



Luther Burbank

An Appreciation by Elbert Hubbard



WHEN I lectured at San Francisco Luther Burbank came down from his home at Santa Rosa, fifty-two miles to the north, to hear me.

There was an audience of nearly two thousand people. There were doctors, lawyers, a few preachers, a celebrated assistant prosecuting attorney, many business men, college professors from Berkeley, teachers from grade schools, many young folk—alert and receptive, eager, generous—and a goodly sprinkling of men with tanned faces and calloused hands.

I sat a moment there on the stage, waiting for the last few stragglers to find their seats, and as I sat there the audience took psychic snapshots at me, and I also sprung a few dry plates on them.

James Whitcomb Riley once told me that when he was about to appear before an audience he always expected to begin in a squeak or a squawk. He doubted himself—would memory fail, voice go on a strike and thought sit silent, stupid, sullen in the brain cells?

I know the feeling. And what an atrocious, brazen, brass-plated presumption on the part of any man to call from fields, parks, libraries and homes the great, the good and the strong of a big city and ask them to sit still and listen to him prate for two hours concerning this and that!

Something like this swept over me as I sat looking into the faces of that four-thousand-eyed something called an audience, at Van Ness Theatre, that beautiful Sunday afternoon in San Francisco.

And as the sense of guilt mounted to my cheek of alleged adamantite, mine eyes looked into the eyes of Luther Burbank, there on the right aisle, fifth row back. Just the one glance and we seemed to understand each other. That quick look changed all the current of my thought. Just before, I was trying to swing my lariat over the coming speech, and at the same time mentally offering any man in the audience a hundred dollars to come forward and take my job.

I now suddenly felt a sense of peace sweep over me. I was back to the wall

and secure. Luther Burbank, who has no time for plays or parties, who, through sense of duty, denies himself to visitors, had come to hear me speak! Oh! and yet again, oh!

His eyes looked level into mine—he smiled a welcome, friendly, kindly, generous, assuring smile.

A speech is a collaboration between the speaker and the listener. If you get much from an oration it is because you have brought much.

Luther Burbank is a sensitive plant. The man who cannot talk to him has no message for mankind.

I spoke for two hours—a heart to heart talk—with the introduction cut and peroration omitted.

I acknowledge it was a great talk—where the thoughts were not padded nor the illustrations lugged in by the ears.

Luther Burbank keyed the discourse.

No one in the audience, so far as I could detect, was aware of his presence. The man fits into a crowd like a guinea chick in a meadow.

The next day I saw Burbank in his own garden there at Santa Rosa. A modest man with iron-gray hair, furrowed face of tan, blue eyes that would be weary and sad were it not for the smiling mouth, whose corners do not turn down, a gentle gentleman, low voiced, quiet, kindly, with a willing heart of love. On Broadway no one would see him, and on Fifth Avenue no one would turn and look. His form is slender, and smart folks, sudden and quick in conclusion, might glance at the slender form and say the man is sickly. But the discerning beheld that he is the type that lives long, because he lives well. His is the strength of the silken corn that bound the god Thor when all the chains broke. He is always at work, always busy; always thinking, planning, doing; dissatisfied with the past, facing the East with eager hope. He is curious as a child, sensitive as a girl in love, strong as a man, persistent as gravitation and gifted like a god.

His hands are sinewy and strong—the hands of a sculptor. His clothes are easy and inexpensive. Children would go to him instinctively. Women would trust him.

Genius in his case is a great capacity for hard work. Fused with this capacity is great love, great delicacy, great persistence.

Among scientists there is almost as much bigotry and dogmatism as there is among theologians.

There is canned science as well as canned religion. In truth, most so-called scientists are teachers of textbooks—purveyors in canned goods.

Even among the Big Five—Tyndall, Huxley, Spencer, Wallace and Darwin—there were a few slight spots on the sun. Only one of that immortal quintette was ninety-nine and ninety-nine one-hundredths fine.

That man was Charles Darwin.

In the heart of Darwin there was no room for doubt, distrust, jealousy or hate. He was without guile. He loved Nature with a high and holy passion. He had no other gods before her.

The honesty of Darwin, his reverence for truth, the modesty of his claims, set him apart as the High Priest of Science. In all the realm of physical research Darwin seemed to have but one competitor, and that was Aristotle.

Now there is a trinity, for Luther Burbank is one with these. He is a citizen of the Celestial City of Free Minds.

With Luther Burbank the clap-trap of science is beautifully missing. The tricks of the scientist are absent.

He makes no effort to explain things he does not understand. He lives his life in the light. The most beautiful words I heard him utter were these: "I do not know."

The finest product of the life and work of Luther Burbank is the man himself.

Elbert Hubbard