

Quaint Character in the Speaker's Chair

How Jenny Lind and an Illinois Farmer Boy "Went Through the Rye Together"—
An Interesting Reminiscence of a Great Singer—Some Philosophical "Mulberries"

With the advent of every new political party, quaint characters have commanded public attention.

In a popular uprising an untried party had captured the legislature of one of the western states. The members of the lower house in that legislature chose as their presiding officer an odd character whom we shall designate as Mull—largely for the reason that that was not his name. Speaker Mull was an unlettered man, but he possessed a native shrewdness and he had such a unique way of expressing himself that during that session of the legislature he made generous contribution to newspaper literature. For instance, it was the wont of Speaker Mull to suggest—at the moment he felt the pangs of noon day hunger—"Let's unhitch and go to dinner." Some of the quaint sayings of the speaker were grouped under the title of "Mulberries" and given publicity in the newspapers of that day.

Here are some sample "Mulberries:"

"I found out several years ago that I couldn't know much, so I concluded I'd make it a point to know things well. Gentleman, what I do know I know awful hard."

"I heard a fellow say yesterday, 'There's only one Mull.' I tell you what, boys, if we were all made alike there wouldn't be any excuse for mutual admiration societies in this here land."

"I may not catch on quite as quick as some others, but I hang on hard enough to make up for it."

"I'll tell you, gentlemen, the trouble with this crowd is, every fellow is trying to make another legislator better and forgetting about himself."

"This is the most intelligent legislature I ever saw. It's the only one I ever saw."

"It's pretty tough when a man wants to know something and can't know it; but half the battle is won by wanting to know something."

"Gentlemen, there are a good many ways to do wrong; there is only one way to do right."

"Most of us would rather be right than president; but some of us would rather have the president's salary than even the satisfaction of knowing that we were holier than they."

"Boys, I never enjoyed life before; this legislative business is the best fun I ever had, and when we all go home, the man who leaves here as my enemy, will have to be a smaller man than I am."

"If a man wants to know if I came here for my health, I tell him no—nor for boodle neither. It's the only safe plan."

"I never so highly prized my good old mother's teachings as I have in the last two months—when I needed them most."

"I pity the man who daresn't go outside of his own political party to win a friend. When we get up to the pearly gates, I don't doubt but what we will all be independents, democrats or republicans; and I expect the man who is first to be rejected will be the political leader who has no need for friendship himself and who tries to imprison human friendships in the narrow cells of political association."

"Since I have been speaker, there are a good many chaps down on the floor who think they have seen things to smile at. I often find consolation in the belief that if any one of those chaps were in my place the laugh might be on the other side, and I want it understood that there are a great many things happening on the floor which make me smile—in my sleeve, of course."

On one occasion, the entire legislature attended a play, where everyone was captivated by a beautiful song. On the following morning Speaker Mull was asked, "How did you like that song last night?"

The speaker was resting in his private office, preparing for his day's battle as presiding officer. He replied: "That was pretty good, but let me tell you, she ain't no Jenny Lind."

"Did you ever hear Jenny Lind?"

"Did I ever hear Jenny Lind?" exclaimed the speaker in a somewhat injured tone. "Did I ever hear Jenny Lind? I should say I did."

Me and her went through the rye together. It was in spirit rather than in the flesh that Jenny and I went through the rye together."

"Where did you hear her sing?"
"It was in St. Louis. Oh, I was only a kid, but big enough to just float away with every word Jenny Lind sang."

"What did she sing?"
"What didn't she sing? But there is one song I will never forget. It's the only song I ever learned or tried to learn. It's the sweetest music to my ears today. Jenny was not a very big woman, but great Jupiter! What a voice she had. It was at Ben De Bar's old theater in St. Louis. With my father I lived in Montgomery county, Illinois, and the old gentleman had taken me to hear the woman who had stopped churns in their duty. She sang—Great Caesar, how she sang! She came out and sang some nice songs, and I remember that soon I was moving all over my seat without regard to my old home instruction that boys must be seen instead of heard. But then everybody else was going wild over the singing. Finally Jenny was called out and then was the time that she broke me all up. She stood there with three thousand pairs of eyes upon her and three thousand pairs of ears listening for every note. One moment she gazed like a little frightened bird might at the great crowd before her. Then she raised her hand and everybody shut up yelling and you might have heard a pin drop. Then when everything was as quiet as a session of the house—when the house ain't in session—Jenny began to sing. Great Jupiter, what a song it was!

"Yes, sir," he continued, "she began to sing, and I'll never forget that song. It was something like this:

"If a body meet a body
Coming through the rye,
Should a body kiss a body,
Need that body cry?"

"If a lassie has her laddie,
Never one have I,
If that lassie kiss that laddie,
Is it anybody's business?"

"Of course," continued the speaker, "I don't remember the exact words and may not have the words exactly right, but the tune—I'll never forget that tune"—and the speaker whistled the old familiar air, "Coming Through the Rye."

"That was a glorious time," he added, "I remember I stood up and held onto the seat in front of me. I was only a farmer boy, but I was an American, with all the love for such songs as Jenny Lind sang. I forgot all about my father sitting beside me; I forgot all my surroundings; forgot that I was in a crowd of three thousand fashionably dressed people; all I thought of was Jenny Lind and that tune. Soon I seemed to go away from there. I seemed to seize the hand of the singer; I clutched it tightly and the crowd before us seemed to melt away and in the place of the stylish theater there seemed to spring up a great field of rye. 'If a lassie has her laddie,' sang Jenny, and I seemed to clutch her hand tighter and when she repeated that verse, 'If a body meet a body,' I seemed to make a desperate effort and together Jenny and I started off through the field tramping down the rye straw. On and on we pranced; it didn't seem like we were walking; we were just floating but I clung tight to Jenny and Jenny she clung tight to me and when we reached the other side of the field we turned and cut a new swath to the tother side. On and on we floated—going through the rye. It was the happiest moment of my life, but just as I seemed to become unconscious I heard shouts and clapping of hands, and saw the waving of handkerchiefs. Three thousand people were on their feet yelling like mad men. My old father had jumped up beside me and he was waving his old felt hat. The people all seemed mad and I opened my eyes and then I realized that I had been standing there all the time and that Jenny had simply hypnotized me. I hadn't been tramping through the rye field at all, and I remember, poor little country boy that I was, I sat down on the cushioned seat, and taking out my little red bandana, wiped

several big drops of water from my eyes. Jenny came before the curtain and said 'good-bye.' Then the great crowd filed out. I took hold of my good old father's hand and we left the theater. Not a word was spoken by either of us until we reached the sidewalk and then my father said: 'Samuel, that was the greatest song I ever heard.'

"For weeks after that the cornfields and the barnyards on our old Illinois farm re-echoed with bits of that old song. And now I never hear that song but what it brings back to me the days of my boyhood. I never hear it but what I see the faces of my father and mother. I never hear it but what I seem to be feeding the cows in the barnyard or driving the hogs from the cornfield and the next time I go to hear a woman who can sing and will sing, I'm going to ask her to open the pearly gates for a moment with the keynotes of 'Coming Thro' the Rye.'"

It was 10 o'clock and the speaker hurried down the aisle of the house of representatives and mounted the speaker's stand, calling the house to order. When the chaplain offered prayer the speaker bowed his head lower than usual; when the clerk read the long and tiresome record the speaker fixed his eyes on the toe of his boot and whistled softly—and the tune which floated to the press stand was an old familiar air.

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ANOTHER JOYFUL SONG

When the Washington Herald pitched the tune and chortled in joyous song the praises of the pumpkin pie, The Commoner took a long breath and with all the cheerfulness and tunefulness at its command joined in the glad some chorus. The subject was an inspiring one, calling out the best efforts of the vocalists, and there are ample evidences in the scrap book to prove that the song and the singers made a hit with those who are yet able to enjoy the rich though simple gustatory joys of other days.

Now the esteemed Herald leads us on to respond to the encore and has chosen another theme calculated to arouse us to even better vocal effort. The Herald now sings of "hog killin' time," with all its joys, edible and social. Sorry, indeed, are we for those benighted individuals to whom the joys of "hog killin' time" are as a sealed book. The pleasant interchange of labor between neighbors, the joys of accepting a jowl or a chunk of backbone from a friend down the road, the olfactory delights arising from the trying out of the lard, the musical scrunch of the sausage grinder and the nutty aroma arising from the smokehouse where the fresh hams are being cured—all these are joys no longer participated in by men and women, save in somewhat remote localities where the devastating hand of the packing trust has not been laid. And then, too, our esteemed contemporary asks us to join in singing one verse dedicated especially to a concomitant of "hog killin' time," and although the very mention of it starts the salivary glands to working overtime and the juice to trickling down our chin, we joyfully lift our voice to sing the praises of "cracklin' bread." Let the French chef hide his head in shame, and the Italian master of the kitchen weep for very humiliation. Not in all the long list of their culinary achievements can they find one single thing to match the glory of "cracklin' bread." Nor, for that matter, can the French and Italian chefs de cuisine—if that's the foreign lingo—compare with the cooks of the "hog killin'" districts in the preparation of real, soul-satisfying and stomach-pleasing meals. Spare-ribs and kraut, with dumplings, ham hock and cabbage, pickled pigs feet and dill pickles, cracklin' bread and rich, old-fashioned dasher church buttermilk, pumpkin bread and 'simmon sauce, fried sausage and gravy with a stack o' wheats on the side—O, me! O, my!

Now all together, with the gustatory mentor of the Washington Herald beating the time and leading the song, let us join in singing the joys of "hog killin' time," and strive with all our might to bring about the revival of an institution almost throttled by the prosaic, money-grubbing and dyspeptic-breeding meat trust.