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Speed Mosby, Prophet

Quotation From His Famous Book, Ben Blunt

(The railroad assessment in Nebraska this year will be placed in the neighborhood of about \$45,000,000. Last year the total was \$27,000,000. The increase of \$18,000,000, therefore, represents an increase of two-thirds, or 66 2-3 per cent.)

This statement is made on the authority of a prominent delegate to the state convention who will be a member of the committee on resolutions and who received his information from Governor Mickey, a member of the board of equalization.—Item in Lincoln Evening News, Wednesday, May 18, 1904.)

Some weeks ago The Independent had occasion to mention editorially Speed Mosby's book, "Ben Blunt," a novel picturing things political in that Royal Baking Powder state, Missouri. It is said that denizens of that great health resort, where alum baking powder is much scarcer than thousand dollar bills, have to "be shown."

Well, Mosby has "shown" them the inside workings around the state house in such inimitable style that "Ben Blunt" would be regarded as a classic of political literature if it were not so painfully apparent that he's been painting from life instead of drawing upon his imagination.

The Independent has been watching the proceedings before the Nebraska state board of equalization for some days with much interest. The strenuous efforts of the railroads for a lowering of their assessment, and the equally strenuous efforts of the big republican papers to have the board raise the railroad assessment—as viewed by The Independent are more than half "horse-play" to fool the uninitiated and to stop the clamor for equitable taxation. How the farce will end is so graphically told in the following quotation from "Ben Blunt" as to need no elaboration by The Independent:

CHAPTER II. The Auditor.

No wher so besy a man as he ther was,
And yet he semed bisier than he was.
—Chaucer, Canterbury Tales, Prologue.

Hon. William Rounder sat in his easy chair, smoking and sweating and puffing, and sorting his mail. He was evidently clearing his decks for action, and his magnificent corpus of nearly three hundred pounds presented an imposing spectacle as he dashed into a phalanx of some two or three dozen letters, cutting and slashing them here and there, till he had laid their inwards bare upon his desk: incidentally pocketing the accompanying railroad passes, as the spoils of battle.

"Oh, Sib!" he called out to Mr. Sibley, his chief clerk, "here, take these letters to the bond clerk, and these others you may attend to yourself—and, say, Sib, hold on there! Sib, tell Blunt to step here a minute, won't you, please, sir?" And then adding, in an undertone, with many a fervid sigh: "That'll leave me fully a half dozen letters to answer. Great balls of fire! Heavy mail, sure—heavy mail, by grit! And the board of equalization meets today, and Snyder of the Santa Fe will be here, and Jones of the Rock Island, and Crandall of the C. B. & Q., and the Lord knows who all!"

"And the Lord knows who all," echoed Mr. Sibley.

"Was it not the poet Congreve who said, 'Misfortunes come not single spies, but in battalions,' queried Mr. Blunt, good naturedly, as he entered the room.

"I don't care whether it was Congreve or some other kind of a greve, but the thing that's grievin' me just now is this pile of mail," responded the Auditor dolefully. "But," said he, "we might as well get at it, and tear the bone right out of it now. I'm going to clean up my desk this morning if it costs a doctor's bill and a lawsuit. Now, Mr. Blunt, if you'll sit down there, please, sir, I'll just dictate a few epistles to the Corinthians. Oh, Ned! (this to a negro janitor) bring me a drink of water, won't you please?" Ned hustled out and soon

reutrned with a gourd-dipper full of the cooling liquid.

"Ah-h-h! Mighty thin, Ned," said the Auditor, as he gulped it down.

"Yes, sah, 'deed it is, boss, but it's de bes' you kin expect out'n dat Putnam county goad dippah."

In his office Mr. Rounder never kept a glass for drinking purposes. He thought the gourd would be more popular with his country constituency. And so it was; and the people went home and talked about the uncontaminated democracy of plain Billy Rounder, who drank his ice-water out of a gourd.

Mr. Blunt had picked up a morning paper in the meantime, and was glancing over the head-lines.

The Auditor scuttled his avignon back into his chair and was manifestly preparing for another exertion.

"Now, Benjamin," said he, "my fellow Christian traveler to the judgment bar o' God, when you come to a period, we'll get ready to proceed. Whet up your pencil there, and we'll send in a few lines to the Ephesians. Ready?"

Mr. Blunt said that he was.

"I'll declare!" said the Auditor excitedly, "I aimed to get my beard decapitated as I came through town this morning. Now, let's see. The board meets at ten, don't it. The sun, moon and stars may vary, but we never do. Well, I'll have time. Take this letter first. Are you ready?"

The secretary again responded that he was.

Mr. Rounder then grasped a letter to which he intended to dictate a reply, first trying to read it upside side, and then inside out, roaring at the same time, in a voice loud enough to fairly shake the foundations of the capitol, a couplet from his favorite ditty:

"The mother was chasing her son round the room
Chasing her son round the room."

At last finding the address he so violently sought, he exclaimed:

"Let 'er go, Blunt.—Oh, yes, I didn't give you the address, did I? Ready?"

Mr. Blunt again said that he was ready, and the dictation began:

"Dear Mr. Clodgett:—"

"Hold on, there, Ben!—wait a minute; tear that up. Now, ready?"

And then, after taking another deep breath, an expression of determination in his face, and with the air of a strong man about to run a race, he gathered his wits for a supreme effort, and dictated, without a struggle, the following letter:

"Hon. J. H. Clodgett, Gen. Sol. Wabash R'y Co., St. Louis, Mo.—Dear Mr. Clodgett: Yours of the 13th inst. received, containing pass from here to Buffalo and return for myself and 26 friends, for which please accept thanks. I await an opportunity to reciprocate. Command me at your pleasure. With every assurance of my high regard for you personally, I am, your friend, WM. ROUNDER."

And then, with a final gasp, he exclaimed: "Hold up, there—Ben! don't put the signature on; I'll sign it myself." So saying, he sank back into his chair, from sheer exhaustion, and lighted a fresh cigar.

After an interval of recuperation he again turned to his secretary, declaring, as he tossed the remaining letters over to Mr. Blunt.

"Now, Ben, I must have my beard amputated, and you can look after this mail as well as I. There's one there from the Frisco—look that up for him, and give him what he wants; and here's a blamed fool wanting to know something about taxing franchises as high as farm lands—you'd better refer him to the attorney general—and, hold on; wait a minute; I wish you would please acknowledge receipt of that frank from the Wells-Fargo, and thank Tim for it; and then just drop a little note to the Western Union, and enclose 'em my empty complimentary stamp book, and ask 'em to replenish it for me—won't you, please, sir? Now you attend to that, Ben, and I'll make thee ruler over many cities. I've got to go and get my beard pruned a little—and if Mr.

Snyder or any of them come in, just tell 'em I'll be back directly."

With these few parting observations he waddled off.

Mr. Rounder was not a bad man at heart. He was a lover of good-fellowship, and was himself the prince of good fellows.

He was the son of a preacher—a Baptist and a Virginian of the old school—but he rarely attended church as often as once in a month, and now bore small indication of his early religious training, except such scant indicia as might be gleaned from his ludicrous Biblical references and quotations. He had always been somewhat of a rake, and naught but the expected happened when he was transmogrified into a politician. He went from bad to worse, and from worse—to politics.

As auditor of the state he had gathered about him a corps of assistants wholly to his liking, excepting two. The political views of Mr. Blunt were entirely too radical, and those of Mr. Sibley altogether too slippery. But both Mr. Sibley and Mr. Blunt, the one as his chief clerk and the other as his private secretary, had possibly acquired more knowledge about the inner workings of the administration of Mr. Rounder than that gentleman cared to have made public, so he made swift to endure what could not be altered, grunting and puffing his life comfortably away, and accumulating fat and fees as he went rolling and lolling along.

"Sib," said he, "when I stepped into the gilded palace of sin around the corner to get me something cool, the gentleman in the white apron informed me that a fellow had just been in there who was going to make a talk to the board this morning against Mr. Snyder and Mr. Crandall and all of them, and try to get us to raise the assessments on franchisees; says he represents some kind of a People's Welfare Society, or some such fool thing or other—now wouldn't that singe your eyebrows?"

"It certainly would," was the prompt reply.

"But say, Sib; we oughtn't to listen to that fellow's talk—tryin' to drive capital out of the state. Why, if we should listen to that dumb fool, we might turn Mr. Jones and Mr. Snyder and all of 'em against the party."

"He must not be heard," said Sibley. "But we've got to hear him, Sib."

"He must be heard," said Sibley. "Hold on there a minute," the perplexed statesman suddenly exclaimed, "here comes Mr. Snyder now; we'll just talk to him about it."

At that moment a tall, elegant looking gentleman, with a pleasant face and a merry, twinkling eye, walked briskly into the room, and the robust Auditor sprang joyously to his feet, with rather more alacrity than might have been expected, considering his weight. "Why, how are you, Colonel, how are you," said he; "how's every sixteen foot of you? Be seated, Colonel, be seated."

"How have you been, Billy," the brevetted Colonel inquired.

"Oh," responded the Auditor with a heavy sigh, "I've been keeping on the reservation pretty well, I thank you—treading the winepress alone, Colonel—tramping out the vintage of the Lord at the same old stand; aching a bit at the elbows and knee-caps, though. But I'm able to sit up a little, and take nourishment."

And Mr. Sibley winced with pain, at thought of the aching knee-caps and elbows.

"Gout, eh? High living, I suspect."

"No, no; 'tisn't that, Colonel. 'Tisn't my homely fare that's troubling me. I can't account for it at all, unless it comes from sitting in damp churches, and eating late meals o' Sundays, caused by listening to long sermons. I suppose you know, Colonel, there's a fellow up here trying to give us trouble about the assessments today."

The "colonel" had heard of it; had, in fact, been observing the movement for some time, and was now prepared

to relieve the strain upon the mind of the worthy Auditor.

"Yes," said he, "I've heard of it." And closing one eye significantly he sat there like a cyclops for some moments.

"I have had a talk with the other solicitors and some of their tax commissioners and the heads of the departments, and we have about concluded to give those franchise agitators a compromise. It isn't well, you know, to antagonize those people too much; public sentiment is a trifle against us now, anyway. We realize, of course, that public patronage creates to a certain extent our franchise values, and if we go to acting ugly those cranks may conclude to absorb the whole business, and we don't want to have trouble with them just now. In short, we are prepared to consent to an increase in our assessments now, and there will, of course, be no trouble in reducing them, when this absurd sentiment begins to wane."

"I believe you are right, Colonel," said Rounder.

"You are right, Colonel," echoed Mr. Sibley.

The board met in due time, and concluded its deliberations. Next morning the papers told, in glaring head-lines, of its patriotic work:

"Corporation Assessments Raised Many Millions—Hon. Wm. Rounder Strikes a Blow for the Common People—Advocates Franchise Taxation—Board's Action Largely Due to Him."

And the People's Welfare league wired Mr. Rounder its vote of thanks.

Mr. Rounder sat in his easy chair, and grunted and smoked and smiled.

"That was a good day's work we did yesterday, Ben," said he to his private secretary.

"Yes, yes, it was," Mr. Blunt thoughtfully replied; very thoughtfully, for he was thinking of what Lincoln said about the impossibility of fooling all of the people all of the time, and was trying to determine to his own satisfaction whether Honest Abe was really dishonest, or simply misinformed.

He Denies It

Editor Independent: I see your paper is reiterating the statement originating in the Des Moines Register and Leader that I was instrumental with my influence in urging Governor Shaw to issue a parole to a convict. Kindly give space to the accompanying enclosure which was addressed to the Register to set it right.

Thanking you in advance, sincerely,
VICTOR ROSEWATER,
Omaha, Neb.

Omaha, Neb., April 29, 1904.—To the Editor of The Register, Des Moines, Ia.—Dear Sir: Your story, based upon a partial exhibit of documents on file in the governor's office, makes out that I exerted my influence with Governor Shaw to procure a parole for Sheriff, the prisoner convicted for the Pollock diamond robbery.

I do not know anything of Sheriff except by hear-say and have never had any interest in his liberation. It seems that a letter of introduction given by me in 1899 to Chief of Police White was presented by him to Governor Shaw when he called on an errand in behalf of Sheriff. If you had printed this letter it would be seen that it is no more than a perfunctory letter of introduction such as any business man gives to a friend every week in the year. The letter reads as follows:

"Omaha, Neb., May 15, 1899.—Hon. Leslie M. Shaw, Governor of Iowa, Des Moines, Ia.—My Dear Sir: This will introduce to you Mr. Martin White, Omaha's efficient chief of police, who has some business to transact in the Iowa capital. Any favors you may show him will be greatly appreciated. Very truly yours,
VICTOR ROSEWATER,
Managing Editor."

At the time this letter was written I had no knowledge what sort of business called Chief White to Des