

## THE MINSTREL OF THE ALLEGHENIES

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### Chapter VII: *Young Folks and "Old Folks at Home"*

THE HIGH TIDE of Stephen Foster's career was during 1850, '51, and '52, when he had returned from Cincinnati and wrote such numbers as *Old Folks at Home* followed by the great Kentucky folk song.

His first years free from business interruptions led to a rich outpouring. Royalty checks were mounting. He had few expenses beyond postage, ink and paper and he was still the simple, studious composer who paid his bills as he went along and had his lodgings with his family. He felt he could afford a wife.

Over in Stanwix Street in the heart of downtown Pittsburgh lived the McDowell family, and Stephen often went across the river to call on Jane. She was a beautiful, auburn-haired, open-faced girl who had beaux by the dozens. Having once renewed his acquaintance with her when she was visiting in Cincinnati Stephen pursued her society night after night, and if Jane were otherwise busy spent the time with her charming sisters. Her father, Dr. Andrew McDowell, the friend of Dickens, had a full set of the master's works in which a waiting caller might browse.

His most annoying rival was his boyhood friend, Richard Cowan. A family narrative relates that one night Jane made an error and the two young men appeared at her door simultaneously. Stephen settled down with a book while Richard had the preferred spot in the parlor. But when Richard Cowan left at the respectable hour of ten-thirty Stephen threw down his book, stepped into Jane's presence, and demanded an immediate "Yes," or "No." The answer was "Yes," and on July 22, 1850, they were married.

Jane had a dressmaker come to the Stanwix Street house to make her wedding outfit, a "riding dress" ready for travel. Then she went a couple of squares to "C. Arbuthnot's" and returned with a little, flat, hatbox not much bigger than a flapjack and just as limp; and with it a box of gloves and gaiters to match her costume, and several fluted nightcaps. Stephen was no Beau Brummell but for his wedding, like

any other youth of twenty-four, he ordered gray trousers, narrow at the bottom, a flowered waistcoat, and for crowning glory an oversized beaver topper. These costumes, and the wedding which was the Episcopal service performed by the Rev. Mr. Theodore B. Lyman, were described by the bride's sister Agnes who wrote soon afterward to another sister, Marian. She mentions the wedding cake, the ice cream, the three kinds of wine, and, in sarcasm, "the delightful serenade" given them that night by hoodlums who first played and shouted for two hours before the wrong house. No matter what the years brought, Stephen's was a regulation wedding of his day.

The family had been boarding in various places in Allegheny prior to Stephen's marriage, but now they decided to be together again. So Stephen brought his bride home to their former residence on the Commons and moved in with his father and mother, Morrison when he was at home, Henry and his wife (the attractive Mary Burgess whom he had married three years before), and two servants to run the place. William, Sr., was confined to his bed at the time,<sup>1</sup> and there was an occasional tightness in the exchequer. But if Stephen and Jane didn't "live happily ever after" at least for the time being they lived equably with a houseful of relations.

Perhaps because their home was now too crowded to allow him a studio, the week he was married Stephen rented an office and became businesslike, going to shop to compose. He contributed his share of the household budget as did his brothers, and Morrison kept the accounts. Working regularly, it seemed to Stephen that he couldn't get his songs down fast enough. There were seventeen publications in 1851. Some of the songs were banal, some were exceedingly good, and one is immortal—*Old Folks at Home*. Every few months Foster turned out a moneymaker, and every year in the early fifties, one or two masterpieces.

He kept a sketchbook and jotted down ideas for tunes, sometimes illustrating them with drawings. The first few pages are given over to word improvisations for, like "Sentimental Tommy," he worked at a word until he got the right shade of rhyme and meaning. One can follow the changes in such a number as *Laura Lee* (published by Ben-

<sup>1</sup> Howard says: "In 1851, Foster, senior, became an invalid and was confined to his room for the four years until his death." When Stephen and Jane were married, he had not yet become an invalid.

teen in '51) and his struggles with "Swanee Ribber"—words that are unforgettable in any language.

The verses for two or three of his songs for this year were written by someone else—always a mistake with Foster. He wrote two farewell songs; the one for Mrs. Harry Woods, *Farewell Old Cottage*, being brought out by Firth, Pond. Soon Benteen published his first mother song, *Mother, Thou'rt Faithful to Me*—he was alternating between the two vying firms.

Dutchtown was only a stone's throw from Stephen's home and with Henry Kleber's help he translated and arranged Franz Abt's *In den Augen liegt das Herz*, which was published by Firth, Pond under the title, *In the Eye Abides the Heart*. Another novelty, *Wilt Thou Be Gone, Love*, was a duet paraphrased from the garden scene of "Romeo and Juliet," one of Foster's most ambitious flights: chromatics, voices in thirds, a two-voice mordent, and the whole rising to a graceful climax which must have sounded well in those square piano days.

There were also oversights, either because of matrimony or because the songs were coming too fast to record. Thus there came to light in 1931 a delightful song, *Long Ago Day*, which Foster had given to his minstrel friend, Thomas D. Rice, at this period along with *This Rose Will Remind You*. The first of the "Willie" songs made its appearance, *Willie, My Brave*, dedicated to his old friend Mrs. Andrew Robinson, who couldn't have been as flattered by it as she was when, as Susan Pentland, she had received her first tribute.

A success of the year was *Ring de Banjo*. Despite the debate as to whether the Negro played the banjo (some say he only knew the fiddle and the bones, and others grow philologicistic and claim the word is derived from the Congoese "Banjar"), along came Foster with a good stirring rhythm to capture the End Man's mood, writing as only he knew how. Another popular number was *Oh! Boys, Carry Me 'Long*. Within a short time it ran into twenty editions and a guitar arrangement was brought out. Firth, Pond published both of these triumphs and the receipts rolled in. In six-eight time, key of F, the latter song has a marked lilt and strong originality. It is still used, thanks to its appealing chorus line, "Carry me till I die."

The nugget of pure gold in the run-of-mine output of 1851 was *Old Folks at Home*. This was published about twelve months after Stephen's marriage to Jane, and five months after their only child, a

daughter Marion, was born. According to Evelyn Morneweck (Morrison's daughter and an exemplary chronicler), this was on April 18, 1851. Stephen's glory was then at full tide.

Every great song has its legend, sometimes the sheerest romance, and occasionally a vestige of truth. The legend of *Old Folks at Home* is almost as much quoted as the song. From Morrison's excellent biography the story has traveled around the world. Let him tell it:

One day in 1851 Stephen came into my office on the banks of the Monongahela, Pittsburgh, and said to me, "What is a good name of two syllables for a Southern river? I want to use it in this new song of "Old Folks at Home."

I asked him how Yazoo would do "Oh," said he, "that has been used before." I then suggested Pedee. "Oh, pshaw," he replied, "I won't have that!" I then took down an atlas from the top of my desk and opened the map of the United States. We both looked over it and my finger stopped at the "Swanee," a little river in Florida emptying into the Gulf of Mexico.

"That's it, that's it exactly," exclaimed he, delighted, as he wrote the name down; and the song was finished, commencing, "Way Down Upon de Swanee Ribber." He left the office, as was his custom, abruptly, without saying another word, and I resumed my work.

Had Foster known more about that muddy little creek called the Swanee he might not have been so enthusiastic. Any two-syllable name would have done, but between Peedee and Yazoo there must of necessity have been "one more river to cross." Even if Foster knew nothing of Florida, or any other place "up and down de whole creation," the word was just right for his purpose. Inspiration and accuracy do not always go hand in hand.

So came that international classic and the world had another folksong to sing and Europe received another impression of plantation life. Simple, dignified, the famous fragment has musical perfection.

Firth, Pond published the piece in October, 1851, and it was deposited for copyright under the caption, "An Ethiopian Melody as sung by Christy's Minstrels—written and composed by E. P. Christy." Then the confusion began.

The song ran into hundreds of thousands, made a fortune for Firth, Pond and Company, and gave Foster a royalty sheet estimated at more than \$15,000.<sup>2</sup> It was one of the world's greatest sellers. It

<sup>2</sup> The tradition that Foster received \$15,000 in royalties from the sale of *Old Folks at Home* has become well established. It is frequently encountered by the Foster student. However, his actual earnings were much less than this legendary figure. During his own

was heard around campfires in the Civil War, North and South, and around campfires in Africa and Australia. Included in all anthologies, it has been translated into almost every tongue. Few other folksongs have had its success, only *Home Sweet Home* surpassing its appeal.

Queen Victoria, when the Fisk Jubilee Singers came to London, is said to have asked for it at every performance. It was tremendously popular at the time when England was interested in our affairs in the South and was repeated in high cockney accents in all the music halls. Canada enjoyed it, even the voyageurs of Quebec borrowed the idiom and sang *Old Folks at Home* in *patois*. Minstrelsy was spreading.

Foster had already entered into an agreement with Ned (Edwin P.) Christy and that entrepreneur had capitalized on him while omitting his name from the title page.<sup>3</sup> When Foster gave Christy the rights to *Old Folks at Home* he gave him the rights of show publication, a move that he later regretted. Morrison Foster states that Christy gave the composer \$500 for the exclusive privilege of bringing this song out, but it is possible that Morrison forgot the exact amount and added a zero. Five hundred dollars would have been an unheard of sum for those days, as up to this time Foster had received only ten dollars for the same sort of contract. A letter that Stephen wrote to Christy in

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life, Stephen's royalties were \$1,647.46. After his death, his heirs received an additional \$1,923.09 from the song, and \$40.53 from arrangements of it. This makes a total of \$3,611.08 in royalties for *Old Folks at Home*. The amount would have been greater if, in 1857, Stephen had not sold back to his publishers his future interest in this song.

<sup>3</sup> Foster sold Christy the right to have Christy's name listed on the title page of *Old Folks at Home* as author and composer. Christy paid fifteen dollars for this privilege (not five hundred dollars as Morrison Foster stated years later). This transaction took place as a result of Stephen's own suggestion, so Christy did not take advantage of him as has been frequently stated. When Stephen began to realize, in 1852, that *Old Folks at Home* was among his best works, he deeply regretted the bargain that he himself had proposed, and asked Christy to permit him to use his own name on future editions of the song. Christy, preferring to follow the terms of the bargain originally arranged by Stephen, refused. Therefore, all editions of *Old Folks at Home* published during the period of the first copyright, 1851-1879, bear the name of E. P. Christy as author and composer, and include no reference to Stephen Foster. When the song was re-copyrighted in 1879, Morrison Foster made sure that the name of Stephen Foster appeared on the title page as author and composer.

While Foster sold (not gave) Christy the right to have the latter's name on the title page, and gave the Christy Minstrels the right to use the song, all the royalties from the sale of the published copies of *Old Folks at Home* went to Foster.

May, 1852, is indicative of his concern about his own mounting reputation. Said he, in part:

As I once intimated to you, I had the intention of omitting my name on my Ethiopian songs, owing to the prejudice against them by some, which might injure my reputation as a writer of another style of music . . . but have concluded to reinstate my name . . . and to pursue the Ethiopian business without fear or shame and lend all my energies to make the business live. . . . But I am not encouraged in undertaking this so long as "The Old Folks at Home" stares me in the face with another's name on it. . . . On receipt of your free consent . . . I will . . . willingly refund you the money you paid me on that song. . . . I find I cannot write at all unless I write for public approbation.

Christy, in New York and on the road, had the reputation of being a straight-shooter. That he gave the rightful composer permission to use his own name is apparent, as later editions of all the Ethiopian airs are printed "Stephen C. Foster."<sup>4</sup>

There were interesting sidelights in that letter. It shows that Foster contemplated writing other music than the minstrel type. Yet, when he did change his style, he wrote only doggerel in his efforts to sell to the revival and fireside trade. What was this "fear or shame" that hounded him all his life? Did his friends still think his huge successes ignoble? Or did his bride? Evidently no one—and himself least of all—understood the value of his output or dreamed that it would place him among the world's great geniuses.

The most disturbing thought is the passage saying he cannot write at all unless "for public approbation." That is a strange confession for a composer to make. Many illustrious men have written despite the public, caring very little whether their songs were used or not. Music was in them and it had to come out. If the public fell in line so much the better for the public.

Ned Christy was a typical showman, claiming everything, and it was claimed for him that he invented minstrelsy. This in spite of the fact that it had been known up and down the rivers for ten years. Christy did, however, arrange the ritual, setting the number of gags to be used and adding the olio and the grand finale. He opened in New York at Palmo's Opera House and soon took over Mechanic's Hall where his minstrels played for nine years and eleven months to S.R.O. audiences: a record deserving our Hollywood adjective, "stupendous."

<sup>4</sup> Christy did not give Foster permission to use his own name on *Old Folks at Home*. See note 3 above.

Ned retired (he afterward committed suicide) and George Christy took over the shows. In conjunction with Henry Woods he made a fortune. As most of the performers were either of English or Irish descent they wanted to take their hits back to London. In England they became known as the Royal Christy Minstrels, and the Queen's Christy Minstrels, and the cockneys changed the name of "End Men" to "Corner Men." But neither Ned nor George ever accompanied the troupes abroad; they were Christy only in name.

England, therefore, heard Foster's airs as soon as they came out and his name became a backstage tradition, although the stalls and galleries weren't sure there was such a person. Prime Minister Gladstone attended and forgot the cares of state in the japes and jokes, though the learned *London Illustrated News* stood offside and scoffed at the whole technique.

In the United States, also, there were detractors. Actor-producers were worried and one theatrical writer burst into print with: "The great and increasing popularity of Negro minstrelsy is a matter of serious concern to the purveyor of dramatic exhibitions in every town and city upon the vast continent of America." Querulous John S. Dwight, the Boston music critic, and the first of the discerning ones, complained in his much-read *Journal of Music* (published in 1853), that such tunes as *Old Folks at Home* were "erroneously supposed to have taken a deep hold of the popular mind . . . such melody breaks out every now and then like a morbid irritation of the skin." This disciple of Brook Farm must have been terribly irritated himself, as Foster was exceedingly popular and *Old Folks at Home* was sweeping the country. It had been off the press a little less than a year when a scrivener in the *Albany State Register* gave out a rhapsodic review:

"Old Folks at Home," the last negro melody, is on everybody's tongue, and consequently in everybody's mouth. Pianos and guitars groan to it, night and day; sentimental young ladies sing it . . . all the hands play it; amateur flute players agonize over it at every spare moment; the street organs grind it out . . . the butcher boy treats you to a strain or two as he hands in the steak for dinner; the milkman mixes it up strangely with the harsh ding-dong of his bell . . . indeed at every hour we are forcibly impressed with the fact that—

Way down upon de Swanee Ribber

Far, far away,

Dere's whar my heart is turnin' ebber

Dere's whar de old folks stay.

## Chapter VIII: "My Old Kentucky Home"

THE YEAR 1852 was a lean one for songs, numerically, but two written then were of Foster's best so the result in terms of success is very high.

In the summer Firth, Pond and Company, who took over all his publications after their bonanza in *Old Folks at Home*, issued the well-known *Massa's in de Cold Ground*—Foster in his richest vein. The Christy Minstrels had pre-publication rights and introduced it with telling effect. It is magnificently poignant and moved thousands of listeners. One finds the familiar "de," "neber" and "cayse," but Foster fitted the text perfectly to his melodic theme and the result is a notable example of pure melody and sure harmonization. Every school child knows this nostalgic number and it became the favorite of the locker room quartets. *Massa's in de Cold Ground* remains today one of the world's great *chansons funebres*.

At this time the minstrels had taken over songs of the sea, sailor chanteys, and Irish themes, and possibly Stephen thought he could merge all three in *Maggie by My Side*. The composition had a respectable sale but is distinctly below par. There was a duet, written in sixes and thirds, *The Hour for Thee and Me*—a short flight of sixteen bars and soon over. A month later appeared another doloroso piece, *I Cannot Sing Tonight*, with a text by George F. Banister. Aside from the *parlando* phrase, "I cannot, I cannot," the interest lags. However, Foster did manage to make a guitar arrangement of his successful *Gwine to Run All Night* and changed the title to the *Camptown Races*.

But the furious struggles of the years '48 and '49, when he tossed off and threw away *Uncle Ned* and *Oh! Susanna*; the dreary drudgery in Cincinnati and subsequent successes on his return to Pittsburgh; and above all, the exhausting past year culminating in the world acclaim given to *Old Folks at Home*, had left him not only depleted but willing to rest on his oars and enjoy prosperity. Before *Massa's in de Cold Ground* had added its quota to his renown, he decided to take a trip and see the South that had finally made him famous.

Dunning, since the Mexican War, had become more and more a



riverman, owning his own boat and often taking a voyage as skipper or supercargo. He wrote the family that he was planning to come to Pittsburgh for freight in February, 1852, and invited them to return with him to New Orleans. His packet, the "James Millingar," was a handsome sternwheeler able to hold her own against any other of the "Whiskey Haulers" as they were called.

They organized an agreeable party—almost the old Choral Society: Stephen and his wife, Mr. and Mrs. Andrew L. Robinson (she was the former Susan Pentland), Mrs. William Robinson and her daughter, Mary Ann, Richard Cowan (an old rival of Stephen's), and the lovely Jessie Lightner, who later became Morrison Foster's wife. On the down trip after a stop at Wheeling they took on more friends at Cincinnati, Miss Louise Walker and her two brothers. As T. M. Walker, the chronicler, noted, the travelers were all possessed of musical ability which made the trip not only pleasant for themselves but for all the other passengers who listened on deck.

Soon they were headed south, "The Deep South" of which Stephen wrote so eloquently. He had once made a short river trip with his mother as a boy but now he was to pick up authentic local color and at last see the levee-land and the cane brake which he had already immortalized.

Every morning Dunning invited the party up to the pilot house and sometimes Stephen took the wheel, and sometimes when the course was straight one of the Walker boys took it. Dunning was both owner and captain and if he wished to let his guests take a hand it didn't matter much. The river was wide and the towns fifty miles apart.

At night the party ascended to the upper deck and watched the sun go dipping down as the boat headed westward. The farther south they turned the sharper the stars seemed to become; and always the great, winding river, with only the swish and push of the water against the bow and the breathing of the engines.

Louisville came into view, lovely, lazy, sprawling Louisville, and at the public landing they received an invitation from John Rowan, Jr., to bring Stephen's party over to Federal Hill, at Bardstown; a plan they had no opportunity, then, to accept. But at some period, either on the

return trip or on another unrecorded journey of 1852, Stephen is known to have been there.<sup>5</sup>

On down the river went the "James Millingar," running ashore to take on a horse or a cow and then laboring off to another bank to unload casks of whiskey and sacks of meal. The evening landings were the best when the lanterns twinkled their signals and the packet was always in danger of running afoul a sandbar. The bells would clang and the boat tie in until the fog lifted or the morning sun dried it up. After three weeks they made New Orleans and were entranced with the old city. Marvelous hours were spent in the old French quarter sampling *bouillabaisse* on stomachs attuned to Pennsylvania buckwheat cakes. Then Stephen thought he would look up an old acquaintance, Dan Rice.

Dan Rice was a minstrel man, and New Orleans had a great fondness for him. They liked their shows a little more refined than in the East, but they patronized Rice's Virginia Serenaders. Stephen Foster and Richard Cowan had known the showman back in his old Pittsburgh days when he was driving horses for a prominent family and doing an amateur End Man act on the side. Rice knew Stephen as the greatest musical contributor the minstrel business had, and used his songs.

The story runs that the young men thought they would like to get away from the women-folk for a while and asked Dan Rice to show them around town. He gave them a glimpse of the Creole quarter, showed them the celebrated street where the "ladies of the evening" dallied at their front doors, and finally they asked to be taken to a cockfight—a sport which Pennsylvania and Louisiana had in common.

"Boys," said Rice, "I couldn't think of risking my reputation by being seen at a cockfight!"

However, he found someone who could. And after Rice had saved his reputation he rejoined the others for the rest of the city tour, "Le Vieux Carre," Laffite's headquarters, the slave block, the old houses with gardens. Stephen wished that the Allegheny houses had half of New Orleans' seclusion and wanted particularly a "wandering gallery."

<sup>5</sup> The writer of these notes does not believe that there is any source material that would verify the statement in the first sentence of this paragraph, that John Rowan, Jr., sent an invitation to the Foster party at Louisville to visit Federal Hill. In fact, there is no reliable evidence that Stephen visited Federal Hill in 1852.

Three happy days and the party started back up the river. Baton Rouge first, then a stop-over at Natchez—Under-the-Hill: picturesque Natchez with its inimitable colored section full of "copy," a drama in every doorway. On up-river, slowly, to Memphis, and a stay at Cairo where they entered the Ohio River again. Stephen was curious about this town at the forks of the Mississippi because he had already written a song about it.

Back to Cincinnati; and there Dunning decided to send his passengers the rest of the way on Captain Batchelor's "magnificent new boat, the peerless 'Allegheny.'" He, himself, must return down-stream to New Orleans. Stephen and Jane went back to their baby and the East Commons house while their friends dispersed with many thanks for the memorable trip; even more memorable to Stephen and his young wife than to the others, for their vacations together were rare.

An observing contributor to *Putnam's Monthly* (1855) noted with regret that many "poetasters who never saw a crocodile or smelt magnolia blossoms in their lives sit coolly down to write an African ditty as a pleasant after-dinner pastime." But in the case of Stephen Foster he already had plenty of contacts before he journeyed into the Negroes' domain. He may not have seen them at work on the plantations until he took this New Orleans trip, but he made very few mistakes in his verses about "de land ob cotton."

Sometime in the year 1852 he went to Bardstown, Kentucky, to visit his cousins at the now famous Federal Hall; famous, that is, because of his visit.<sup>6</sup> That he was familiar with the setting is proved by his song, *My Old Kentucky Home*, which was published the following year.

<sup>6</sup> One of the most interesting of all controversies in the Stephen Foster story deals with the connection between Stephen, Federal Hill, and his great song, *My Old Kentucky Home*. The controversy is summed up in the following questions: (1) Did Stephen Foster ever visit Federal Hill? (2) If so, when did he visit it? (3) Did he write *My Old Kentucky Home* there? The reader who is interested in going into the various phases of this controversy is referred to two of Foster's chief biographers, John Tasker Howard, *Stephen Foster, America's Troubadour*, pp. 170-177, and Evelyn Foster Mornesweck, *Chronicles of Stephen Foster's Family*, vol. 2, pp. 402-413. However, the reader who studies these two authorities will become more confused, because he will find that they do not agree!

Howard is skeptical about the evidence offered to uphold the Bardstown legends. He states, correctly, that there is no *contemporary, reliable, source material* to verify the tradition. While not flatly

Thirty miles from Louisville, across the undulating hills, lies Bardstown, the ancestral home of the Rowans. A fast Kentucky horse in Stephen's day could have made the trip in twelve hours. Over the Louisville Pike he must have driven, as before him went Louis Philippe and the Marquis de Lafayette, and as a mysterious young priest had gone in 1789, William de Rohan, and after him, John Rowan, Indian fighter, hunter, duellist, senator, and famous jurist.

Judge Rowan built Federal Hall, first because this was a hunting country, and second because he wanted a country estate that he could drive out and enjoy when he grew tired of law in Louisville. Later on he enlarged this home, added plantation quarters, and equipped it after the fashion of a Southern gentleman.

Judge Rowan died before Stephen came upon the scene, and "Young John," Stephen's third cousin, carried on the Rowan traditions. He, too, was a man of distinction, a duellist of note. He married Rebecca Carnes, a Baltimore belle, and was sent as minister to the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies during President Polk's administration.

"Young John" was a highly civilized man and when he returned from Venice and Florence he invited gifted men to be his guests at Federal Hall. There came Theodore O'Hara, who wrote the much-quoted "Bivouac for the Dead," and William Haines Lytle, author of that famous rhetorical speech dear to schoolboys, "I am Dying, Egypt, Dying." Lytle was a cousin of the Fosters and the Rowans. Then came the most famous guest of all, "Cousin Steve," from Pittsburgh.

Stephen is said to have been in love with the old, brick house and the huge ailanthus tree "where the birds made music all the day." He noted how "the corn-top's ripe and the meadow's in the bloom," and as

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denying that Stephen may have visited Federal Hill, he answers these questions by saying that it has never been satisfactorily proved that he did visit it, or when, or that the song was written there. On the other hand, Mrs. Morneweck believes that Foster did visit Bardstown in 1852, but states that *My Old Kentucky Home* was not written there, but in Pittsburgh.

The writer of these notes tends to follow Howard in this controversy. In his opinion, the controversy will probably never be satisfactorily settled. The chances of contemporary source material coming to light, which will verify the tradition that Foster visited Bardstown, either in 1852 or at some other date, seem unlikely. Morrison Foster, Mrs. Morneweck's father, made the definite statement that *My Old Kentucky Home* was composed in Pittsburgh, and there seems to be no question about the accuracy of this statement.

he looked down from his large second-floor room into the Negro quarters he could see "the young folks roll on the little cabin floor." Out beyond was the high tableland of the plantation sloping down toward the distant Ohio River. It must have been as beautiful a vista then as it is today and that he was moved by the panorama one may well believe.

The rest, the world knows. *My Old Kentucky Home*, one of Foster's finest songs, came from this inspiration. Did he write it there? The Kentuckians think so. Or did he write it at home after he left Bardstown?

"Marse Henry Watterson" says he did write it there, and a number of other songs, but the Southern editor was not altogether accurate about Stephen Foster. It doesn't really matter as the locale is unquestionably Federal Hill, faithful in background, and as John Philip Sousa once said: "If he didn't write it there in the South he might just as well have."

The Christy Minstrels introduced the song, Firth, Pond and Company published it, and it ran into thousands. Like *Old Folks at Home*, *Oh, Susanna*, and *Oh! Boys, Carry Me 'Long*, it achieved the greatest possible success. Years later Kentucky was to make it her state song.

The verse is of superior quality in this lyric. There is no attempt at comic contrast or mispronunciation; Foster paints the picture without blackface or Tambo and Bones' help. Was he getting weary of the standardized minstrel pronunciation?

A holograph in the Josiah K. Lilly collection discloses the fact that the song was originally to be titled, "Poor Uncle Tom, Good Night." Then Stephen fiddled with the accents as he did in "Swanee River" until he got precisely the flavor he wanted, and "Uncle Tom" was eventually dropped and "Weep no more my lady," written in for the repetitive first line, "Oh, goodnight, goodnight, goodnight." There are few song writers whose works have been collected and preserved as have those of Stephen Foster due to the zeal of his admirer and collector, Josiah K. Lilly.<sup>7</sup>

Stephen Foster's songs, *My Old Kentucky Home* among them, were used for propaganda in the middle fifties. There were even people who fancied he was an out-and-out Abolitionist and yet he, and his

<sup>7</sup> Since this was written by Dr. Gaul, the whole Foster Collection of the late Josiah K. Lilly of Indianapolis was given by him to the University of Pittsburgh where it is housed in a museum called Foster Hall and is open to the public.

people, were Democrats—in a fire-eating community of Republicans.<sup>8</sup> He was serving no political party when he wrote such melodies. He merely was moved by the pathos of the unfortunate black man and being a sensitive person put his feeling into text and tune.

Although the Down Easterners wished to use his pieces to incite the throngs, that was not Foster's purpose in composing them. His one idea was to write for the minstrels supremely well. He was all sympathy for the slaves who passed through Cincinnati and Pittsburgh via the Underground Railroad and sensed the injustice meted out to the colored man. But he was writing songs—not righting wrongs—and he affiliated himself with neither side. He remained aloof, looking—as the artist looks—at the subject matter and drawing it as his gifts lay.

Between the years of 1850 and 1855 there were days of psychological awakening with men finding themselves, and declaring themselves. Such beliefs did not originate in Boston nor, for that matter, in Charleston, South Carolina. They were not born in the political forum or in the hustings however much they may have been stimulated in those places. Like Topsy, in that propagandistic piece *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, these convictions just grew.

John Brown of Pottawatomie may have gone through Pennsylvania, or Stephen may have met Harriet Beecher Stowe in Cincinnati. Certainly anyone as interested in the Negro as himself would have read her *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a book that swept the country as did his *Old Folks at Home*, and was instrumental in fanning the conflagration that started the Civil War. But even though Foster had now met his lay figures face to face, had seen his beloved Negroes on the plantations and in the cane brake, he continued being a commentator in his sad (or merry) music.

The debate became more heated, hateful and intense, and in the midst of it—perhaps because of it—he was to abandon his Negro lay and sing of other matters.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Strictly speaking, there were no "Republicans" in Pittsburgh, or elsewhere, in 1852, for the Republican party, as such, did not come into existence until 1856.

<sup>9</sup> Foster did not permanently abandon the Negro theme. In 1860 he wrote three songs of this type, of which one, *Old Black Joe*, is among his best.

## Chapter IX: *'Stephen Stands Alone'*

STEPHEN's successes may have gone to his head, or the trip South have disrupted his love of Allegheny, for in the spring of 1853 he left his wife and baby and went to New York for a year and a half. Jane seems not to have been averse—or perhaps, like other wives, she could not stop him.

Why she did not go with him is another matter that has beguiled the commentators ever since. In these days temporary separations because of business affairs are so usual one would not question the arrangement. But a letter written by Stephen's sister Henrietta from Youngstown, to Morrison in June, 1853, indicates that she was troubled although not surprised. And she asks what Stephen "did" with little Marion. A logical reason (to this writer) for his going off alone would have been that he couldn't stand hearing the baby cry. No musician can—and few plumbers or "real estators."

This was the first public break, and though Foster came back to his wife and to the family when his father was failing, things were not the same. New York had poisoned him, as later it was to singe his wings.

There are people in old Allegheny who say that Stephen never should have married at all (Allegheny is a gossipy place); that "he used to make his wife get up in the middle of the night and listen to his songs!" Irrelevant and unimportant. Every writing husband demands that his wife listen to him immediately, and every wife of a poet or musician is geared to the getting-up job six weeks after her wedding day. Other, more sinister detractors claim it was his drinking that alienated Jane. Perhaps it was, in the end, but his dissipation is not known to have been great until he had returned from his triumphs in the metropolis and was buried alive in Allegheny after he had buried his father and mother. It might be more fair to attribute the break to "too much family."

Any creative artist can tell you that songs may be begun but never finished under the acceleration of whiskey, and at this period Stephen was finishing off his best work. Morrison, who always puts a good face on family matters, says simply: "After his marriage Stephen received very flattering offers from the publishers in New York, and strong inducements to make that city his home. He removed there

and had every favorable prospect that a young man could hope for. He was paid a certain sum for every song he might choose to write, besides a royalty on the copies printed."

So he went to see Firth, Pond and Company and that firm was delighted to meet him, made contacts for him, and tried to help him get orientated. But Stephen was lonely and nervous and New York was hardly a soporific. He spent a great deal of time at the home of Giliad Smith, William Foster's brother-in law, where the family made him welcome. It was Giliad's sister, Lavinia, who afterward became Mrs. J. Edgar Thomson, wife of the well-known third president of the Pennsylvania Railroad.

During his New York interval, Stephen made many guitar arrangements. It was the favorite instrument of traveling musicians, and Firth, Pond made a practice of bringing out guitar numbers after the new songs were known. There is a theory that the guitar is a trivial instrument, probably because so many amateurs essay it. Yet Beethoven wrote for it, Schumann considered it for the "romanza" of his D-minor symphony, Rossini used it in the "Barber of Seville," and Mozart employed it in "Don Giovanni." Hector Berlioz and the moderns have also given it place. In Stephen Foster's case, however, making such arrangements of his own works was a wasteful time-taker.

His output of 1853 in strange surroundings was crowded and uneven, yet several interesting numbers appeared, and two great master songs: *My Old Kentucky Home*,<sup>10</sup> previously mentioned, and in quite another vein, *Old Dog Tray*. This song may also have been composed in quieter days at home, except that composers in Foster's era did not suffer the time-lag they do now when publishers hold songs for a year or two before they find room for them in their catalogues. (There were fewer composers—and no shortage of paper.)

One of this year's songs was *Annie My Own Love*, whose chief interest lies in the fact that the words were written by an old Pittsburgh friend, Charles P. Shiras, who often submitted stanzas to Stephen.<sup>11</sup> Several instrumental numbers made their appearance, and a gospel

<sup>10</sup> *My Old Kentucky Home* was published on January 31, 1853, while Stephen was still in Pittsburgh.

<sup>11</sup> There is a legend that Stephen's friend, Charles P. Shiras, wrote the verses of many of his songs, but this is incorrect. Only one published Foster song, *Annie My Own Love*, had verses written by Shiras.



hymn, *There's a Land of Bliss*.<sup>12</sup> The melody was taken from his *Old Uncle Ned* all tricked out with hosannahs and "shouts": an example of what New York led him into writing—or rewriting—when he essayed the religious form for which he had no bent.

Two other simple songs appeared in 1853 and one that justifies his reputation, *Old Dog Tray*. As a child Stephen was a nuisance to his father and mother because he was always collecting stray dogs and cats. He would pick them up along the river or on the covered bridge, and home he would bring them. The more forlorn the animal the more he would cherish it. When he was older there was always a dog at his heels as he strolled along Ridge Avenue. A friend, Colonel Mather I. Stewart, said he would give him a real dog, and presented him with a handsome setter. That dog became a well-known companion. Stephen would take him to play with the children on the Common where he went to feed the pigeons, and the more the youngsters pulled his tail and tumbled him around the more the dog enjoyed it. Morrison says: "When he wrote 'Old Dog Tray' he put into verse and song the . . . remembrances of his faithful dog."

Foster gave the lyric one of his best tunes. When it was introduced by the Christy Minstrels it was a complete success and has been ever since. Of all the dog songs written before that day and afterward, *Old Dog Tray* remains the best of the canine catalogue. It wasn't long before there was a whole new generation of dogs named "Tray" and Stephen Foster was their godfather.<sup>13</sup> Of course the song has had to stand a tremendous amount of paraphrasing—such as "He's flea-bitten, he's not kind, and his tail sticks out behind," but whatever the words (and his own are apt) the gay mood strikes a responsive chord.

Firth, Pond published the number under the general title of *Foster's American Melodies*, and it became as popular in England as in America. When Colonel Jack Haverly took his famous "Mastodon Minstrels—Forty, Count 'Em! Forty!" to London in 1880 he featured it by having his End Man appear leading a fox terrier with an umbrella

<sup>12</sup> Stephen actually had nothing to do with the hymn, *There's a Land of Bliss*. The publishers simply took a religious poem, which was *not* the work of Stephen, and set the words to his own air of *Old Uncle Ned*. There were many adaptations of favorite Foster melodies, hundreds of which are in the Foster Hall Collection.

<sup>13</sup> "Tray" was already a popular name for a dog. However, there is no doubt that Stephen's song helped to make the name even more popular.

tied to its head. Christy added one of his celebrated whistling choruses, singing the lines first and then whistling a free and fancy refrain.

Early in 1854 (still in the New York period) Firth, Pond paid Stephen a welcome \$150 for compiling a book of popular numbers called *The Social Orchestra*, arranged by "a gentleman of acknowledged musical taste, and composer of some of the most popular airs ever written in this or any other country." Another effort of that year was the controversial *Ellen Bayne*. His defamers accuse him of taking his theme from that old Baptist camp meeting hymn later glorified into *John Brown's Body*, a silly accusation as the two only coincide when the famous Civil War song is stripped of its melodic passing notes. One might better argue that *John Brown's Body* was taken from Foster's *Ellen Bayne* as it appeared almost a decade afterward. If one wanted to imagine he owed the tune to anything preceding Foster could have copied one nearer home, as the first four bars resemble an old German folksong, *Singing Birds Have Come Again*, a tune often heard in Dutchtown, Allegheny.

Then came one of his worst songs, and contrary to the respect owed public taste it proved one of his greatest sellers. That anemic number was the second of the Willie songs, *Willie We Have Missed You*, and its sensational success prompted Foster to turn on the Willie spigot and permit more to flow. Summer brought *Jeanie with the Light Brown Hair*, the first of his "Jeanie" and "Jenny" songs, all popularly supposed to be tributes to his wife, Jane. This is one of Foster's loveliest melodies, Scotch in character. Although lacking the Scotch "twist" it has the flavor of the Highlands. A rising scale, ad lib., enhances the melody and even when sung today it has undeniable drawing power. *Jeanie with the Light Brown Hair* ran into many editions and has been used by the world's great artists. The fact that this love song was brought out in New York a year after he had left Jane, or "Jeanie," shows that he was not only still devoted to her but also homesick.

At first New York was absorbing for it offered varied amusement. He could see Mathilda Herron in a new play called "The Lady of the Camellias," or if he felt naughty take in an extravaganza at Niblo's Gardens. A seat at Castle Garden would allow him to hear M. Jullien in "the most perfect salle de concert in the world." There was plenty of theatre, even if most of it was Shakespeare and the rest minstrel shows which threatened to put the bard back on the shelf. The "Great Phineas

T. Barnum" gave unparalleled minstrelsy; or Stephen could saunter over to Broadway opposite Astor House and listen to the all-day band concert on Barnum's balcony.

If he didn't attend formal concerts it was because he didn't care for them. Jenny Lind was drawing her thousand dollars a night and Ole Bull was in New York playing his violin, trying to recoup a fortune lost in Stephen's state where he had attempted to found the idealistic colony of Oleana along communal lines. But what Stephen liked best was the half-day cruise to Staten Island where his cousins, the Smiths, lived, and where they would hire a gig and drive over to New Dorp to cool off in the breeze that blew through the narrows.

This style of living taxed his resources, however, and as early as July of '53 he wrote Morrison asking for the return of a note on his publishers (that he had signed over to him) for \$125. "I am not living expensively," he says, "and I hope it will not be long before I can pay you back. . . . I am about to bring out a couple of good songs." He was right about the couple of good ones. They were *My Old Kentucky Home* and *Old Dog Tray*.<sup>14</sup>

His articles of agreement with Firth, Pond and Company, dated December 21, 1854, show that he was to receive ten per cent on all future vocal compositions, and enumerate twenty-nine previously published compositions on which he had already received eight or ten per cent. Other paragraphs mention the terms for instrumental works, and for arrangements. Stephen's royalty sheet may not have been comparable to that of our Tin Pan Alley but it gave him a lucrative income. Four of his songs ran into large figures, *Old Folks at Home*, *Massa's in de Cold Ground*, *My Old Kentucky Home* and *Old Dog Tray*. If we had not later, in his lean days, drawn advances on his publisher and finally sold back his contracts he might have lived on his royalties all his life. It is interesting to see how nearly right the public taste was in appraising his output.

Although Foster had offers from other publishers in the days of his success he remained loyal to Firth, Pond, and they to him. He was their golden goose. At this period it cannot be said that he was a bad

<sup>14</sup> Since *My Old Kentucky Home* was published in January, 1853, this could not have been one of the songs. *Old Dog Tray* was no doubt one of them since it was published in August. *Little Ella* and *Old Memories* were both published in December. Stephen might have been working on one of these songs at the time he wrote to Morrison.

business man. He was drawing more than other contemporary composers and his royalty sheets were not exceeded until present-day composers learned how to augment their incomes by adding mechanical rights.

After a year of New York he began to grow tired of it, and from their letters one learns that the members of his family were worried about him. Dunning wrote Brother Morrison in March of '54: "Have you heard anything from Stephen lately? Notwithstanding his foolish and unaccountable course I hope he will make a comfortable living for himself." Which might refer to one of two things—his separation from his wife, or his insistence on a "foolish" career. One thing that upset Stephen, himself, was the disquieting news that arrived about his father. He was getting old, and letters urged Stephen to come home.

So one day in the early fall when the buttonball trees in St. Paul's yard were shedding their leaves and the grass on the Middle Church green was turning dry, he called in a second-hand man and without pausing to haggle told him to take away his scanty furnishings. Within twenty-four hours he was headed over the mountains.

His mother was visiting relatives in Philadelphia when he made this unannounced decision, for a letter from her to Morrison dated October 19, 1854, says: "Tell Stephen his letter was a great relief to me to know that all is well at home." And further on she adds, "Give my love to dear Stephen and tell him that I wrote him a letter after I came here and directed it to New York." So Stephen had moved fast. On the other hand Morrison makes a fine scene in describing Stephen's arrival home at night to a dark house, where, recognizing his footstep, his mother rushes down from her husband's sickroom and finds him weeping on the doorstep. An account that is so likely one hopes it is true.

The love of the sons and daughters for their mother approached adoration. It was in her room that as children they would gather in the evening listening to her stories of former days. She would show the girls how to knit and sew and help the boys with their lessons. Sometimes, Morrison says, she would break into their games with "Now, my children, kneel down here around me and let us pray to our heavenly Father." Consequently there was sanctuary wherever she was. Any boy, at any time, coming home to such a mother, might well break into tears.

From that day in the fall when Stephen hurried home he tried to

help with his father's care until suddenly, a few months later, on January 18, 1855, Eliza Tomlinson Foster died. She was apparently well and there was no warning but one day while shopping she was stricken with apoplexy. The shock to her youngest son unnerved him. Nor did he ever recover.

Stephen transferred his devotion to his father, waiting on him at home and attending to his outside affairs. In six months, however, William Barclay Foster followed his wife. The light had been flickering for some time and on July 27, 1855, the worn wick gutted and went out.

The old Quartermaster drew down his flag, the cortege formed, and the muffled drums beat. Pittsburgh accorded him a magnificent civic and military funeral. He was escorted over the river up past Bullitt's Hill and the White Cottage, and on to Allegheny Cemetery. They laid him beside his beloved companion where the grass had hardly grown. After him, in quick succession, more rounded mounds were to appear.

William Foster was a distinguished man and a great force in Western Pennsylvania. Some people still consider him the outstanding member of the family. His name was venerated and his descendants engraved on his stone: "His children are proud of his memory."

*(To be Continued)*