

*the
singing
professor*

Pap was especially fond of music. He bought the first reed organ in our community and youngsters from all around used to come in to sing with the organ. Sister Lida June was our organist. She “picked it up” herself, and could play almost any tune. But for us to sing by, she generally played just chords. We sang mostly church songs, for the only book we had with

songs in it was a hymnal. We soon got to be pretty good at it. Inside of a year or so, we had a regular choir at Sunday School.

One day a singing teacher came along, announcing he was going to open a singing school at Yarmouth. He offered to give ten lessons for a dollar. We were all crazy to go. Pap asked the singing teacher if he would take three of us for two dollars, and he said yes, that that was his wholesale price. So Belle, Lida June, and I got to go to the singing school.

There we got our first insight into the mysteries of music. We learned about the staff, the five lines and four spaces, and the added lines above and below. We learned about the signature, sharps and flats, whole notes, half notes, quarter notes, rests, the meaning of *F* and *FF*, *P* and *PP*. We learned the meaning of rhythmic, melodic, and dynamic, which had something to do with the pitch of tone, the length of tone, and the power and quality of tone, but I don't remember now which was which.

But mostly we learned to sing some wonderful songs. At the end of the ten nights of singing school, the professor staged a big concert. The twenty-five cent admission fee cleaned up more money than he had taken in for teaching. But it was worth more than it cost to get into our heads and hearts the "rudiments," as he called it, of a musical education. In my case that was all I ever got, but I think yet that it was pretty nifty stuff. I have asked more than a dozen modern musical folks about rhythmic, melodic, and dynamic, and most

of them have only the haziest notion about them. Some of them never heard of such things at all.

One of the songs we learned at that singing school went like this:

Lo, the glad May morn, with her rosy light is breaking,
O'er the hills so lovely and fair,
And the pure young buds, from their dewy sleep awaking,
Mirth and music float on the air.

Chorus:

Then away, away, away; then away, away, away,
And a Maying we will go.
Then away, away, away; then away, away, away,
And a Maying we will go.

There were three verses in all, and by the time we got to the chorus the third time everybody was going full tilt, and we really made it hum. Six or seven of these songs were sung together, and four or five of our crowd were soloists. Since I was not one of the soloists, I liked the other numbers better.

But the prize song of them all, I always thought, was about the "Little Vale With Fairy Meadows," and it started off like this:

Little vale with fairy meadows,
Trees that spread their leafy hands,
Flowers clothed in brightest beauty,
Lovelier far than eastern lands.
Scenes of fondest recollections,
Lovely village of the vale,
Sacred to the soul's reflection,
Little village in the vale.

Then right after we had all sung that in what the professor called "unison," we went into a rousing

chorus, and one of the best girl singers started in with an obligato. She used different words and a different tune, but it fitted in without a hitch and made a pleasant melody.

All this happened in the spring of the year. Once during the summer when some of our neighbors gathered at our house on a Sunday afternoon, somebody suggested that we go into the parlor, by the organ, and have the children sing. That suited us and to do the thing up brown, we started in with "Little Vale With Fairy Meadows." Willis Hale was to sing the tenor part, Belle the alto, I was to sing bass, and Lida June was to play the organ and come in on the obligato. But the song was so arranged that the bass didn't start in on the chorus right at the start. The alto part started the song, a little later the tenor joined in, and still further on the bass came in. So I stood beside the organ, waiting for my cue, while the others sang with all their hearts.

Pap got up and came across the room and ordered me to sing. I tried to explain, without disturbing the other singers, that it wasn't my time yet. But I couldn't get him to understand.

"Sing, I tell you," he shouted in my ear. "What you suppose I gave you lessons for?"

I was terribly embarrassed, and so was everybody else. I couldn't think what to say next, but I did stutter out "Wait a minute." But Pap was not the man to wait. He cuffed me over the ears, right there before the whole crowd, and that fixed me so there wasn't a particle of music in me.

It broke up the party as far as singing was concerned.

Later a married sister explained to Pap how it was, but he just let it go and never made any sort of apology. I never quite forgave him for it, either.

One winter the big boys of the neighborhood put on a rousing minstrel show — about the biggest thing that ever happened in our parts. They had Mrs. Pete Schomp send away for the play, then they met at her house to practice. She was the only person in the township who could read music, and she spent two months drilling into the boys' heads the tunes they had to sing.

Women in the school district sewed and worked on costumes. Since the actors were blacked with burnt cork, their lips reddened with analine, and some had wigs made out of sheeps' wool, you couldn't recognize anybody unless you could recognize the voice. One hit of the show was:

I had a noble mother-in-law, and she was dear to me,
Her voice was music to my ear, her smile was sweet to see.
But she is dead, last week she died, and the doctors gave
no cause,
Some said she talked herself to death, and broke her poor
old jaws.

There was more to it, some of it not any too good to print. But, outside of two or three, nobody walked out on the show.

Another song was "The Shoes My Daddy Wore." It was a song and dance arrangement Charlie Mason did, 'cause he was the best jig dancer there was. He could dance a good deal better than he could sing, but they said he averaged pretty high, at that.

Just before my daddy died, he called me to his bed,
I knelt down by his side, and this to me he said,
Come take these good old shoes, I cannot wear them more,
I've worn them more than twenty years, on this old Virginia
shore.

For these am the shoes my daddy wore.
Then watch me what I doos,
With these old plantation shoes,
For these am the shoes my daddy wore.

Then Charlie broke into a buck and wing dance
that just made the platform tremble and the dust fly.
Then he sang another verse and danced as long as his
breath held out.

The minstrel show also featured some trick acts.
One was a fire eater. He talked a lot of nonsense, about
nothing in particular, and crammed cotton back in his
cheeks at the same time. Then he slipped a live coal
into his mouth and began to blow out smoke like a
bellows. Pretty soon it turned into a blaze and fire
spurted out of his mouth for a couple of feet. It was
a mighty fine exhibition, but John Capps worked on
that trick five or six weeks before he could do it without
singeing his mouth.

Then they had end men and middle men who asked
questions and got off a lot of jokes on people. Some of
the jokes were pretty good, although a few were a little
raw and let out things about folks that they didn't want
everybody to know. That caused some talk, but it blew
over after a while.

The big show was staged in an old log house that
wasn't being lived in at the time. It would seat only

thirty, and the show had to be given four times before everybody got to see it. They charged two bits and cleaned up money enough to pay for the play and the three dollars rent on the log house. It sure was a great success in every way.

Mrs. Schomp allowed that the show aroused the people to a better appreciation of art. She probably was right about it, too. She was a wonderful smart woman and they wouldn't have gotten anywhere with that show without her help.

Once in a while a slight-of-hand performer gave an exhibition in our schoolhouse that was pretty fair. Nothing I ever saw though, through all the years of growing up between the Hawkeye Horizons, came anywhere near gunshot of the big minstrel show the boys put on that winter in the little log house by the road. Every time I have sung those songs, they have taken me right back there among those big boys we kids always looked up to, the ones who knew how to smoke and chew tobacco.