

# THE LYCEUM KING.

## What James Redpath Knows About Lyceums.

### The Origin and Growth of the American Lecture System.

#### A Series of Interviews in the San Francisco Chronicle.

The San Francisco Sunday Chronicle has begun the publication of a series of interviews with James Redpath, whom Barnum styles the "King of the Lyceum Managers," giving the history of our lecture system and entertaining reminiscences of the famous orators whose manager he has been.

The series includes sketches and anecdotes of Gough, Wendell Phillips, Beecher, Anna Dickinson, Mrs. Livermore, Colonel Ingersoll, Wilkie Collins, Ben. Butler, Barnum, General Banks, George MacDonald, John G. Saxe, Helen Potter, Bellew the reader (the original of Thackeray's "Charles Honeymoon"), Charlotte Cushman, Longfellow, Garrison, Zach Chandler, John Brown, Jenkins, the author of "Ginx's Baby;" Adirondack Murray, Hayes, the arctic explorer; Du Chaillu, the African explorer; Greeley, Nasby, Mark Twain, Bret Harte, Josh Billings, Grant—regarded as a talker—and a number of others. In the first interview Mr. Redpath says that lyceum-lecturing originated in England about forty years ago, having been started as an educational movement by Lord Brougham and others. Political and religious questions, however, were vigorously ruled out of the list of topics treated, and the consequence is that in that country lecturing has almost died out.

Reporter—How do prices paid to lecturers in England compare with the prices paid here?  
J. R.—First-class lecturers in the United States receive from \$75 to \$500, according to their reputation and the locality where they lecture; and reputation in this sense means what dramatic managers call "draft"—whereas in England, from £1 to £3 is a good fee; and even Gladstone did not get more than £5 or £25. I once paid Beecher \$1000 for a lecture in Boston; I paid Gough every season \$500 in Boston; I have paid Ingersoll as high or about \$700. But Ingersoll's fee was a share of the receipts; and once here in San Francisco his share was, I believe, \$1200. That is

#### The Highest Fee Ever Paid

either as a certainty. No one but Beecher ever received so high a certainty or on "sharing terms" in America as \$1000, and I only paid that to secure him exclusively for Boston—and he also lectured twelve times in New England under the same contract for \$300 a night. The highest average fee is Gough's—\$250 per night for the season. He rarely talks for \$200, and then only because he insists on going to places where they have always engaged him and where that is all they can afford.

Rep.—How do English lecturers compare with American lecturers?

J. R.—As their fees compare. England has produced only half a dozen lecturers who would rank as first class here, and not one of them is or was the equal of Beecher, Gough or Phillips. George Dawson was the best, and he failed here. He is dead. I brought him out here. His literary style was as pure as John Bunyan's, and as artistic as Goldsmith's; but his tone of thought was Thackerayan—full of muffled sneers, cold and realistic; he had no emotion, no ardor, no imagination. Punshon and Vincent ranked next. Punshon is a coarse-grained and lesser Beecher, with some of Beecher's power and imagination, but lacking his glowing and poetical rhetoric. Vincent when I heard him, as a boy, was a duodecimo Gough; later, when he was here, his voice, as Wendell Phillips said to me, sounded as if it came up through two thick beef-steaks and a jug of beer. He was a strong speaker—but no Beecher or Gough. But Mr. Hughes—the author of "Tom Brown at Oxford"—hit the truth when I called on him in London in company with Thomas Nast. "Mr. Redpath," he said, after I had made him an offer to return here to lecture, "do you know there is nothing that astonishes us English so much as to see you Americans come over here for lecturers. Why, sir, I can name

#### All the Orators of England

on the fingers of one hand, while you are a nation of orators." I didn't relieve his astonishment as I could have done by telling him the whole truth—which was that here, lecturing, aside from its literary qualities, was a branch of the show business, and that the people here would be willing to pay fifty cents to see him, even although they knew him to be a poor speaker. The best foreign lecturer we have ever had is William Parsons, and he is an Irishman who has come over every year for ten years past.

Reporter—To what do you attribute the decay of eloquence in England, or our superiority? Have you any theory about it?

J. R.—Why, child of error, I lived in Boston fifteen years, and no man ever did live there one year without having a theory of the universe and all it contains. Seems to me you are sarcastic in that question.

Reporter—I assure you—

J. R.—Don't. I think the same cause that arrested the inventive genius of the Chinese—the stupidity of their rulers. There has not been a man on the throne of England since Cromwell with brains enough to act as one of Dennis Kearney's presidents at his sand-lot meetings. The aristocracy are stupid. They could only make their stupidity respected by creating a public opinion that cried down oratory. Even the best orators—except Gladstone and Bright—pretend not to be able to speak well, and stammer and hem and haw as they deliver really eloquent speeches—Disraeli for example. The English ruling classes have made eloquent utterance—one of the highest and rarest and most noble of all human gifts—take a rank below the most stolid scientific or political drudgery. Social science statisticians really rank above poets there in public estimation, and poets are universally held to be entitled to no respect in interpreting political duties. Outside of Gladstone, Bright and Beaconsfield they have not a political orator in all England who could compare with Senator Booth, Colonel Baker or Tom Fitch.

Reporter—But Spurgeon?

J. R.—We have dozens of orators his equal and several who are superior to him. He is

#### Beecher Without Wings—

earnest, clear and direct; but without fancy, imagery, or a spark of true genius. If ever he comes over here his reputation as an orator will fall to zero, excepting among religious enthusiasts, who will only weigh what he says, not how he says it. And it is the how as well as the what that makes the orator. But let me go back to the history of the lyceum. It is dead in England—it never was really alive there. It has prospered in America because our people justly regard eloquence of speech as a rare and benign gift, and do honor to it. Here, almost as soon as the lecture system was established in England, it was inaugurated in Boston. Among the earliest lecturers were Edward Everett, Oliver Wendell Holmes, James Russell Lowell, Wendell Phillips, Giles, an Irish lecturer, John G. Gough (who was soon drawn into it from the temperance field, although he was not among its founders), E. P. Whipple, Holland, and, I think, Winthrop, also. It was founded on the same idea as in England—the duty of the cultivated classes to educate the masses. Mercantile associations took it up and it soon spread all over the north. It never crossed the line of the old slave states, and it never has taken root in any of those states, even since the war. Gough, Ingersoll, Beecher and Mrs. Livermore, I believe are the only lecturers who have ever "scored great hits" in any of the southern states. The anti-slavery element began to seize the lyceum at an early date with Wendell Phillips and Theodore Parker as its leaders, and when the Kansas struggle resulted in the birth of the Republican party the Free-soil spirit speedily captured it. The literary platform became a great political power, for in the teeth and eyes of palatial journals and dumb pulpits it boldly uttered the American idea. Phillips, Parker, Beecher, Curtis, Anna Dickinson, Theodore Tilton and other Republican and anti-slavery orators became the favorites of lyceum audiences, and practically drove the old lecturers—mostly the distinctively "literary fellows"—from the platform into their studies to weep over its "degeneracy." Literary men, as a rule, are poor lecturers; they mistake essay-reading for oratory, and in writing about the "decline" of the lyceum they mistake

#### Baby Napkins for Shrouds.

It was not dead—it had only grown up to the times. Then came the war. The lyceum was forged and pressed into the service of patriotism. People soon had too much war talk—in journals, lyceums and pulpits—and the general interest in lecturing declined. The western associations dissolved. It did look for a year or two as if lecturing was dead. At this time the bureau system sprang up, and every effort was made to bring in new men with fresh ideas, and to make literary and scientific topics popular. Music was introduced as a distinct novelty, and soon the lyceum was reinvigorated. The business for the last four years has been very dull; but this season it promises to bear a rich harvest for the great talkers and singers, for music is now everywhere, as it ought to be, an equal partner with oratory in the lyceum honors and rewards.

Reporter—Then you mean to say that lecturing is as popular as ever?

J. R.—I mean to say that no eloquent literary orator fails to secure all the lecture engagements he can fill, and that he gets higher prices here than in any other part of the world; and that the only "decline" the lyceum has seen arises from the development of national character. People will not listen to men now unless they have the gift of eloquence; and "it's greatly to their credit" that they refuse to hear men, however eminent as writers, for example, unless they are also orators.

Rep.—How many lecture courses are there in the United States?

J. R.—No one can tell, because there are so many church courses, especially among the Methodists and Baptists; but I suppose there are 2000 or 3000.

Rep.—How many lectures do they give in a season?

J. R.—From six to ten. But, then, in Boston, Philadelphia, New York and Baltimore, and perhaps elsewhere, there are innumerable courses of

scientific lectures given free by the Lowell Institute, by different societies, by the Peabody Institute, by the American Geographical Society and in Cooper Institute. These are not counted in the list of lyceum courses. The Lowell Institute in Boston gives a great number of courses by eminent scientific and literary men on the sciences and literature every season; and, as a rule, they are well attended. The universities ought to be located in great cities, and all their lecturers ought to lecture, not only to the students, but to the public—their doors ought to be open to every one without fee. Then they would justify the money spent on them. The general public will not support scientific courses, but they would attend them if they were free.