

The Stolen Speech

by Joseph Alexander Altsheler, 1862-1919

Published: 1905

in »The Delineator«

Re-published: 2016

Richard M. Woodward



The clerk, speaking with great distinctness, finished the reading of the bill, and then a deep hum of interest ran through the House. No other measure offered during the session had excited half as much interest as this proposal of Mr. Moore's to regulate the schools of the State according to a new system, drastic, nay revolutionary in its character. The question was already a sore one. A committee, after a long examination, had made a severe report upon existing methods, stating unanimously that the schools were antiquated and decidedly inferior to those of other States.

The pride of the people, and also that of the House and Senate, had been touched. Many of the members had come to the aid of the old system, and others had publicly announced that they would support the committee. It was a foregone conclusion that the Legislature would divide seriously on the question and the

division would not be partisan. Republicans and Democrats alike would be found in the attack and the defense.

Now Mr. Moore had introduced his measure, and the field was cleared for the battle. The bill was referred to a committee with instructions to report, and the day's session of the House adjourned. But members and spectators talked of nothing else as they passed out.

Bob Whitney, the young member from Fulton County, and several friends, walked slowly down the aisle, discussing the measure and wondering whether it would pass. Whitney, tall, blue-eyed, handsome and under thirty, was a favorite in the House. Moreover he was its first orator, a man born with the gift of golden speech, and obviously destined to a high career. He was in love, too, with Evelyn Carter, the handsome daughter of the Lieutenant-Governor, and rumor said that she did not look upon him with disfavor.

As Whitney stood upon the Capitol steps he forgot for a moment the perplexing bill. A deep snow had fallen about a week before, followed by a rain which in a half hour or so gave way to intense cold. Very little of the snow had melted, but the rain had frozen upon its surface and the world was literally sheathed in a coat of silvery-white armor. The sun shone bright but frosty and cold, the white hills threw back its gleams in a million spearpoints of silver and gold, the surface of the frozen river flashed and glittered too, and the myriads of icicles, hanging like spears from the roofs, seemed now and then to be tipped with flame.

Paths had been broken through the sheet of ice and the snow beneath, and down the Capitol grounds and along the city streets the snow was heaped on either side of the walks in great white walls.

Whitney, still drawing deep breaths of the cold, bracing air, walked between the white walls replying to the stray words of friends whom he met, but thinking now neither of them nor of the bill. He had the best of reasons for this detachment because he was on his way to the railroad station to meet Evelyn Carter, who was more interesting and far more attractive than any bill could ever possibly be even to an ambitious and rising young politician.

She had been gone only a week, yet the glittering world glittered all the more for him because she was coming. There was in him the strain of sentiment, the touch of poetry which an orator, such as he, must have, and he was consciously willing to attribute much of the beauty about him to her speedy arrival. He smiled because he was pleased, and others, seeing the smile, smiled contagiously.

Life seemed very full to Whitney that morning. After some vexing hours he had found his own mind and was free from doubt. He loved Evelyn Carter, and many little signs inspired him with confidence that he did not love in vain; hence the reasons were numerous and good why he should hold his head high and include the whole world in his happy smile.

He reached the station but did not enter; instead he preferred to stand on the asphalt, beside the tracks, and gaze into the west, whence the train bearing her would appear. The capital lay in a valley and the encircling line of high hills was cut by two deep clefts, through one of which the river flowed, while the railroad came by the other. From the station neither cleft was visible and to anyone standing there the wall of hills would seem complete; so far as the eye was concerned the little city was its own little world.

But the keen eye of Whitney saw a faint blur appear against the dazzling blue of the western sky; the train showed in the cleft and then came swiftly into the station. He was at the step when Evelyn Carter came down, helping her to the asphalt, although none was more sure-footed than she.

She was warm, glowing, wrapped in furs, her cheeks, rosy at any time, red now with the frost, and her eyes brilliant with animation and the pleasure of seeing him again. She was beautiful in a thoroughly sane and wholesome way, full of life, having alike the wish and the ability to enjoy.

"How pleasant it is to be back!" she exclaimed. "What a snug little town it is! And how it makes one feel at home!"

"I hope it isn't the town alone," said Whitney. "Aren't you glad to see me?"

"Oh, well, a little bit, since you ask me," she laughed.

"Your father is detained at the Capitol and I asked to be the delegate to meet you. There is a cab at the corner."

"We won't take it. Come, let's walk; if this were only a country road I'd race you home for a prize. I feel fine enough to do it, and I'd beat you, too."

"Since we're not allowed to run, we'll make it a walk. I'm glad you don't want a cab."

It was a half mile by the most direct route to Mr. Carter's house on the far side of the river, but the two chose another way, which was a full mile, and they wished that it was twice as much. As they swung along, they breathed freely and easily, and the color in their cheeks deepened.

"I heard of the bill before I came down, she said. "The papers up there were talking about it; they say it's going to arouse the whole State."

"Naturally; it's radical, revolutionary."

"And they said that nobody knew how anybody else was going to vote."

"That is true: there is no partisanship in this matter, and there can be none; every member should vote strictly according to his personal judgment."

"Then it is sure to be the feature of the session. Oh, what a great parliamentary fight is coming."

She looked at him eagerly, her eyes sparkling. He met her glance and smiled in sympathy.

"And there will be grand debates," she continued. "What a chance to make a reputation! And you will be in it, won't you?"

"I hope to be," he said, still smiling.

But she stopped suddenly, and a look of dismay replaced the brilliant sparkle that was shining in her eyes.

"That is if you can make up your mind about the bill," she said ruefully. "I've heard that the members just don't know what to do, and neither you nor anybody else can make a great speech without convictions."

"But I have convictions about this bill," he said. "I know how I am going to work and vote."

"And you will tell me."

"Of course, I will tell you, but not until I come to see you this evening. See, we are going through a field now, and there is nobody in sight. A hundred yards for a box of chocolates!"

She raised her skirts a little, and was gone like a flash. When Whitney reached the end of the field she was there, flushed and triumphant.

“Be sure you bring those chocolates when you come this evening,” she said, and Whitney was glad to confirm his losing wager.

He left her at the door of her father’s house—because he was required to do so—and returned to the heart of the city. Here the bill, and the great light, sure to come over it, occupied the attention of all, and Whitney was soon one of the crowd in the lobby of the big hotel.

The fight over the measure was already on. The committee of reference had not yet reported, but it would do so presently and the members of both House and Senate were beginning to take sides; the newspapers of the State were doing likewise, and public opinion, about equally divided, was coming into the capital in a swelling volume. Barker perceived, with increasing clearness, that it was a great opportunity for a man with his oratorical powers to make a reputation, and he thought now of little else.

Late one afternoon he strolled from the hotel toward the Capitol, and on the way he was joined by his friend, Harkins. The two said little and walked slowly.

The cold had not relaxed its grip a particle. The surface of the snow was still a sheet of ice, and on the hills every bough and twig was in shining mail. The sinking sun poured over it all a flood of yellow light.

Barker glanced up once, but he was dazzled by the sunlight reflected in a blaze of gold from the dome of the Capitol, and he turned his eyes back to the snow and his mind to the bill. Then he and Harkins began, to talk about it again, and they entered the Capitol, where Barker wanted to see the clerk of the Court of Appeals about an entry.

The court had adjourned some time since, and the clerk was gone. The two turned away, but when they were in the corridor they saw another couple approaching and this couple were a man and a woman, Bob Whitney and Evelyn Carter.

“They are going into the Court of Appeals chamber,” said Barker. “Now, I wonder what they can want there!”

“Oh, a quiet little exchange of confidence,” said Mr. Harkins with a short, but not bad-humored laugh.

“Whitney is dead in love with the girl and I guess she’s worth it. It’s a rest for tired eyes to look at her, and they say she’s got a real mind, too.”

“She has,” said young Barker with emphasis, and then he added, with a certain amount of envy in his tone, “so has Whitney; he’s sure to make a great speech on this school-bill, one that will attract the attention of the whole State.”

The lobbyist again laughed in a dry, but on the whole good-humored, way.

“I’ll wager you anything that the school-bill is not in Whitney’s mind now,” he said. “No, sir, no such dry subject for him; it’s love’s young dream; that musty old Court of Appeals room will hear some sweet confidences. I wish I were young enough and handsome enough to be in his place.”

Whitney and Evelyn, absorbed in other thoughts, did not see Barker and Harkins, and passed into the court chamber, the big door of which stood wide open.

Presently Barker and the lobbyist, who lingered because they had nothing else to do, heard the sound of a voice now rising, now falling, but without cessation, coming from the great chamber.

"That doesn't sound like your sweet nothings," said Barker with sour sarcasm. "A man wouldn't make love to a girl in that oratorical pitch and tone. At least, I'm sure I wouldn't."

Mr. Harkins did not reply at once, but bent his head forward in the attitude of one who listens. Mr. Harkins never had any particular objection to listening, when time and place were suitable.

"I was wrong," he said presently. "That's Whitney's voice, but he's not making love, he's making a speech."

The face of the lobbyist had changed suddenly. It was alight with interest. The eyes sparkled and the lips parted. Without saying another word he walked to the door of the court room and looked in. There he listened intently for a minute or two, then he looked back and beckoned to Barker, who came obediently.

"Whitney is making a speech sure enough," whispered the lobbyist, a trace of excitement showing in his tone, "and it's a great one. Just listen."

"By Jove, he's rehearsing his great speech and its against the bill; he thinks as I do!" whispered Barker.

Whitney did not speak in a loud tone, but within the more restricted range he gave play to all the skill and graces of the orator; irony, contempt and anger were shown alike in his voice and expression, and the girl before him more than once clapped her gloved hands together, while her eyes sparkled with admiration. Nor could Barker restrain his own silent tribute. He knew that it was a great speech, and a feeling of jealousy and envy leaped into life. He, too, was an orator, why could he not have thought of those things which must appeal so powerfully to the mind of every listener? It seemed to him that nothing, could be left of the bill after Whitney got through with it.

The hand of the lobbyist presently fell gently upon the shoulder of Barker and drew him inside the room. Near the walls are some benches for spectators and they have very high backs. The two sank down in the last bench where they could hear well and yet were hidden by the back of the one in front of them. "I don't want to miss any of that speech and this is a better place than the hall," murmured Mr. Harkins. Mr. Barker did not reply, as he was busy just then with other thoughts. His anger against Whitney was increasing, because he knew the speech to be better than any that he could ever possibly prepare.

It was a long speech, but so good that the time of delivery seemed short, and when Whitney finished Evelyn applauded with great enthusiasm.

"It was splendidly done," she said proudly, when he came down from the dais.

He smiled, not with vanity, but with fondness for her.

"You are partial," he said; "you are not a fair judge."

"Oh, yes, I am fair; if my partiality were to influence me at all it would make me more critical."

She rose from the attorney's chair and stood beside Whitney. The sun was far down the western slope, and the windows glittered under its beams as if with flame. The two were in the heart of the glow, and for a few moments they were

silent. Perhaps she was thinking of her hero's coming triumph. Then she spoke of the late hour.

"See," she said, "it is almost night; they will soon be locking up the Capitol."

They went out together, and neither saw the two figures behind the high-backed seat; but when they were gone the lobbyist rose up and spoke questioningly to the member.

"What do you think of it?" he asked.

"Great," replied Barker in brief melancholy—was still thinking how much better it was than his own speech could be.

"You are an orator, too," said the lobbyist with gentle flattery.

"But I can't equal that," said the member despondently.

Mr. Harkins glanced at the windows, still touched with western fire, and then at the desk of the judges, upon which lay something white. He started, but so slightly that his companion did not see the movement, and then said in a tone of the utmost indifference: "Whitney is a careless fellow; he has gone away and left the manuscript of his speech."

"That won't bother him, he knows it by heart now; he never looked at it once while he was speaking there."

Anyhow, I'll get it and give it back to him," said the lobbyist, and, crossing the room, he took the manuscript from the desk and returned to Barker."

"There are good arguments in this," he said, thoughtfully, tapping the paper against his left hand; "but others will probably think of them before the fight over the bill comes to a head."

"Do you think so?" asked Barker as he glanced out of the window and saw Whitney, and Evelyn walking side by side down the walk through the Capitol grounds.

"Undoubtedly. Whitney has here the arguments at which any man must arrive if he studies long and hard about the bill. I don't like Whitney; but he has ability. However, there are others, too, who have ability."

"I am glad to hear what you say about this speech," said Mr. Barker. "I was of that opinion, but I rather doubted myself until you confirmed me in it."

The lobbyist gave Mr. Barker one of those quick, covert glances of his that were so wonderfully penetrating. Under his easy manner he concealed a deep dislike for Whitney, who had persistently ignored him, and he wished to see him taken down.

"I wonder if Whitney has changed anything in his speech since he wrote this," said Mr. Barker speculatively.

"It's easy enough to see," said Mr. Harkins. Here, take it along to your room and look it over, and if he has changed anything since he wrote it you can tell just how his mind works."

He thrust the manuscript into Barker's hands in a careless manner, as much as to say: "It's merely a suggestion that I make; but it's hardly worth bothering about."

"Whitney is a bright fellow. I admit," repeated Mr. Harkins as they walked on, "but not very deep. A slower man would be certain to arrive at the arguments he used in that speech, and the slower man also would go much farther. It seems to me, Barker, that I've heard you saying much the same things."

"Do you think so?" asked Barker absently.

“As I turn the matter over in my mind I am sure of it. If I were a member of the House I would speak early when the great debate comes, because some are bound to think of the same things, and then I should have said them first. Jove, how cold it grows!”

He pulled the high collar of his overcoat about his ears and stamped his feet, as if he were making a great effort to keep warm. He did not allude again to the school-bill; but he shot more than one penetrating glance from under those lowered lids at the young member. A few yards beyond the Capitol grounds they parted, Mr. Harkins pleading an early dinner and a call that he must make soon afterward.

Left alone, Barker walked on, various thoughts following one another through his mind. His feeling of anger against Whitney endured, and, good as the speech was, he began to feel, too, that Harkins was right; those arguments would have come to him in time, and he also was an orator.

He met nobody; the bitter cold had driven all from the streets and there was nothing to change the current of his thoughts. When he reached his room and took off his overcoat the little bundle of paper in the pocket forced itself upon his attention and he took out the manuscript again.

He sat there long, going over the speech again and again, every word of it sinking into his mind, until his brain contained an ineffaceable photograph of the whole. Then he threw the manuscript in the fire and when the last fragment was burned he went to bed.

The fight over the school-bill came rapidly to its climax, and the interest was all the more keen and thrilling on that account. The committee to which it had been referred made a divided report, a majority for the bill and a minority against it. Many of the leading members who would speak upon the question declined to state their views in advance; owing to the complete lack of party politics in the matter there was no necessity of committing themselves so early and they enjoyed this rare freedom. When people asked Barker how he was going to speak and vote he would shake his head and say, while his eye lighted up with a fine twinkle, “Old man, don’t press me; this is a hard question and I may change my mind at the very last moment.”

Illustration:

Evelyn was there, near the front

The fateful day came at last, and the bill was brought up in the House. Everybody was present; the crush in the lobbies was so great that all were breathless and the whole chamber glowed with the vivid colors of the ladies’ dresses. Evelyn was there, near the front, where she could look down upon the members and where her eyes could meet Whitney’s every time he looked up. She was bright-eyed, eager and full of confidence. In the corner sat Mr. Harkins, quiet and watchful, yet not without genial words for old friends. On the floor of the house was Mr. Barker, bent somewhat over his desk, and never looking once at the balconies.

The pages tiptoed about, the members moved but little, there was throughout the House the intent, expectant silence that betokens the expected coming of some

great event. Despite the report of the committee nobody knew what the fate of the bill was going to be, they could not even guess.

The speeches began, two or three of minor importance were made, and then up sprang Mr. Barker, who was promptly recognized by the speaker. A thrill ran through the assembly. Mr. Barker, it was known, had the gift of oratory, and lately it was reported that he, too, like Whitney, would make a great speech. The skirmishers were out of the way and the big guns were opening fire.

Mr. Barker made skilful use of the preliminary pause that is of so much value to an orator, demanding as it were the attention of the audience and keying it up to the proper pitch. His eye rested a moment on Whitney, and then passed quickly on, before the look could be returned.

He lifted his hand slightly, and then began the best speech that Alfred Barker ever made. The House was amazed and delighted; the members had expected beautifully spoken words from Mr. Barker and the musical tones of a voice that could express every range of emotion, but not the keen and powerful logic that he now showed; not the convincing sentences that he piled one upon another until his argument grew weighty and overwhelming. "How Barker has grown!" muttered more than one member under his breath; but the deepest sigh of content was uttered by Mr. Harkins down in his obscure corner.

When the first sentence was uttered Evelyn Carter started, a look of surprise, then of stupefaction, came into her eyes. Her face turned white, her lips were pressed closely together, and she stared at Mr. Barker in a sort of fascinated horror. Then her gaze turned, and, aghast, she looked at Whitney, who was looking up at her, his face expressing much the same emotions as hers.

Mr. Barker spoke on, his speech increasing alike in beauty and power; he not only thrilled his audience, but thrilled himself as well, and he grew in confidence and strength. By and by he turned his eyes from the speaker to the audience about him and behind him. He saw the white, stricken face of Whitney, and a pang of remorse shot through him. Then, despite himself, he glanced up into the balcony and beheld the face of Evelyn Carter, also white and stricken.

But he would not look again at either of them; now he resolutely turned his face all the while to the speaker; the remorse was gone, and in its place came a defiance that held him to his task; he went on with undiminished power to the end, saying the whole speech, every word of it, and delivering such a terrible blow to the bill that nothing seemed left of that unhappy measure.

Mr. Barker sat down, white and trembling from his effort, but triumphant. He knew that he had swept the House off its feet, he knew it in the breathless silence that followed as it had preceded his great effort, and then the blood surged to his head, in a wild burst of exultation as the cheers came, deep rolling, following in upon each other, like waves of the sea. Mr. Barker was forced to rise and bow more than once. It was minutes before the applause died, and then he sat with his head modestly bent over his desk. He would not meet the looks of those two faces again—at least, not yet.

The silence came once more, and then up rose a tall figure. It was Whitney, and he, too, was recognized by the speaker. Mr. Barker glanced quickly at him, and despite himself he trembled. He had never before seen Whitney look so stern and also so strong. His features seemed somehow to be drawn together, as if his whole

being were powerfully concentrated on one purpose; it was the lion about to spring. But what could he do? If he proclaimed the truth all men would laugh at him and say he was the wildest of romancers. No, such a declaration was impossible, and Mr. Barker, steadying himself, awaited the event with a curiosity that literally burned him.

Whitney began to speak in notes low at first, but full of music and beauty, and the great assembly listened in enchained attention. Gradually his voice rose, and all bent forward in interest and delight. But over a desk not far away a face suddenly turned white, and down in an obscure corner the same whiteness overspread another face.

Whitney was speaking for the bill! And he was speaking for it with a force, a power and a matchless charm, that endowed the measure with the very breath of life, and made it seem the most necessary thing in all the world to the State. Everybody wondered why they had not seen before such obvious reasons for its passage. All the effect of Barker's great effort was swept away at once and people knew now that the bill would pass, that it ought to pass.

Whitney demolished Barker's argument clause by clause and point by point. Barker shuddered. He, too, was convinced. The arguments that had seemed so good to him were thin and hollow. At last he stole a look at the balcony, and there he saw a flushed and happy face, and brilliant eyes gazing down in love, triumph and admiration at Whitney. Lower sank the head of Mr. Barker, and he did not move again until the orator was done.

When Whitney sat down the applause burst forth in a mighty roar, and it lasted much longer than that for Mr. Barker. Other speeches were made, but they were after the climax, and when the vote was taken that afternoon the bill passed—all the world knew, through Whitney's magnificent speech in favor of it—and was passed by the Senate on the following day, becoming a law with the Governor's signature a week later.

Whitney was sitting that evening in the parlor at the house of the Lieutenant-Governor. He had asked the great question and he had received the right answer. His triumph was complete and his face expressed his pride and joy. Evelyn, shy, blushing and lovelier than ever, was near him, and Mr. Carter had just come in to express his approval of his future son-in-law.

While the Lieutenant-Governor was speaking, a servant brought in a card, and before they could say anything the owner of the card followed.

It was Mr. Barker, his face white, but with a new strength and resolve in his eyes. Whitney and Evelyn gazed at each other in astonishment, but Mr. Barker was the first to speak.

"I know that you consider my coming here an intrusion and an impertinence," he said. "God knows that you have a right to think that and worse of me. Don't go, Mr. Carter; you too should hear this. Listen, Whitney. I was tempted, sorely tempted, and you, in your, strength, do not know what terrible temptations can come to a weak man like me."

There was a pause. The Lieutenant-Governor, yet understanding nothing, looked amazed. Whitney and Evelyn, touched already in some strange manner, moved a little closer to each other. Mr. Barker's face worked pitiably, but he went on resolutely.

“I was in the Court of Appeals room that afternoon you made your speech to Miss Carter, and I heard every word of it. I saw how strong it was, and it filled me with envy. Then you went away, forgetting the manuscript. I saw it there on the desk; but at first I did not mean to steal it, on my oath I did not. I took it, and then came the terrible temptation that was too strong for me. I yielded, I confess it. The speech that I made to-day was yours, and you can publish the fact to the world if you will. Why you spoke afterward on the other side, and why you did it so well, on the moment, I do not understand, but I have told you the truth, as you know, and I have no more to say.”

He stood before them, self-immolated, in expiation, but, now, not without a certain pride. It is to his infinite credit that he said nothing about Harkins, casting no blame upon him, but taking it all to himself. The three stood in silence for a little while, and then the girl, out of a great heart, spoke.

“You did a great wrong, Mr. Barker,” she said, “but you have done what few would do to undo it. You are a very brave man.”

A small, warm hand was laid lightly upon his for a moment, and then, in a sudden gush, tears rose to his eyes. With a quick movement he bent and kissed the hand that soothed his wound.

She stepped back and put her hand in Whitney’s.

Tell him, Bob,” she said.

Whitney’s fine face cleared.

It’s come out right, Barker,” he said. “After all, you gave me my great opportunity. Whenever I am going to make a speech on an important question. I write out the best speech that I can on the other side, and then undertake to answer it or forestall it. I find it a splendid plan, because then I have located my enemy and I meet his weapons with my own. And, Barker—old man—the speech you took was the suppositious one that I credited to the other side. Don’t you see what a chance you gave me, because I had my answer ready for every point in that address!”

He came a little nearer and put his hand lightly on Mr. Barker’s shoulder.

“Barker, old man,” he said, “the Governor gives one of his receptions to-night. It is the duty of us all to look in, for at least a few minutes. Won’t you come along with us?”

