not only in Iowa, but also in our neighboring States of Nebraska and South Dakota to which Sioux City is a gateway. Mr. Perkins was intensely interested in all things of a political nature. Every time I returned from these meetings it was my unvarying custom to go directly to his office—the little front room in the *Journal* building—and give him a first hand account of the occurrences, tell him what happened on the inside, and picture all the moves and countermoves of the pre-convention hours. It was

at times like these that my chief was at his best. He enjoyed the narratives and his comments hit center, like the "SNAP SHOTS" he wrote for the Sunday edition. He was a master of wit and satire, and his sarcasm was of the withering brand.

But he was a man of kind heart and he could be tender, too, and gentle. The oft repeated statement that he never spoke a word of praise for the work of any of the writers on his staff is not true. I have seen him put his finger on some inconspicuous story in the *Journal*, as he scanned his own particular copy of the paper in the morning — and he proof-read it through every day, from the head of column one, front page, down through the want ads — and heard him say: "That's good writing"; or, "That's well written"; or, "That's a fine piece of reporting." To be sure, he was critical, but that was because the *Journal* was his very life and it was his nature to be careful and painstaking. He actually would grieve over mistakes in the *Journal* which the ordinary layman never would see, or would regard as of no consequence. But it was this trait that made the *Journal* a model for other newspapers and caused the *Washington Post*, so long ago as 1894, to refer to it as presenting the finest typographical appearance of any newspaper in the United States published in a city of less than a hundred thousand population. It was also these high standards of the editor which made the *Journal* a training school for so great a number who chose journalism for their

life work, not a few of whom have achieved fame and wide influence, and not one of whom ever failed to realize and acknowledge with gratitude his debt to Mr. Perkins for invaluable training and help. And he always followed their careers with the solicitous interest of a father for sons who have gone out to new fields.

Newspaper men at a distance wondered from the very first that a newspaper of the high standard of the *Journal* in typography, news service, and all round excellence — far superior to those published in cities of many times the population of Sioux City — could be produced in so small a town. The explanation was Mr. Perkins himself — his industry and capacity. In the early days he did the work of half a dozen men. His brother, Henry A., who had immediate charge of the business office, was a good writer and thorough newspaper man, and helped greatly in the daily news work. Their sister, Mrs. Boehmler, who taught in the public schools, was also a talented writer, and regularly contributed to the news, besides conducting the society department. The whole family helped. In those days, when the staff was limited in number, every member had to multiply himself, and the hours were long. All naturally followed the inspiring example of the chief, feeling that he knew and appreciated good work, and took pride in their tasks.

I must recur to the gentle, lovable side of the character of Mr. Perkins, as all must do who really

knew the man. I would dwell upon his love for his mother and his tender care for her in her old age — to that grand, good mother to whom he owed so much. She was an example of all that is best in womanhood, and was cared for with unceasing devotion by the son whose inspiration she still was in his manhood as she had been in his boyhood and youth.

One episode in the life of Mr. Perkins, eloquent of the man's real nature, ought not to be omitted, though it was one of which he rarely spoke and of which the circumstances mainly had to be gathered from others — his experience as a soldier in the Civil War. He enlisted as a private on August 12, 1862. Only a year and a half before, he and his elder brother, by means of their small joint savings, had founded the *Cedar Falls Gazette*, a weekly paper. The older brother had married. There was the mother and the infant newspaper to maintain. George felt it was his duty to answer the call of Lincoln for men to save the country. Three months later, at Helena, Arkansas, after a long week of grilling military duty, he stood guard one night in a downpour of cold rain, though ill and burning with fever, refusing to ask to be excused. He stood guard until regularly relieved. Then, overcome with exhaustion and pain, he fell to the ground. He was borne away, desperately ill, and when the regiment moved on, he had to be transferred to Jefferson Barracks in St. Louis. His brother found him in a hospital there, unable to speak above a whisper,

emaciated to a skeleton, and his bones visible through the skin. The army doctors said that to try to move him meant death and that his case was hopeless. However, he was discharged on January 12, 1863. By a miracle, they finally succeeded in getting him home alive and, after lying between life and death for a long year, he slowly began to mend. Then, for another long year, when unable to sit in a chair for more than half an hour at a time, he would write or do something tending to help his brother with their newspaper. George D. Perkins, although entitled under the law to a pension, never applied for one and never received a dollar of pension money. In a writing not intended for publication, never published until his death, he said with characteristic modesty: "The only satisfaction I have been able to extract from my army experience, aside from contemplation of my good intentions, has been the fact that I really did serve, though not at all gloriously, the better part of three years, and that I was more than once in hazard of my life without losing it; for I was painfully slow with the recovery of my health."

Unlike most men who are trained writers, Mr. Perkins was a public speaker of great force. His voice was strong and carried far, but he never tore a passion to tatters. The editorial process, with him, had become instinctive; that is, in speaking as in writing, he edited and criticized as he proceeded, choosing the right word, the pertinent phrase, the

correct sentence, without the hesitation or the repetition which are such common and distressing faults of so many public speakers. He was the reverse of the adjectival and adverbial orator. This does not mean that his addresses were devoid of ornament, but that they never were marred by excess of ornament. By nature he was full of sentiment, but his good judgment and his earnestness for the main point, which was a conviction, were restraints always efficient.

His speeches in political campaigns were never written out in full, though they were prepared with great care, study, and research. He collected all available information and data, analyzed it, absorbed it, classified it, and always was ready on occasion to vary both the matter and the manner of his addresses. Even when he wrote out an address, he rarely read or referred to the writing. In such cases there always were wide variations from the written form in language, imagery, and illustration, and generally with betterment, so quick and consecutive were his mental operations.

He was in great demand as an orator for special occasions, particularly in his later years. Some of these addresses were widely published and read. Among these may be mentioned the "Eulogy of David B. Henderson" at the funeral in Dubuque on February 25, 1906; the address on "Newspapers and the Law" before the Iowa Pioneer Lawmakers' Association in Des Moines on March 21, 1906; the

address at the dedication of the Carnegie Library at Cedar Falls on September 24, 1903; the address on "Shortcomings of Modern Education" before the Iowa State Teachers' Association at Council Bluffs on October 24, 1903; the address on "Education as Related to Life" at the Iowa State University commencement on June 15, 1904; and the address on "Abraham Lincoln" at the centennial anniversary in Sioux City on February 12, 1909. The last cited was a discourse of remarkable power and discrimination, for all his life Lincoln had been his beau ideal of a man, and a statesman whose character he had studied with loving enthusiasm.

The development of Mr. Perkins, during his later years, into one of the most adept and acceptable after-dinner speakers in the West was a surprise to many who did not know him well. During all his life he had been a busy man, intensely occupied with serious affairs. But latterly came more leisure and opportunity for those contacts with his fellow men for which he always yearned. What so delighted them then always had been in the man — his good fellowship, quick wit, humor, culture, his genuine kindness of feeling — only these qualities had not had free course. The men about him in this work and those who had to do with him in other concerns knew well what was in his soul, and they always loved him for it as later all the world came to have affection for him when they knew him as he was.

In stature Mr. Perkins was barely up to medium

height, and naturally rather spare. As he grew older, he became somewhat stocky, though never burdensomely corpulent. The face was massive, the features strong but expressive. The most impressive feature, beneath a spacious forehead, was the eye, large, keen, and deep, which met you with absolute directness. The impression of the whole was that of strength, of firmness, of sincerity, of honesty — but not more of strength than of kindness. And this impression was true to the man.

These are only glimpses of the man. The place of George D. Perkins as a public character is and long has been fixed and will stand long after the generation in which he lived has passed away. But that which those who were closely associated with him and knew him best will remember longest and most tenderly cherish was his affectionate impulses and the goodness of his soul. I can best illustrate these impulses and this goodness by quoting from a letter which Mr. Perkins wrote me in December, 1904. At that time I had worked on the *Journal* a little more than ten years. I thought I saw an opportunity to get into a paying business, so I had a talk with Mr. Perkins and told him of my plans. He was exceedingly kind to me, and when we shook hands and said good-bye, his attitude toward me was as near that of a father as I had ever known. The following day was Christmas. That morning I found lying upon my typewriter a letter from the chief. It began with a line saying he wanted to

repeat in writing what he had said the day before in conversation. And then he added:

“I am sorry on my own account and for The Journal to have you go away. I hope good luck may keep you company, and that the good fortune which may come to you will not estrange you from the place you have so long filled in The Journal office. You have not only been a faithful, competent and intelligent worker, but you also have been a good friend. You will be missed from your accustomed round by a wide circle of friends, and it will seem to them all, I am sure, as if The Journal had lost a strong arm; but among these friends, I desire to say that I want to be remembered among the best. You have done me many kindnesses, personal to myself, and you have served The Journal as if it were your own. The many friends you have made here you have made the friends of The Journal, and that not only proves your goodness but it is proof also of your tact and good judgment. It is a pleasure to me to recall that in all the years you have been here there has never been complaint between us, and for whatever credit there is in this I give more to you than I claim for myself. If I have some good sides and have been able to reveal them to you I shall have something to remember you for with gratitude while I live. Your success in the place you have so long filled in The Journal office has come of your love of the work and what you said of your relations here will abide with me as a delight.

I shall always be glad to hear of your good fortune and of anything coming your way to add to the pleasure of living.”

In a private letter, not intended for publication, summarizing his life work as editor of *The Sioux City Journal*, Mr. Perkins said: “I have always been fortunate in having the assistance of faithful and competent men, to whom, in much of the service, I have, by reason of their better qualifications, been subordinate.”

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