Chapter IV: "Gentlemen, Be Seated"

Stephen Foster returned home from Jefferson College the same month he went there, July, 1841. Driving back through the South Hills he recrossed the Monongahela and arrived in Alleghany, dispirited.

His disturbed mother immediately wrote to her son, William; Stephen wrote to him in August; his father not until September. These letters show that William had intended to pay his young brother's expenses through college. He must have been discouraged. The family and Stephen, himself, were apologetic. Stephen's explanation was that he became sick, had dizzy spells, nosebleed, had to stay in bed; and that anyway he was not attending classes regularly as he had entered in the middle of the session. One of the students who was about to drive to Pittsburgh happened in his room (he wrote) and suddenly he made up his mind to go with him.

His father might have turned him around and started him back had he not been out of town leading a temperance meeting. In his own letter to William he speaks of having put Stephen in the hands of a tutor, and concludes: "It is a source of much comfort to your mother and myself that he does not appear to have any evil propensities and his leisure hours are all devoted to music, for which he possesses a strange talent."

The important words are "leisure" and "talent." Not even then, when the boy was fifteen, did anyone consider his making a career of music. Instead, they toyed with the idea of sending him to Annapolis, a scheme first mentioned by his mother in a letter to William the year before, and now brought up again by Stephen in his embarrassment. Luckily for him (and for us) the project failed to materialize.

His education soon became desultory. His father wrote to William in the spring of '42 that Stephen was "uncommonly studious at home but dislikes going to school. He says there is too much confusion." Then

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1 This meeting took place about August 28, 1841, when Stephen wrote his letter to his brother William; it did not take place in July, while Stephen was attending Jefferson College.
he asks the dependable son to give the youngest a job that summer, but William seems to have been through for it was his father who finally put him in his own office. Stephen wrote a copperplate hand, a gift he carried all his life, and could make himself useful doing double entries in ledgers.

The same year of 1842 Charles Dickens and his wife came down the Juniata and over the mountains by the canal route. They stopped over in Pittsburgh at the old Exchange Hotel, at Penn Avenue and Sixth Street. As William Foster was mayor of Allegheny he had an opportunity to meet the famous visitor and took Stephen with him. But it was Dr. Andrew McDowell (later on Stephen's father-in-law) who became a friend of the great man. He was called on to attend Dickens when he was sick in Pittsburgh and they corresponded for some years. Dickens went on down the Ohio on his lecture tour—and repaid the hospitality of the river towns with disparaging writings on the region.

There were family changes during the year. Henrietta's husband, Thomas L. Wick, died suddenly in Youngstown, and while Mrs. Foster and Stephen were visiting there to comfort her in her bereavement, William, Jr., was married the second time, to Elizabeth Burnett, and established a new home at Towanda, Pennsylvania. Morrison, engaged in a prosperous trade on the river packets, came home for the holidays in December, 1842, and as he was the nearest in age to Stephen took him on a round of the theaters.

They saw the great Shakespearean actor (known in the river towns as "Drunken Booth") in "Richard the Third" and "King Lear"; and went to hear Henry Russell, an English "concertiser," who made a deep impression on Stephen's early career.

Russell was of Jewish descent and a born showman. He comprised the whole program, seating himself at the piano and opening with the song, Woodman, Spare that Tree. He was a sensation and captured the city with that precursor of mother songs, The Old Arm Chair. What is more, he showed Stephen how to do the trick.

Impressionable years—Stephen was growing up.
A striking little girl, Susan Pentland, lived with her father, Captain

2 If there is a tradition that Dickens and Dr. McDowell corresponded for some years, no correspondence verifying it is known to have been discovered to date.
Joseph Pentland, in the other half of the double house occupied by the Fosters. This dwelling had been built by William, Jr., and faced the East Commons, on Union Avenue. The children played together in the same back yard, and Stephen enjoyed the captain's reminiscences of the War of 1812. He was just at the age to notice girls, sixteen, but as Susan was only eleven no one took the affair seriously.

However, as the Pentlands had a square piano while all Stephen had at the time was a flute and a guitar, he spent much time next door. It was on their piano that he improvised and wrote his first love song, Open Thy Lattice Love, in 1842. It was published two years later by George Willig of Philadelphia, bearing the inscription, "Composed for and dedicated to Miss Susan E. Pentland of Pittsburgh." And Miss Sue, with her hair still hanging down her back, was much flattered. Within seven years she was married to Andrew L. Robinson, one of the same group of youngsters who had grown up together on the Commons.

Open Thy Lattice Love is no hymn to Eros; it is a pallid aria. Foster composed the music, some unknown poet wrote the stanzas that had been printed in the New Mirror (a New York weekly paper), and the song enjoyed a vogue in Allegheny parlors. Stephen was acquiring the knack of getting notes down on paper, distributing chords, sustaining a theme. The introduction, like many of his preludes, is borrowed from the opening phrases and is characteristic; for in his songs that were to follow he never learned to improve on this approach.

A song which may have preceded the above (ascribed by Nevin to 1841) is Sadly to Mine Heart Appealing. But as it was not published until 1858, when Stephen was scraping the bottom of the barrel for salable tunes, no one knows exactly when it was written. What we do know are the great songs that followed Open Thy Lattice Love in the period when Stephen was still in Pittsburgh before being incarcerated again at bookkeeping in Cincinnati.

In 1844 political feeling ran high and Pittsburgh was particularly partisan. It was a presidential year and John Tyler of "Tippecanoe and Tyler too" was out to succeed himself, but Polk was nominated and elected. Audiences were harangued in the old Market Hall,

3 The author of the verses was George Pope Morris, whose best-known work is Woodman, Spare that Tree.
marching clubs were organized, and male choruses formed to sing party songs.

Such a singing group met in the Foster home. The sons caught their fervor from their fathers and in the ensemble were such names as J. C. Blair, Andrew L. Robinson, J. Harvey Davis, Robert P. McDowell, and Morrison Foster. Stephen was the director. As nearly as anyone knows, that was the first male chorus in Pittsburgh, and after the election fever died down the young men voted to continue practicing. They met twice a week and for lack of suitable material Stephen jumped in with a bright thought or two.

Negro tunes were favored and one night Stephen said he had written a little something he wished the boys would try over. So he brought out *Louisiana Belle* and it was an instantaneous smash hit—a hoedown dance tune.

Surprised and pleased with its success he showed up seven days later with another set of words and another kind of tune, *Uncle Ned*, a song that shortly became famous. But the fame went chiefly to the Sable Harmonists, a touring minstrel group, and it wasn't until long afterward that Foster was publicly recognized as the composer. In these two songs Foster found himself, and in *Uncle Ned* the whole world found a new song to sing.

*Louisiana Belle* is a good, stirring tune, built scalewise. It is not an outstanding Foster air but it taps along at a merry rate. The words (Stephen wrote them himself and here began a new era) are quite amusing and show a certain facility if no particular poetic thought. There are five verses and they fit the tune perfectly and go with a zip.

In *Uncle Ned* Foster's text again fits the tune to a T and is precisely in the mood. The verse is simple and catches the imagination at once. Slight wonder that *Old Uncle Ned* (as it was soon called) became a national ballad within a few years. Foster was nineteen when he wrote these songs, and they show him in the two veins that were to distinguish him—the gay and the sad. Of the two *Uncle Ned* is far the superior.

His sister, Ann Eliza, says that *Oh! Susanna* was also of this period of the singing society, but as Cincinnati claims that song it may have been written later. Its mood is quite different. Aside from the dialect, which may easily be ignored, it is not of negro genre but
was adaptable to, and immediately taken up by, any sort of wanderer off for the West by boat or covered wagon in the days of the great migrations.

These songs were passed along by word of mouth, were learned and sung that way, and were even written and published through that method. Foster was often victimized. It is not that he was a dupe, but Pittsburgh was a long way from any publishing center and at first he had no idea of the worth of a manuscript. He gave copies to anyone who would use them.

After these songs were published by W. C. Peters a letter from Stephen answering an inquiry on the subject of copyrights was sent to a William E. Miller. It is dated from Cincinnati, May 25, 1849, and what he said at that time is illuminating. It reads in part:

I gave manuscript copies of each of the songs, "Lou'siana Belle," "Uncle Ned," and "Oh, Susanna" to several persons before I gave them to Mr. Peters for publication, but in neither instance with any permission nor restriction in regard to publishing them, unless contained in a letter to Mr. Roark, accompanying the Manuscript of "Uncle Ned" although of this I am doubtful. Mr. Peters has my receipt for each of the songs.

The only information I can give you in regard to dates, as my memory does not serve me, must be in copying the years named on the title pages . . . "Lou'siana Belle" was copyrighted in 1847—the others in 1848.

That is, a year or two afterward, he had forgotten to whom he had given these brilliant compositions (except to William Roark of the Sable Harmonists), and when they were published. He had given W. C. Peters seven manuscripts and they made a fortune for him. Sometimes Foster's name is remembered and printed on the compositions and sometimes it is not. Morrison says: "He made a present of 'Old Uncle Ned' and 'Oh, Susannah' to Mr. Peters. The latter made ten thousand dollars out of them."

Every Forty-Niner, every fiddle that squeaked, every banjo that plunked its way to "Californy" played Oh! Susanna. And every rural tenor and country baritone took a fling at Old Uncle Ned. They swept the land. They were heard from Hell Gate to Golden

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4 William E. Millet was a New York music publisher, located at 329 Broadway. His firm issued a "pirated" edition of Old Uncle Ned on May 16, 1848, prior to the Peters edition. The Millet edition, which seems to have been published without Stephen's permission, was probably the first edition of the song.
Gate, and the ships sailing east and west from New York and San Francisco carried the gay stanzas of Susanna and "de bullgine," and Uncle Ned and his bald head. Those two songs immediately added to the enjoyment of the world.

By the time Peters had copyrighted them by permission of the composer, several other publishers had already done the same thing. But to Peters went the bulk of the rake-off, and the prestige which followed their success. He was a man who had followed the piano trade down the river, in fact he brought it down. When the instruments came over the mountains he reshipped them at Pittsburgh, by boat, for Cincinnati and on down the Ohio River. He also took himself to Cincinnati and it is said he made enough out of Foster's works to open another office in Louisville. When Stephen went to him with a new song that he wrote in his Cincinnati days Peters seems also to have gathered in the former ones written for the Pittsburgh singing group. There he sat, spiderwise, in his advertised "Emporium," waiting for inquisitive little flies like Stephen to walk into his clutches.

Stephen had studied a little with him in Pittsburgh and felt friendly toward him. But there is no evidence that Peters did anything for his former acquaintance except print his compositions for his own profit. As the years rolled on why didn't one of his business-like brothers demand that Foster be reimbursed for such a song as "Oh! Susanna?" There were trying days ahead in which back royalty would have been a life-saver.

After he had written his first great songs for the "Gentlemen be Seated," and before they were published when he shortly went to Cincinnati, came the Great Pittsburgh Fire of 1845. As Stephen was still living in that city he could have burst into a song to commemorate the disaster as he did for the Mexican and Civil wars. Topical songs were the rule of the day.

From the safe distance of Allegheny he must have watched the

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5 Stephen's brother Morrison devoted much time and energy to protecting Stephen's financial interests, both before and after his death. There is some evidence that Morrison went to see the New York publisher who issued the first ("pirated") edition of "Oh! Susanna," in an effort to obtain a financial interest in it for Stephen. It is not known whether his efforts were successful.

6 Presumably this refers to the Sable Harmonists, or to minstrel troupes in general.
whole, tremendous conflagration. At five minutes past noon on April 10, 1845, a woman was building a fire to wash her clothes out of doors. The weather was parching dry and high winds prevailed. While she had her back turned gossiping with a neighbor, sparks flew, and within a few minutes the town tocsin—the bell of the Third Presbyterian Church—had begun to toll, and every wagon-rim fire alarm carried the warning from hill to hill. Stephen saw great clouds of smoke go rolling up and red flames began to belch out into the streets and lick the water front. The local volunteer fire companies hurried to the scene—too late. Within five hours the flames had destroyed twelve hundred buildings.

What would have moved Stephen most was that his friend, Samuel Kingston, who lived near the Scotch Hill Market, lost his life trying to rescue a piano. Everyone in Lawrenceville, which was up the hill, and in Allegheny Town, across the river, offered shelter for the burnt-out survivors; doubtless Mayor Foster among them. Stephen, already composing for minstrels, overlooked a timely topic. And the “Point” of the city where the historical houses ought to stand has never been the same.

7 Evelyn Foster Morneweck, Stephen's niece, relates in her Chronicles of Stephen Foster's Family that Stephen and Morrison were among the Allegheny boys and men who turned out with all the volunteer fire companies to help fight the flames.

8 In 1845 Stephen was probably composing for the amusement of himself and friends, rather than for minstrels. His collaboration with minstrels was to come later.

9 His brother Morrison contributed a verse about the fire, to a political song written by Stephen in 1856, the year of the Buchanan-Fremont presidential campaign. The Democratic candidate was James Buchanan, related by marriage to the Foster family. In 1845, after the Pittsburgh fire, Buchanan had contributed $500 to the relief fund. Morrison’s verse, added to Stephen’s song, The Great Baby Show or The Abolition Show, comments on the ingratitude of the Republican followers of John C. Fremont:

In the year '45, when the fire laid us waste,
Old Buck gave us five hundred dollars in haste.
They then took his money, and lauded his name,
But he’s now “Ten Cent Jimmy,” their banners proclaim.
Chapter V: Cincinnati and Fame

The new packet, the "James Millingar," rounded the bend of the Ohio River. The whistle blew, the big bell that hung between the smokestacks bonged, the sternwheeler slowed down, and a frail, nervous youth packed away his flute and prepared to descend the companionway from the grand salon.

The young gentleman was Stephen Foster arriving in Cincinnati in the fall of 1846 to work in the office of his brother. Dunning Foster was the junior member of the firm of Irwin and Foster, steamboat agents, and owned a part interest in a number of vessels plying the river. He and Archibald Irwin were considered the coming merchants.

There was a squeak of pulleys and the landing stage shot out. "All ashore!" came the call. Stephen stepped off at Gilmour's Landing and there was his brother, Dunning, to grab his carpetbag and inquire about his trip. Easy—agreed Stephen, twenty hours. No particular excitement. At East Liverpool they let off three cows and a donkey and took on some crockery and at Marietta took aboard two or three tons of stone mill wheels. At Wheeling they unloaded bar'ls of whiskey and took on tobacco—nothing of much importance.

The young men sauntered up the river slope to Broadway, and then to Fourth Street and Jane Griffin's place where Dunning was boarding. If the city wasn't as large as Pittsburgh, still, to Stephen, it was a fair-sized town. On the streets were Conestoga wagons, this time drawn by oxen rather than horses as the Ohio hills were not as heavy going as the mountain ranges in Pennsylvania. Let the boy look around, said brother Dunning—who was five years ahead of the twenty-year-old Stephen and already an established business man—tomorrow would be time enough to start work.

10 Stephen's brother Dunning purchased the steamboat "James Millingar" late in 1851. The editor does not know of any source material which would prove that Stephen was a passenger on this boat in the autumn of 1846, on his trip from Pittsburgh to Cincinnati. 11 The author exercised his privilege as an artist to add color to his account of Stephen's trip. No source material concerning the cargo has been located, to date. Facts can be very dull! 12 Evelyn Foster Morneweck thinks that when Stephen first went to Cincinnati, Dunning and he boarded at the Broadway Hotel. They moved to Mrs. Griffin's boarding house later.
“Irwin and Foster” were located at No. 4 Cassilly’s Row, colorfully called in Cincinnati, “Rat Row,” and later on Broadway. There were sixteen shipping agents in the neighborhood and when a boat whistled everyone ran down to the river to see whose packet was in.

To Cassilly’s Row of warehouses Stephen repaired next morning. He was to be bookkeeper and invoice clerk and had learned a little about such matters while working for his father. Temperamentally, he was unfitted for any sort of work, as Dunning soon found out. He didn’t like business and he hated contacts with people who meant nothing to him. He was that way in the beginning and that way to the end. “You can’t make a truck horse out of a race horse,” the neighbors had said. Stephen wouldn’t stand hitched.

Obediently he mounts his stool, opens up the ledger, starts to enter debits and credits—and wonders what it’s all about. Then his eyes follow across the turbid Ohio to the fields of Kentucky. The river Negroes, he admits, have a much better time of it. He not only understands them, he envies their indifference. He decides to stroll down to the landing, and hears that a packet, “The Two Pollies,” is coming upriver with a troupe of minstrels on board. There is no more work that day. He goes back to the office, hangs up his alpaca coat, puts on his flat little hat, and hurries up to the canal and over to the Opera House to read the broadsides and throw-a-ways. Someone else could open the mail!

Cincinnati was the heart of minstrelsy, and to Stephen one flourish of a tambourine, one slap of bones, was worth a dozen hogsheads of molasses in Rat Row. Came “The Congo Melodists,” came Buckley’s New Orleans “Nightingales,” and finally William Roark and his roaring “Sable Harmonists,” and right then S. C. Foster sat up and took notice. Several notices, in fact, as it changed his whole life.

One day he picked up a stale copy of the London Daily News and, finding eight stanzas that pleased him, wrote There’s a Good Time Coming. It was his first Cincinnati song13 and he took it to W. C. Peters, who published it with others written in Pittsburgh. It was another kind of New Deal song and while it didn’t sell like wildfire it had a fair popularity at the time. In B-flat the composer tried a few adventuresome (for him) intervals and developed a pianistic accompaniment.

13 There’s a Good Time Coming was written in Pittsburgh and published in Cincinnati before Stephen left Pittsburgh for Cincinnati.
It is not a good song, nor entirely poor, but it did one good thing, it established him with Peters and opened up the sluice gates.

Old Michael P. Cassilly, who was a family friend of the Fosters, and whose name was on the “Cassilly Row” block, had a granddaughter, Sophie Marshall, whom Stephen occasionally went to call on. He liked to have her sing his new songs. “Miss Marshall possessed a beautiful voice and sang with much sweetness and taste.” But unless there was some good reason for it Stephen attended few of the numerous soirees and house concerts to which he and his brother were invited. His flute was his companion but he refused to play it for sociability’s sake. They tell a story down there that once a lady was giving a party and asked him to bring it along. He was annoyed beyond politeness and sent back word that he would be most happy to send his flute but that he would stay away. (For parallels to this story see Von Bulow, De Pachman, and others who substitute piano.)

Another Cincinnati legend runs that one dreary March afternoon in 1847, when the spring rise was making river life intolerable, Stephen sat looking out across the muddy Ohio. He was presumably busy at the office ledger adding up columns opposite sugar and shovels, beeswax and blue denim; he began to hum a little phrase; then he started writing down some words: “No use talkin’ when de Nigga wants to go whar de corn tops blossom and de canebrake grow—den come along to Cuba and we’ll dance de polka-juba—way down souf whar de corn grow!”

Archibald Irwin laid down his pen and looked at Dunning Foster. “Stevey writin’ another tune?” And Dunning answered, scratching his head in vexation: “Yep—he’ll never make even a tolerable business man!”

They were unaware that brother Morrison, back in Pittsburgh, had just sent Stephen a letter that day about a contest for minstrel songs. Morrison had read in the Pittsburgh Gazette that Nelson Kneass, an unscrupulous entrepreneur who had made himself prominent in the black-face business, was offering prizes for songs—fabulous awards, a ring set with a ruby for the “best comic song,” a gold watch chain for the best sentimental song, and a large loving cup for the best negro song. What Kneass was going to do with these songs when he got them was another matter. He was the same man who claimed he had written Ben Bolt. He had original ideas about being a composer, acquisitive ideas, and was a creature of infinite variety. Besides umpa-ing the banjo he could umpa the piano and that put him
two or three accompaniments up on his brothers of the Sable Circle.

The Eagle saloon in Pittsburgh was the favorite resort of all visiting artists, and to it came Nelson Kneass to be master of ceremonies. Mr. Andrews, owner of the “saloon,” was also a dealer in ice cream and pastries, and furnished his second floor on Wood Street with small tables where customers could watch the entertainment on a raised platform at the end of the room—a forerunner of the ubiquitous cabaret performance. When business was slack talented Kneass thought up a bright little ballyhoo, like the ruby ring and the loving cup.

“Just the thing for Stephie,” said Morrison.

Stephen finished his script, “Away Down South,” and sent it in to the competition. It was magnificently received, but the cards were stacked against him. The prize went to one of the “Eagle’s” regular performers. Morrison was very much put out and early next morning rushed to the United States Court to apply for a copyright on Stephen’s song. And there he found Nelson Kneass applying for the same thing in his own name!

Fortunately Morrison Foster arrived in time to protect his brother’s interests. “I informed Judge Irwin of the fraud,” he writes, “and the baffled rogue was glad to be allowed to depart unpunished.” Kneass, however, was not the sort to be “baffled.” It was an old theatrical custom, old as the stage, namely, if you see a script you like, take it. The episode is interesting, however, because it shows that Morrison was beginning to have an idea of the value of Stephen’s compositions.

There was a song written in 1847 by Foster that was indicative of his future sentimental numbers—Where is Thy Spirit, Mary? Evidently Peters, who was taking his negro ballads at the time, didn’t care for this one, for it only cropped up years after Foster’s death. The song is in one of his most elegiac moods and has some rather free and exquisite moments. A light number of the same year which Peters did publish asks another question, What Must a Fairy’s Dream Be?, composed in Foster’s thinnest style—the kind composers think they are writing for children and which children hate.

Stay Summer Breath is a ballad in which the text is a shade better than the tune, published by Peters in 1848 when Stephen seemed to be trying for novel effects. He introduces a staccato, hand-to-hand
detachment that is unusual for him. The same year Peters published a patriotic quickstep, *Santa Anna’s Retreat from Buena Vista*, which commemorated the end of the Mexican War. It was written for military bands and enjoyed a mild popularity.

Santa Anna fascinated Stephen. His brother Dunning was down in Mexico helping to defeat him—perhaps he would come marching back home to his quickstep? But Dunning came home a sick man and there was no marching.

Pittsburgh had had two frightful cholera epidemics due to the river water. Stephen’s mother was worried about his health in Cincinnati fearing that the contamination would spread down the Ohio. Luckily Stephen escaped. But soon after Dunning returned in ill health from Mexico, Morrison, traveling up and down the river on his business affairs, was stricken with cholera and forced to stop off at Cincinnati. Stephen sent for his mother, and when Morrison seemed out of danger he accompanied both of them back to Pittsburgh.

He made several restless trips to Pittsburgh in 1848-49. First with the cholera-stricken Morrison, then to two weddings of old friends, including that of his first flame, Susan Pentland, and Andrew Robinson. After these celebrations he made a trip to Warren, Ohio, to visit his sister, Henrietta, who had been remarried since he left home to Jesse Thornton, highly esteemed in the Western Reserve. In October of ’49 Stephen reluctantly returned to his bookkeeping, but for a few months only.

Cincinnati had taught him that he could write what the End Men wanted, and the publishers substantiated that knowledge. Following his initial successes with Peters, the reputable firm of Firth, Pond and Company asked him to submit manuscripts. So he wrapped up three or four songs in brown paper and sent them to New York. These were *Nelly Was a Lady*, *My Brudder Gum*, and *Dolcy Jones*, published in the fall of 1849, with *Nelly Bly* following in ’50.\(^1\)

For once his new songs appeared under his own name—“Foster’s Ethiopian Melodies.” They were an immediate hit.

A letter about them from Firth, Pond and Company in September, 1849, gave Stephen both good and bad advice. They warned him not to write too much, which was excellent, but they adjured him to

\(^{14}\) *Nelly Was a Lady* was published in the summer of 1849; the two other 1849 songs were published in the autumn.
write only for the public taste, which was his undoing.

These songs established Stephen Foster in the East. He didn't have to work hard to introduce them. The minstrel men took care of the momentum and he could give away his fifty free copies, which was all the remuneration he received. But at least he secured a contract for royalty on future publications by the same firm.

*My Brudder Gum* was an instantaneous success. The song in structure and thought is a lineal descendant of Rice's *Jump Jim Crow*, and the composer's earlier *Oh! Susanna*. In psychology and pattern it is a "shout," a character song, and essentially comic. It is a pretty fair banjo tune and carries an effective, simple, four-part chorus.

*Nelly Was a Lady* is the exact antithesis and represents Stephen at his height. There are certain magnificent phrases in this brief twelve-bar song, particularly that haunting, opening phrase. It is a "slow drag" and is Foster in a lovely mood. When it was sung in the fifties an old minstrel man claimed it to be the most profoundly touching melody he had ever used, and that the line, "Down in de meadow 'mong de clover," always held people breathless. The words are Foster's as were most of them at this period.

In the same group is the silly and yet funny *Dolcy Jones*, the stuttering, hiccuping, stumbling Dolcy, the joy of every Tambo of that era. It may not be good poetry—or even poetry at all—but in the mouth of a roistering singer with a strong impediment in his delivery it becomes capital minstrel material. Last of the four was *Nelly Bly*, not the best of Nelly songs but a "dulcet melody"—a banjo lilt of great possibilities when properly harmonized by the circle. Rattled with the bones and tambo, it is sure-fire. Despite its title it is an "Ethiopian" song.

Ring and Parker sang these numbers in Philadelphia, Frank Bower, Dan Emmett, and others took care of them in Manhattan, and the "Harmoniums" in Boston helped the cause of abolition there with *Nelly Was a Lady* and for good measure added *Uncle Ned*. Stephen Foster was not only in ascendancy, he was made.

The snowball was rolling. F. D. Benteen, a publisher in Baltimore, was also willing to "accommodate" him, and the following year

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15 Stephen's remuneration for *Nelly Was a Lady* and *My Brudder Gum* was fifty printed copies of each. He was paid royalties on sales of the other two songs: *Nelly Bly* earned him $564.34, and *Dolcy Jones*, $21.46.
brought out many songs, some of which were doubtless written in Cincinnati along with the early Firth, Pond and Company numbers.  
Cincinnati could hold him no longer. Even before knowing how far these songs would take him, upon seeing the success of a song like Oh! Susanna, he realized the time had come for him to devote himself entirely to composition. And there was another thing on his mind that would influence any young man. Jane McDowell, a girl whom he had known in her pigtails days in Pittsburgh, had visited friends in Cincinnati where he again met her.  
He had been rather lonely that winter, for it was when Dunning had gone off to the Mexican War. He called on Jane, and found she was engaged to a boy in New Lisbon—and that was that. Or was it? For she was the girl he married on July 22, 1850, and he must have had her in mind when he planned to return to the city where she lived. He had already been back there several times for other people's weddings.  
Sometime early in 1850 Stephen packed up his belongings, glad to take his writing materials to more congenial surroundings. He said good-by to his landlady, and being a gentle youth expressed gratitude for all she had done. He thanked Archibald Irwin of his brother's firm for putting up with him—and departed.  
He left Cincinnati with mixed emotions. Climbing to the upper deck of the packet he looked toward Broadway and then turned his back and faced the Kentucky shore. He stood there a solitary figure, but a very happy man. He had had his fling at business—and it had had its fling at him—and now he knew himself. No one in his family need try to change him.
Chapter VI: A Life Work Begins

Stephen Foster was bound up the Ohio for Pittsburgh. When the packet passed Beaver Creek he noticed a change in the waters, the color was a dirty, yellow ochre and there was a black scum along the shores. Coal barges were being pushed by a tug behind, long lines of them swerving as they passed. After they skirted the last farms on Neville Island he could see that Pittsburgh was growing. New buildings had sprung up at all the landings and the "Point" was being rebuilt. There were over sixty thousand people there in 1850, counting those in the adjacent river towns.

Stephen had plenty of time to think on that slow trip up-river. He was wondering (he spent all his vacillating life wondering) how a young man could support himself just writing songs? What bothered him most was what to do with the tunes that kept running through his head. One thing he was sure of—he was never going back into business.

The boat slid alongside the high, sloping banks and shivered to a standstill. He noted that on the Cincinnati shore there had been less activity. The banks there were flat and the ox teams never hurried beyond a languid "Haw-buck!" But up here in Pittsburgh darkey boys and donkeys were squirming like ants on the hillsides. Finally he called a colored idler and told him to load his heavy boxes on a dray. Then he climbed into a horse-bus and rattled over to Allegheny.

Stephen arrived at his father's house like another prodigal son. There wasn't much fatted calf for him, because the Foster fortunes were getting skimpier every day, but what there was, was his—he was welcome. Although his mother considered him her problem child, still he was her youngest, and that meant an untoward degree of affection. Stephen worshipped her and proved his love through the years by his innumerable mother songs.

Father Foster wasn't so enthusiastic. He was glad to see that Stephen wanted to come home, noted his rather distinguished appearance, but also remembered that he hadn't made good working in Cin-

16 No doubt a Cincinnatian of Stephen Foster's day would take exception to this statement. The Queen City of the West felt that her energy and activity equalled, if not surpassed, those of Pittsburgh!
cinnati with Dunning. And what was all this he had heard about his not wanting to work, at all?

The first thing Stephen did after he threw down his things in the hall was to ask for a room of his own. He said he wanted a place to himself, a sort of study, where he could do a little writing without being bothered by the family. Father Foster hemmed and hawed and offered him a desk in his downtown office. That, Stephen refused, flatfootedly—no more deskroom anywhere.

So his mother fitted out the upstairs back room looking over the garden. She had the squared-off ingrain carpet mended, and hung on the wall a lithograph of "The Great Pittsburgh Fire." But she did give him some useful things—a sofa, a large table, a music rack, an oil lamp, and a desk: to which he added an inkwell, piles of paper, and a ruler. The piano was downstairs in the front parlor (if there was any at this time), but a composer does not necessarily write on, or at, a piano. He can write at a desk and try his music over afterward, as Stephen evidently did, on his own or someone else's instrument.

That room was Stephen's turning point. In it he could turn the key in the lock and open the door only at his mother's knock, or when someone brought him a tray. He became the anchorite of Allegheny as Hawthorne was the anchorite of Salem.

He was an omnivorous reader, though he seldom turned his information to account. At one period he is said to have tried painting (doubtless for recreation), and now when he was master of his own time he began studying languages with Charles Shiras, the cultured publisher of the Albatross. But if Stephen began with what he heard around him on the Allegheny hillsides it must have been very imperfect Platt Deutch, or low German. His brother Morrison claimed that he "devoted himself to the study of music as a science," and one wishes it were true. A neighbor on Ridge Avenue, Emma Nicholson, noted that "he was a very poor player but he knew a little about writing," and further said that Mary Woods had to play his songs for him as he had such slight dexterity.

This is understandable as Stephen did not settle down to the piano until his middle twenties and by that time the hand is set. That, and the lack of his having his own instrument to practice on, would explain the paucity of his accompaniments. Whether there was any piano in the Foster home previous to his return from Cin-
cinnati early in 1850, there must have been one there during the year for Morrison spoke of the evenings when Stephen played, and of how the family enjoyed these impromptu concerts when he improvised on his own themes. The next morning Stephen would go upstairs to his room, turn the key in the lock, rule fifteen lines on his paper—five for the right hand, five for the left, five for the voice—and plough into composition.

Ideas flowed from his inkwell. One of the things he did after settling down at home was to organize a group of friends into a choral society. He had his own musical conventions, verse and chorus, and he needed sopranos, altos, tenors, and basses to try out the richnesses he was putting into these choral ends. There was brother Morrison for the low end, and among the sopranos were Mrs. Andrew L. Robinson, Mrs. John Mitchell, and Jessie Lightner. Stephen practiced his songs with this group. During 1850, after he had returned from Cincinnati, there were sixteen compositions published—most of them good.

His old firm of W. C. Peters issued the Soiree Polka and had it arranged for “piano four-hands.” Vienna might have its waltz and London its minuet, but in the river cities of America it was the schottische and the polka that set the hoop-skirts twirling. That is the most that can be said for this elemental bit of three-four writing.

But immediately came another national hit. Pittsburgh had one major diversion, horse racing. From this 1850 period came that classic of the turf, Gwine to Run All Night, later called in all the song books The Camptown Races. It was his first great success with his new contact, F. D. Benteen of Baltimore, and made that rather obscure firm known. It is still a success with our present-day male choruses and glee clubs.

Foster's epic of the race track came from his own observation. He knew how men bet on “de long-tail filly,” and how someone won “on de bay.” Jockeys quoted the “race track five miles long,” horses trotted to it, and at Havre de Grace the hostlers sang it as they rubbed down their lathered nags. Despite its nonsense it is one of the greatest track songs ever written.

Benteen had already published Oh! Lemuel which had a brief vogue in giving the End Men something to step, when he brought out Gwine to Run All Night, a money maker. But his publication of
Foster's *Dolly Day* was merely another banjo song in which the composer quoted his own familiar phrases.

In *Dolly Day* and the following *Angelina Baker*, Foster went back to his English heritage for his verse ideas. If they were stripped of dialect and included a yew-tree or thorn they would make acceptable folksong material. The following letter to Edwin P. Christy, the famous blackface minstrel, shows Foster's faith in minstrelsy's advancement of his songs—and that he knew a trick or two, himself:

"Dear Sir:

Herewith I send you copies of my late songs, 'Gwine to Run All Night' and 'Dolly Day.' I regret that the title page had been ordered and probably cut before I was informed of your desire that your name should not be used in connection with other bands. I have accordingly ordered my publisher in Baltimore to have a new title page cut bearing the name of your band alone, like that used by Messrs. Firth, Pond and Co., N. Y., as I wish to unite with you in every effort to encourage a taste for this style of music so cried down by opera mongers."

An interesting remark about "opera mongers." He must have heard Ridge Avenue making fun of his trade and reacted violently to their precious opinion. To him there was no condescension in writing for the minstrels. He believed in them. He could have written twice as many songs in 1850 and found an immediate market.

Firth, Pond and Company increased their royalty rates a few years later. Naturally, Foster had to write his own words for he was a one-style, two-mood composer, and his texts were part of his success. When he essays others' verses he proves how unadaptable his muse was. Then, again, there were very few lyricists available. A few poets were writing for *Godey's Lady's Book* and Frank Leslie's new publications, and of course there were the classics; but inasmuch as none of these mentioned "lubly gal," "de corn-brake," or "shubble and de hoe," they were not at all suitable for Ethiopian purposes.

Of "wine, women and song," he knew only wine and song—the well-known Pittsburgh whiskey and his own song. "Outside of his own studies and performances," wrote faithful Morrison, "he seemed to prefer to get away from music and musical topics." And again, "his companions were seldom musicians." There must have been plenty of opportunity, for the Foster family had entree in many places, but Stephen stayed away. There were some musicians who knew him professionally, who spoke of him jealously, who deprecated his
efforts, but few of them knew him socially or intimately. Which may explain the stories that are still told around Pittsburgh, for he was accused of everything from crass ignorance to boorishness.

It was a difficult business being the nation’s foremost composer and sometimes Stephen hit it and sometimes he didn’t. *Way Down in Ca-i-ro* is a Firth, Pond and Company print and is a transient eight-bar bit, *a la* banjo. It is Foster stereotype, and his quatrains are palpably rewrites from other compositions, but it does sing. *Lily Ray*, also published by Firth, Pond and Company is consecutively gentle. Brief as it is (there are only ten bars), the song has much of the tenderness of a German *volkslied*, as if Stephen had wandered up the Spring Garden hillside and come back from an afternoon in a *bier gaerten* with a grief-stricken lay.

The dirge days were beginning. Lovely maidens were drooping and dying and Foster was becoming a professional mourner. The Great Weeps were sweeping over America. So came *Ah! May the Red Rose Live Alway*, from Benteen in Baltimore, and it shows Foster in a more individual mood with an almost Scotch flavor, asking the singer to execute a well-turned mordent. In its turn, Firth, Pond and Company issued the *Voice of Bygone Days*, and Stephen had a good time soothing the weary-hearted.

It was the period when fathers took their children to the cemeteries for their Sunday afternoon walks and there contemplated the tombs, the weeping willows, and the flowery epitaphs. A study of the lithographs of the day shows to what extent the country mourned its departed, and Foster was distinctly of his day. It must not be supposed that these sad lays were intended primarily for the square piano and an evening at home. Not at all—they were designed for the minstrel trade! People went to performances to cry as well as laugh, and it was a happy concert that could give them both emotions.

Two of the most engaging titles issued by Benteen were *I Would Not Die in Spring Time* (1850), and a year later what he termed an answer to it, *I Would Not Die in Summer Time*. Anent the first, Foster had thought seriously of using a pseudonym for his words, choosing “Milton Moore,” a name compounded from those of his two favorite poets, John Milton and Thomas Moore. But much as he liked the alliteration he discarded the name after one attempt in the vernal *I Would Not Die in Spring Time*. Even for by-products and
second-raters it wouldn't do. The only capital he had was the name Stephen C. Foster—that was what the publishers, the minstrel men, and the public wanted.

Other authors wrote and encouraged him, among them Washington Irving. Travelers sent messages that they had heard *Oh! Susanna* sung by the cottages of the Clyde, and *Uncle Ned* was once heard at the base of the Cairo pyramids. These things made little difference to him unless to enforce longer hours in his Union Avenue hermitage.

He might have had the stimulation of contemporary musicians like Herz, Sivori, Thalberg, or Ole Bull (who was a prominent figure in Pennsylvania) had he not shunned all contacts with such men. His tools were his sole companions: his piano (when he had one), his flute, his guitar, and his baritone voice which could interpret both words and music.

That his texts were what is called clean-minded is apparent. And that is rather remarkable because Pittsburgh at the time he lived in it was full of rowdyism and the language of the streets was Rabelaisian. But a minstrel show containing an indecent gag or a suggestive song would never have gotten beyond the river landing; the next boat would have seen the troupe headed downstream. A rather remarkable period and a decidedly remarkable popular composer. Stephen Foster was one hundred per cent pure on any square piano and made the minstrel song safe for democracy.

He was not the father of minstrelsy, some ill-advised admirers to the contrary. He might be called its chief architect. Pittsburgh and Cincinnati were the great jumping boards for the Burnt Cork Circle, and he was right there to supply them. Through them he spoke and through him they sang.

America owes to the Negro, himself, the first native form of stage show. Minstrels originated on the plantations, with their banjo men, their hand-clappers and tambourines, and the white man borrowed the idiom and organized it. The buck-and-wing dancers, the soft-shoe dancers, were there in the beginning as were the singers. The ritual and the routine were all that was added.

From its beginnings on the plantations, minstrelsy made its way to the circus. It became the Grand After Concert, anticipating the final rodeo or wild west show of the present day. From the tanbark
ring it made its way painfully to the midwest saloon, and then entertainers like Daddy Rice came along and developed it into a show for the river boats. It started to flower in the thirties, reached its full bloom in the sixties, and then decay set in—or rather, its motivations were absorbed in other forms of entertainment.

The theater of the period was almost as elemental as it was in Shakespeare’s day; perhaps in the middle west it was more so. Of light theater there was very little, and the country beyond the Appalachians was hungry for it. There were a few comedy itinerants, and negro singers strummed their banjos on the street corners, but laughter-entertainment ended.

It was the opening of the Pennsylvania Canal that released the flood and brought small operatic troupes over the mountains. The same momentum brought the minstrels and made song-and-dance men popular. And every time the "Gentlemen of the Circle" rattled the clappers they paid obeisance to the gifted composer at the forks of the three rivers. By the same token he owed everything to them. When the last Grand-Walk-Around is completed it will be Foster's triste face that will appear above the Interlocutor’s Chair.

17 Stephen’s earnings from *Gwine to Run All Night* (Camptown Races) were only $101.25.