



RICHARD B. SHERIDAN

## RICHARD B. B. SHERIDAN

**R**ICHARD BRINSLEY BUTLER SHERIDAN, a brilliant British orator, statesman, and dramatist, was born at Dublin, Sept. 30, 1751, and died at London, July 7, 1816. His father, Thomas Sheridan, was in his day a well-known Irish actor, who played with Garrick, and was manager of Drury Lane Theatre, London. After an education at Harrow, he settled in London, where he married the noted "Maid of Bath," Elizabeth Linley, daughter of the composer, and scored his first success as a dramatist with "The Rivals," which appeared in 1775. This was followed by "The Duenna," a somewhat overrated though popular play, which was far eclipsed by the brilliant satiric comedy, "The School for Scandal." Meanwhile, aided by his father-in-law, he became owner of Drury Lane Theatre, a project which later on was to bring him trouble and financial disaster. He next turned his attention to politics, entering the English Parliament as Whig member for Stafford and under the patronage of Fox, and two years afterwards (in 1782) became under-secretary for foreign affairs in Rockingham's ministry, and in 1783 secretary of the treasury. In Parliament, in 1787, his great speech at the national inquisition on Warren Hastings, impeaching that Indian pro-consul's treatment of the Begums, placed him in the front rank of orators (see appended, the summing-up speech, delivered by Sheridan in the following year). Although he sat for thirty-two years in Parliament, Sheridan only once again reached the same height of eloquence in a speech (1794) supporting the French Revolution. Socially, Sheridan was a delightful man to know, a favorite among the wits of his day, and the companion of the Prince Regent, afterward George IV. About his declining years troubles thickened, however, and he died embarrassed by debt and depressed by life's disappointments. He was accorded a burial in the great Abbey of Westminster. Among his other dramatic works besides those above mentioned were "The Critic," "Pizarro," and "A Trip to Scarborough."

### SHERIDAN'S IMPEACHMENT OF WARREN HASTINGS

DELIVERED BEFORE THE HIGH COURT OF PARLIAMENT, JUNE 1788

**T**HE speeches of Mr. Sheridan on the trial of Warren Hastings, are undoubtedly more celebrated than any other productions of modern eloquence. But the "high and diffused renown" which they have acquired, must in a great degree be imputed to the impression excited by them in their delivery. For it is certain that no adequate report of the speeches has been given to the public.

(393)

The second speech, the close of which is here presented, is the one pronounced in the house of lords, in reviewing the evidence on the Begum charge.

There is nothing, my lords, to be found in the history of human turpitude; nothing in the nervous delineations and penetrating brevity of Tacitus; nothing in the luminous and luxuriant pages of Gibbon, or of any other historian, dead or living, who, searching into measures and characters with the rigor of truth, presents to our abhorrence depravity in its blackest shapes, which can equal, in the grossness of the guilt, or in the hardness of heart with which it was conducted, or in low and grovelling motives, the acts and character of the prisoner. It was he, who in the base desire of stripping two helpless women, could stir the son to rise up in vengeance against them; who when that son had certain touches of nature in his breast, certain feelings of an awakened conscience, could accuse him of entertaining peevish objections to the plunder and sacrifice of his mother; who, having finally divested him of all thought, all reflection, all memory, all conscience, all tenderness and duty as a son, all dignity as a monarch; having destroyed his character, and depopulated his country, at length brought him to violate the dearest ties of nature, in countenancing the destruction of his parents. This crime, I say, has no parallel or prototype in the old world or the new, from the day of original sin to the present hour. The victims of his oppression were confessedly destitute of all power to resist their oppressors. But their debility, which from other bosoms would have claimed some compassion, at least with respect to the mode of suffering, with him excited only the ingenuity of torture. Even when every feeling of the Nabob was subdued; when, as we have seen, my lords, nature made a last, lingering, feeble

stand within his breast; even then, that cold unfriendly spirit of malignity, with which his doom was fixed, returned with double rigor and sharper acrimony to its purpose, and compelled the child to inflict on the parent that destruction of which he was himself reserved to be the final victim.

Great as is this climax in which, my lords, I thought the pinnacle of guilt was attained, there is yet something still more transcendently flagitious. I particularly allude to his infamous letter, falsely dated the 15th of February, 1782, in which, at the very moment that he had given the order for the entire destruction of the Begums, and for the resumption of the jaghires, he expresses to the Nabob the warm and lively interest which he took in his welfare, the sincerity and ardor of his friendship, and that, though his presence was eminently wanted at Calcutta, he could not refrain from coming to his assistance, and that in the meantime, he had sent four regiments to his aid. So deliberate and cool; so hypocritical and insinuating is the villainy of this man! What heart is not exasperated by the malignity of a treachery so barefaced and dispassionate? At length, however, the Nabob was on his guard. He could not be deceived by this mask. The offer of the four regiments developed to him the object of Mr. Hastings. He perceived the dagger bunglingly concealed in the hand which was treacherously extended as if to his assistance. From this moment the last faint ray of hope expired in his bosom. We accordingly find no further confidence of the Nabob in the prisoner. Mr. Middleton now swayed his iron sceptre without control. The jaghires were seized. Every measure was carried. The Nabob, mortified, humbled, and degraded, sunk into insignificance and contempt. This letter was sent at the very time when the troops surrounded the walls of Fyzabad; and

then began a scene of horrors, which, if I wished to inflame your lordship's feelings, I should only have occasion minutely to describe; to state the violence committed on that palace which the piety of the kingdom had raised for the retreat and seclusion of the objects of its pride and veneration! It was in these shades, rendered sacred by superstition, that innocence reposed. Here venerable age, and helpless infancy found an asylum! If we look, my lords, into the whole of this most wicked transaction, from the time when this treachery was first conceived, to that when, by a series of artifices the most execrable, it was brought to a completion, the prisoner will be seen standing aloof, indeed, but not inactive. He will be discovered reviewing his agents, rebuking at one time the pale conscience of Middleton, at another, relying on the stouter villainy of Hyder Beg Cawn. With all the calmness of veteran delinquency, his eye will be seen ranging through the busy prospect, piercing the darkness of subordinate guilt, and disciplining with congenial adroitness the agents of his crimes, and the instruments of his cruelty.

The feelings, my lords, of the several parties at the time will be most properly judged of by their respective correspondence. When the Bow Begum, despairing of redress from the Nabob, addressed herself to Mr. Middleton, and reminded him of the guarantee which he had signed, she was instantly promised that the amount of her jaghire should be made good, though he said he could not interfere with the sovereign decision of the Nabob respecting the lands. The deluded and unfortunate woman "thanked God that Mr. Middleton was at hand for her relief." At this very instant he was directing every effort to her destruction. For he had actually written the orders which were to take the collection

out of the hands of her agents! But let it not be forgotten, my lords, when the Begum was undeceived, when she found that British faith was no protection, when she found that she should leave the country, and prayed to the God of nations not to grant his peace to those who remained behind, there was still no charge of rebellion, no recrimination made to all her approaches for the broken faith of the English. That when stung to madness, she asked "how long would be their reign," there was no mention of her disaffection. The stress is therefore idle, which the counsel for the prisoner have strove to lay on these expressions of an injured and enraged woman. When at last irritated beyond bearing, she denounced infamy on the heads of her oppressors, who is there that will not say that she spoke in a prophetic spirit; and that what she then predicted has not even to its last letter been accomplished? But did Mr. Middleton even to this violence retort any particle of accusation? No. He sent a jocose reply, stating that he had received such a letter under her seal, but that from its contents he could not suspect it to come from her, and begged therefore that she would endeavor to detect the forgery. Thus did he add to foul injuries the vile aggravation of a brutal jest. Like the tiger he showed the savageness of his nature, by grinning at his prey, and fawning over the last agonies of his unfortunate victim.

The letters, my lords, were then enclosed to the Nabob, who no more than the rest made any attempt to justify himself by imputing any criminality to the Begums. He only sighed a hope, that his conduct to his parents had drawn no shame upon his head; and declared his intention to punish not any disaffection in the Begums, but some officious servants who had dared to foment the misunderstanding be-

tween them and himself. A letter was finally sent to Mr. Hastings, about six days before the seizure of the treasures from the Begums, declaring their innocence, and referring the governor general in proof of it to Captain Gordon, whose life they had protected, and whose safety should have been their justification. This inquiry was never made. It was looked on as unnecessary, because the conviction of their innocence was too deeply impressed already.

The counsel, my lords, in recommending an attention to the public in preference to the private letters, remarked particularly, that one of the latter should not be taken in evidence, because it was evidently and abstractedly private, relating the anxieties of Mr. Middleton, on account of the illness of his son. This is a singular argument indeed. The circumstances, however, undoubtedly merits strict observation, though not in the view in which it was placed by the counsel. It goes to show that some at least of the persons concerned in these transactions, felt the force of those rites which their efforts were directed to tear asunder; that those who could ridicule the respective attachment of a mother and a son; who could prohibit the reverence of the son to the mother; who could deny to maternal debility the protection which filial tenderness should afford, were yet sensible of the straining of those chords by which they are connected. There is something in the present business, with all that is horrible to create aversion so vilely loathsome, as to excite disgust. It is, my lords, surely superfluous to dwell on the sacredness of the ties which those aliens to feeling, those apostates to humanity thus divided. In such an assembly, as the one before which I speak, there is not an eye but must look reproof to this conduct, not a heart but must anticipate its condemnation. Filial Piety! It is

the primal bond of society. It is that instinctive principle, which, panting for its proper good, soothes, unbidden, each sense and sensibility of man. It now quivers on every lip. It now beams from every eye. It is that gratitude which, softening under the sense of recollected good, is eager to own the vast countless debt it never, alas! can pay, for so many long years of unceasing solitudes, honorable self-denials, life-preserving cares. It is that part of our practice, where duty drops its awe, where reverence refines into love. It asks no aid of memory. It needs not the deductions of reason. Pre-existing, paramount over all, whether moral law or human rule, few arguments can increase and none can diminish it. It is the sacrament of our nature; not only the duty, but the indulgence of man. It is his first great privilege. It is amongst his last most endearing delights, when the bosom glows with the idea of reverberated love; when to requite on the visitations of nature, and return the blessings that have been received; when, what was emotion fixed into vital principle; what was instinct, habituated into a master passion, sways all the sweetest energies of man, hands over each vicissitude of all that must pass away, aids the melancholy virtues in their last sad tasks of life; to cheer the languors of decrepitude and age; explore the thought; explain the aching eye!

But, my lords, I am ashamed to consume so much of your lordships' time in attempting to give a cold picture of this sacred impulse when I behold so many breathing testimonies of its influence around me; when every countenance in this assembly is beaming and erecting itself into the recognition of this universal principle!

The expressions contained in the letter of Mr. Middleton, of tender solicitude for his son, have been also mentioned as