

# *The* JOURNAL

OF THE RUTGERS UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

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VOLUME XXXI

JUNE 1968

NUMBER 2

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## SONGS AMERICA USED TO SING

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**T**O the young people of today an age lacking such popular means of musical dissemination as the phonograph, the radio, television, and the juke-box is probably unimaginable, however desirable to their elders. But eras devoid of these blessings—if that is the word I want—have not been condemned to tunelessness. In fact it may well be that a time without mechanical means of sound reproduction would of necessity (musical expression being a necessity) adopt the do-it-yourself approach to a greater extent than our own day has done. This seems to have been true, for instance, of Elizabethan England, and it was equally true of Victorian America where song was a ready outlet for the solitary individual, for the informal group gathered about the piano or the reed organ or on the front porch or on the picnic or hayride, and for the children in the schoolroom.

How widespread such usage was and how large its repertory we can surmise from the collections of song sheets of the period that exist in several places about the country. One of the largest of these is that in the possession of the Library Company of Philadelphia, which contains about 2,900 different items, including a relatively small number of non-musical verse sheets. The Rutgers University Library has a much less extensive gathering of something over 400 examples plus many duplicates, but it is noteworthy in that considerably more than half of its items are not to be found in the Library Company collection. What a total census would reveal I have no



# GRAFTED INTO THE ARMY.

Our Jimmy has gone for to live in a tent,  
 They have grafted him into the army;  
 He finally pucker'd up courage and went,  
 When they grafted him into the army.  
 I told them the child was too young, alas!  
 At the captain's fore-quarters, they said he would pass —  
 They'd train him up well in the infantry class —  
 So they grafted him into the army.

Chorus.

Oh Jimmy farewell! Your brothers fell  
 Way down in Alabammy;  
 I thought they would spare lone widdler's heir,  
 But they grafted him into the army.

Dressed up in his unicorn — dear little chap;  
 They have grafted him into the army;  
 It seems but a day since he set in my lap,  
 But they grafted him into the army,  
 And these are the trousers he used to wear —  
 Them very same buttons — the patch and the tear —  
 But Uncle Sam gave him a bran new pair  
 When they grafted him into the army.

Chorus: Oh Jimmy farewell, &c.

Now in my provisions I see him revealed —  
 They have grafted him into the army;  
 A picket beside the contented field,  
 They have grafted him into the army.  
 He looks kinder sickish — begins to cry —  
 A big volunteer standing right in his eye!  
 Oh what if the ducky should up and die  
 Now they've grafted him into the army.

Chorus: Oh Jimmy farewell, &c.

Ten illustrated Songs on Notepaper, mailed to any Address on receipt of 50 Cents.

CHARLES MAGNUS, No. 12 Frankfort Street, N. Y., and 520 7th Street, Washington, D. C.

A CIVIL WAR SONG SHEET  
 from the  
 Rutgers Collection

idea, but Edwin Wolf 2nd, compiler of the Philadelphia catalogue, says that the various titles issued from the presses by "the hundred score," and that song sheet producing, while not unknown before the time we are concerned with, about 1850 "became big small-business."<sup>1</sup>

The term "song sheets," as used here, denotes sheets of paper, ranging from about  $4\frac{1}{2} \times 7\frac{1}{2}$  to about  $7\frac{1}{2} \times 10$  inches, each bearing the words but not the music of one or occasionally two songs, sometimes old but usually recent. The proper tune is frequently specified (e. g., "Air: 'Last Rose of Summer'"), or in the absence of such assistance the sheet in most instances will obligingly inform the reader where the music can be obtained by mail for a sum between ten and sixty cents.

The sheets vary considerably in appearance. Prevailingly the text is surrounded by a typographical border, which is at times a setting for crudely-drawn human figures. The price for such items at book and stationery stores or from hawkers was a humble cent or two. But songsters desiring something more genteel could buy note paper with an illustration, brightly though unskillfully colored, on the upper half of one side, below which were printed the words of the song, the other side being generally ruled for correspondence. (See frontispiece.) The price for such was likely to be fifty cents for ten sheets—a rather high price for letter paper.

The Rutgers collection, like that of the Philadelphia Library Company, includes several sheets that appear to be poems for reading rather than for singing. But for our purpose the distinction is of little importance inasmuch as both types were brought out in the same format by the same publishers and were intended for the entertainment of the same audience. Though by no means the largest in the country, the gathering of song and verse sheets at Rutgers may be accounted fairly representative of America's output during approximately the second half of the nineteenth century. The earliest of the few dated sheets was published in 1852, the latest in 1891.

Occasionally one comes upon an item of reputable provenance: a few hymns, an excerpt from *Pinafore* or *The Bohemian Girl*, a poem

<sup>1</sup> Edwin Wolf, 2nd, *American Song Sheets, Slip Ballads and Poetical Broad-sides 1850-1870* (Philadelphia, 1963), p. iii.

by Byron (considerably altered), "The Marseillaise," a song by the admired comedians Harrigan and Hart or by Stephen Foster. But the great majority of the compositions are either anonymous or are by authors unknown to fame. Not surprisingly, much of the verse writing is decidedly naive in content and amateurish in technique, qualities that would not necessarily interfere with its appeal to the rank and file. Our present concern, then, is not so much with the literary qualities of this body of material as with its expression of some tastes and attitudes that must have been widely acceptable, seeing that so many thousands welcomed the product for the purpose of diversion. I suppose all of this means that the sheets are of interest chiefly as illustrating the popular culture of their time.

Perhaps the dominant mood of the collection taken as a whole is sentimentality. And it could hardly be otherwise inasmuch as the purpose was to exploit the predilection of the American middle class during the Victorian era. The death of young children, for instance, is a recurrent theme as are homeless children and longing for the old home by those separated from it.

A large section of the sheets is devoted to tender songs of young love, usually happy, with a plethora of kisses and dreams, but sometimes saddened by absence, rejection, or death. In some instances the writer's fancy betrays him into amusing extravagance. An Alpine maiden's lover comes to her bounding from crag to crag, playing some musical instrument the while. A glowworm executes a dance. A lover makes the unflattering confession that he fell in love with the tassels on his lady's boots before he fell in love with her. An innamorata commissions a passing bird to convey a message to her truant love. Yet it is worth remarking that the young love category includes some of the few timeless items that found their way to the song sheets: "Annie Laurie," "Mary of Argyle," "Highland Mary" (Burns), "Come Where My Love Lies Dreaming" (Foster).

Married love that has stood the test of time is also celebrated in "You Are Always Young to Me" and the familiar "When You and I Were Young, Maggie." Another called simply "When You and I Were Young" reminds one of Burns' "John Anderson My Jo" and has one of the better passages to be encountered in the song sheets, a stanza Whittier might have written if he had not been a bachelor:

We're growing old together, love,  
 But joy may yet be ours;  
 For still the stars look kindly down,  
 And as sweetly bloom the flowers;  
 And if, perchance, some wither'd leaves  
 Are round our pathway flung,  
 Some still are green as in the days  
 When you and I were young.

Sentimental, to be sure, but it still speaks.

A more uncontrolled sentimentality emerges when motherhood is the theme. In the Rutgers collection alone twenty-three songs carry the word "Mother" or "Ma" in the title, not to mention a dozen or so more in which she is a major figure. Almost invariably she is presented as an angel on earth guiding her young aright except when she is an angel in heaven shedding her saintly beams upon her bereft offspring.

One adult orphan cherishes above all else the ring his mother wore, and another, who has large possessions, values most a flower from his "angel mother's grave." Perhaps most lugubrious among the songs about departed parents is one entitled "Why Did They Dig Ma's Grave So Deep."

In fact so prevalent was this association of bathos with the maternal relationship that one impious soul produced a travesty which he called "Mother on the Brain." But the dominant sentiment, at least for musical purposes, is well summed up in a piece whose title is the immortal query "What Is Home Without a Mother?"

Fathers, of course, did not tug at the Victorian heartstrings as did their feminine counterparts, and yet they are not wholly overlooked by the song-smiths. Some fathers unfeelingly turn the wayward daughter from the door or her picture to the wall. Others rival the mothers in tenderness. Indeed Mother shows up shockingly in "The Broken Home," she having gone off with an old sweetheart after two years of marriage, leaving Joe ready to die of grief but for his baby's smile. Another tear-jerker featuring Father has the well-known title "Over the Hills to the Poor House," in which the aged parent, Lear-like, has given his property to his children, who drive

him out into the street, leaving him no refuge save the poor house.<sup>2</sup>

In sharp contrast are the many humorous items, which seem to bear some relation to comic valentines in that they are crude, sometimes cruel, often silly, and almost never funny. Ethnic groups are often caricatured; drunkenness, as in "Old Man's Drunk Again!" and "Rock and Rye Crazy" (to the tune of "Rock-a-bye, Baby"), provides what today might be labeled sick humor. Coarseness marks "Parrot and the Parson," wherein the parson makes love to the cook in his wife's absence, only to be informed on by his feathered friend. The element of impropriety is unmistakable in "I'd Choose to Be a Baby" as sung by Tony Pastor, sometimes considered the father of American vaudeville. The singer reports that when he was a baby the ladies would "Undress, and put me to bed! I wish they'd do it now." It is only fair to say that the pieces seldom offended Victorian delicacy to this extent.

Religion as a specific subject is less in evidence than one might expect; only half a dozen songs in this category are found in the Rutgers collection. But incidental allusions to such Christian stereotypes as heaven and angels are sufficiently numerous to satisfy the most pious.

The moralistic approach is somewhat more manifest than the strictly religious. Compositions with captions like "Say a Kind Word When You Can" and "Don't Push a Man When He's Going Down Hill" aim to indoctrinate through exhortation. Others employ the horrendous example as in "Spider and the Fly" and "Come Home, Father," the latter featuring a barroom haunter who disregards his daughter's entreaty while the clock in the steeple strikes one and two and three, and little Bennie dies in the fireless home. Of some relevance is "Another Awful Crime," whose outspoken author advises teachers to "Quit teaching long dead doctrines, make your lives and teaching rhyme," and reminds preachers that "Your diet isn't always crumbs, your loves not always wives."

As would be expected, the sheet writers, whose aim was instant

<sup>2</sup> Surprisingly enough, the popular country-and-western songs of our hard-boiled day are emphasizing sentimental themes similar to those discussed above, if one may judge from such titles as: "Motherless Children," "The Poor Orphan Child," "Memories of Mother and Dad," "When the Golden Leaves Begin to Fall," "Mama, You've Been on My Mind," "Daddy and Home."

appeal, on occasion dealt with current incidents, developments, and personalities. The topic of one sheet is the Noble Order of Knights of Labor, an idealistic type of trade union founded in Philadelphia in 1869 by Uriah S. Stephens, which had about a million members by 1885. The author prophesies that the Knights will soon sit in the Senate and drive out fraud, indeed that they will soon rule the nation. Boston's great fire of 1872, which resulted in losses of approximately \$75 million, inspired "Boston in Ashes, or, Homeless Tonight," a pathetic composition about two orphans whose home has been destroyed by the fire and whose sole wish is to join their parents in heaven.

Technological advances that called out rhyming comment include the electric light (a more wonderful invention than the phonograph, but lovers "curse and d---n" it), the cable car (which charged six cents for a five-cent ride), and the elevated railroad (which provided glimpses of humble family life at the second-story level).

Among celebrities accorded at least passing mention are Henry Ward Beecher, overpaid for his preaching; Robert G. Ingersoll, headed for a brimstone-scented destination; Lillie Langtry and Kate Claxton, two popular actresses, the former singled out for her piquant past, the latter for her narrow escape from the Brooklyn Theatre fire; and Mary Walker, a picturesque feminist whose preference for male attire is jestingly noted.

Female fashions did not go unobserved by the topical verse writers. Hair puffs, dyed hair, painted faces, big hats were among the "foolish" things the ladies were affecting. But special ridicule was visited upon the Grecian bend, a silhouette achieved with the aid of the wasp waist and the bustle that was particularly sought after about 1868. This dictate of high fashion impelled the author of a sheet called "The Grecian Bend" to inquire indignantly, "Where will the follies end?"

"Quite English, You Know" is the title of another Philippic, this one copyrighted in 1885, protesting against an English trend in American dress, looks, etc. One of the deplored fashion transmitters was an unnamed English actor: "Some said he was trash, but he gobbled our cash." We also "studied his walk and copied his dress." This probably was none other than the famous Sir Henry Irving,

whose American tours began in 1883 and extended over a score of years, and whose conspicuous mannerisms in walking and speech were admired by some and derided by others. Equally unwelcome was a British boxer represented as more expert at collecting "hard Yankee coin" than at standing up against hard Yankee fists at Madison Square Garden. This reference would seem to be to Charlie Mitchell, a talented light heavyweight from England who fought John L. Sullivan in 1883 at Madison Square Garden and was saved from a savage beating only by police intervention. Again in 1884 Mitchell entered the same ring against Sullivan, but this time the mighty John L. was too drunk to fight.<sup>3</sup> One would hope that the courageous Englishman collected "hard Yankee coin" on both occasions.

Certain immigrant or ethnic groups in America were dealt with from a variety of angles by the song writers. Among them the Germans are represented in the Rutgers collection only by three or four comic pieces in dialect. Scots dialect is employed in a handful of songs, all of them soberly sentimental.

The Irish came in for much more notice than did the Germans or the Scots. Which is not surprising because by 1850 Irish immigrants, numbering nearly a million, constituted forty-two per cent of the total foreign-born population of the United States, and the next ten years added over half a million more. Driven from their homeland by its appalling economic conditions, the Irish peasants found employment in American factories and as workmen in a multitude of huge construction projects, thereby making a vital contribution to the industrial growth of their adoptive country.<sup>4</sup>

Many of the Irish pieces fall into the sentimental love category with a sufficiency of Kathleens (or Kittys or Katys), Noras, and "mavourneens." Inevitably what was commonly accepted as the Irish character was exploited as a source of humor involving wildly drunken sprees or stupidity or cleverness. But a wholly serious and sympathetically treated theme was Irish emancipation from England,

<sup>3</sup> Alexander Johnston, *Ten—and Out! The Complete Story of the Prize Ring in America* (New York, 3rd ed., 1947) pp. 61-62, 64.

<sup>4</sup> Charles and Mary Beard, *The Rise of American Civilization* (New York, 1930), I, 641-642.



a cause the nationalists in Ireland and the Fenian Brotherhood in America were promoting at this time with special vehemence and violence. The song taking its title from the proverbial slogan "Erin Go Bragh" (Ireland forever), enunciates the pro-Irish doctrine as vigorously as any.

Of particular interest today are the numerous Negro songs. Some of them present the black man or woman as a grotesquely comic figure with an atrocious dialect, on the painfully familiar assumption, now surely gone forever, that the Negro's chief function is that of a court jester to his white overlords. But sympathy is also in evidence, as in songs of homesickness ("Carry Me Back to Old Virginy" and "Carry Me Back to Tennessee") or of love, sometimes successful, sometimes thwarted.

Slavery itself is a recurrent subject, defended by some authors, deplored by others. "Old Home Ain't What It Used to Be" affirms that along with hard work slavery also provided many pleasures and that freedom has left the slave sad and forlorn. "Massa's in de Cold Ground" has the lines: "Massa make the darkies lub him,/ 'Cayse he was so kind." More typical are "Slavery Days" (an ex-slave looks back on "dem agonizing, cruel slavery days"), "Poor Old Uncle Rube" (in heaven the corn and cotton fields will be "bright and gay" and there will be no overseer), and "Slave's Dream" (the slave awakes to bondage from his dream of freedom: "And this was in a christian land, where men oft kneel and pray,/ The vaunted home of liberty, where whip and lash hold sway."). "Darling Nelly Gray" has a special poignancy as Nelly's lover on the old Kentucky shore learns that

The white man bound her with his chain—  
They have taken her to Georgia for to wear her life away,  
As she toils in the cotton and the cane.

An obviously expurgated version of this song was the one we blithely sang in my youth, for we were led to believe it was angels who took Nelly away.

That the song sheets were considered adaptable to other purposes than casual entertainment is further attested by their occasional use in political campaigns. In fact the earliest specimen in the Rutgers

lot is a long narrow slip dated May 15, 1852, bearing a song in praise of Daniel Webster ("Air: Oh! Susannah Don't You Cry for Me"), and advocating his Presidential nomination by the Whigs on the ground that his "wisdom saved the Union."

Other aspirants who never attained the Presidency were also championed in song. John C. Frémont, the first Republican candidate for that office, in 1856 inspired "A New Song for an Old Tune," the old tune being "Yankee Doodle." George B. McClellan, Democratic nominee in 1864, was praised as an opponent of both Abolition and Secession and as one who had succeeded where Lincoln had failed completely. The Great Emancipator was obviously supported, though not named, in "The Rally Cry of Freedom," which declares that "We are ready for the polls" and are pledged heart and hand to the man who will lead the Union safely through to victory over rebellion and to freedom.

Locally interesting, at least, is a group of pieces called out by the New Jersey gubernatorial contest of 1865. The main issue seems to have been loyalty versus the Copperheadism that was prevalent in the state during the latter years of the war. The Democratic candidate was General Theodore Runyon, who, whether himself a Copperhead or not, had served as attorney in defense of Copperheads. His opponent was Marcus L. Ward, who had given extensive aid to wounded soldiers and the families of soldiers. The Republicans, with the more active stable of song writers, got out sheets castigating "The Running Runyon of Bull Run" and his Copperhead faction, and shouting "Forward! for-Ward," "the Soldier's Friend," with whose election "New Jersey comes into the Union!" freed "from Stigma and from Stain." When Ward defeated Runyon, "A Song of Victory" was broadcast thanking God for delivering New Jersey from the Copperheads' "obnoxious rule," the end of which once more placed her among the loyal states.

Of all the song sheets at Rutgers the most attention-worthy are those concerned with the Civil War, which, like the First World War and unlike the Second, seems to have been a singing war. The first note we have is a cheerful one, the singer insisting she is always "Gay and Happy" (this being the caption), even when contemplating the Southern threat of disunion, for the spirit of

Washington keeps guard. But this is the last we hear of gaiety. Other early versifiers foresee civil war, Fort Sumter having been fired on, but they hope no blood will be shed and that the Union, right or wrong, will be preserved.

The mood grows more tense as Jefferson Davis is denounced and Baltimore is held up to shame as a traitor for its mob attack on the Sixth Massachusetts Regiment as it passed through the city in April, 1861. In July of that year it is declared that there will be no more Bull Runs because "we've got a brave McClellan now."

About the beginning of 1862 England is reprimanded in "John Bull, or Any Other Man" for threatening intervention in the war. "Our Yankee Monitor" is praised for its naval potency, by which other nations are stirred to envy. Lincoln's call for increased enlistments in the summer of 1862 prompted a song with the familiar title "We Are Coming Father Abraham Six Hundred Thousand More." One of the important engagements of this year is memorialized, somewhat illiterately, in "The Drummer of Antietam," which hails those who fell that day as true martyrs of "sweet Liberty." General McClellan, removed from his command by Lincoln in November, 1862, is upheld in "Give Us Back Our Old Commander." Here he is affectionately styled "Little Mac, the people's pride," while Lincoln is disparaged as "great on Proclamations"—and, by implication, not much else.

The antipathy to the Conscription Act of 1863 is reflected in "Johnny, Fill up the Bowl," which says in part:

Abram Lincoln, what yer 'bout?  
Stop this war: it's all played out!

.....

The Conscription Act it now is passed,  
And we'll be drafted all at last.

"Come in out of the Draft" is a would-be comic song about a conscript who tries to avoid the draft. A more effective protest is "Grafted into the Army," supposedly spoken by an ignorant worried widow who has lost sons in Alabama and whose only surviving boy has been "grafted" and is now "Dressed up in his unicorn."

Especially stimulating to the song-smiths were the military events

of 1864. The Battle of the Wilderness is made to appear an "easy" victory for the Union men, who sent the rebels "howling back" so that "they fell like withered grass," and who then dressed their enemies' wounds and buried their dead. Sherman's capture of Atlanta (it "won Georgia back to the Union") is the topic of one piece and his march to the sea the topic of another—the familiar "Marching through Georgia." Sheridan's dramatic triumph over Early in the Shenandoah Valley is celebrated in two songs, one with a refrain that labors to rhyme "Early" and "valley."

The next year made possible "Victory at Last" with its sober joy that the day of peace is near and the boys are coming home. Almost simultaneously a very different emotion pervaded the North as expressed in a "Requiem" for President Lincoln. Written to be sung to the tune of "My Faith Looks up to Thee," it voices a grief that leaves to future days the lauding of "his noble name." The final event of the war to be noted in the Rutgers gathering is the capture of Jefferson Davis. Inaccurately reported to have been taken while trying to escape in female garb, he is ridiculed in a couple of items, one, called "Petticoat Jeff," insisting that

In petticoats he could not shine,  
For when he run his boots betrayed him,  
Sneaking away in crinoline.

Frequently the Civil War songs are of concern not so much as a record of specific events but rather as an attempt to utter the feeling of those, both soldiers and civilians, for whom the war was the dominant reality of their lives. The emotion is sometimes that of separated lovers, as in "The Girl I Left Behind Me" (dedicated to the Pennsylvania Volunteers) or "Young Girl from New-Jers-A." Sometimes it is heartache over disruption of the home circle by enlistment or death—an attitude met in "Vacant Chair," "When This Cruel War Is Over," "My Northern Boy to the War Has Gone," Stephen Foster's "Was My Brother in the Battle!" and "Dear Mother, I've Come Home to Die." (A heartfelt variant on this title is "Dear Mother I've Come Home to Eat," in which the speaker avers that he has had a sufficiency of "Hard tack, salt junk, and rusty pork" and yearns for quail "from Jersey's woods.")

The poignant tragedy of the war is perhaps best brought out in two pieces not unknown today. "The Picket's Last Watch," with its equalitarian line, "Not an officer lost, only one of the men," ends with the fine stanza:

All quiet along the Potomac to-night,  
No sound save the rush of the river;  
While soft falls the dew on the face of the dead,  
The Picket's off duty forever.

As Irwin Silber puts it, this song "remains one of the genuine lasting literary-musical efforts of the war." "Tenting on the Old Camp-Ground," sung by both Northern and Southern soldiers, owed its special appeal to what Mr. Silber has rightly called the "hauntingly plaintive" quality of its words and music.<sup>5</sup> The sincerity and restraint of its pathos are evident in the lines:

Many are the hearts that are weary to-night,  
Wishing for the war to cease:  
Many are the hearts looking for the right,  
To see the dawn of peace.

To anyone brought up on Civil War songs, "Tenting on the Old Camp-Ground" is even yet truly moving.

The Rutgers song sheets of this period, being of Northern origin, naturally mirror Northern attitudes.<sup>6</sup> Of course various Federal units are acclaimed, including the Pennsylvania "Bucktails" and several New Jersey regiments. President Davis is reviled whenever mentioned: he is a "cowardly traitor" and should swing "as high as Haaman." Stonewall Jackson is another "traitor." By some writers the Confederate troops are execrated: they have robbed the dead and wounded "As none but Southern bloods can do," their leaders are "tyrants," and "Their flag is but a rag." But gratifyingly often

<sup>5</sup> Irwin Silber, *Songs of the Civil War* (New York, 1960), pp. 119, 167.

<sup>6</sup> Lest this study might seem to imply that the Civil War song sheets came wholly from the North, it should be pointed out that the Wolf bibliography of the Philadelphia collection lists 194 Confederate items. The only piece at Rutgers clearly of Southern derivation is "Requiem," written to be sung in memory of the Confederate dead by the students of a female seminary at Winchester, Virginia, on June 9, 1870. It asserts that these heroes were "too proud to be whipp'd into tyranny's yoke" and that an angel would write their names with "a pencil of light."

the Confederacy incites not animosity but sorrow and hope for reunion. We will "shed a tear for those once loved." "Still for our enemies we'll pray." When the rebellion is over we will offer our hand to the vanquished "And bid them be once more the Many in One."

This article has necessarily omitted a number of miscellaneous narratives found in the local collection. It has likewise disregarded several themes that appear infrequently (ocean, sailors, moonlight, old schoolmates, etc.) so that more space might be available for the topics that clearly emerge from an examination of the files; and it may be fairly assumed that the items here exhibited are typical in respect to literary merit or, more often, the lack of it.

Undistinguished and ephemeral though the song sheets mainly are, then, it seems that they are not without their significance. Commanding in their day an audience of millions, they offer some documented insight into the average American mind of their time; and it is right that institutions such as the Rutgers University Library and the Library Company of Philadelphia should collect and preserve them.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> The extent to which this type of song reflects contemporaneous affairs is well brought out by Lester S. Levy in *Grace Notes in American History: Popular Sheet Music from 1820 to 1900* (Norman, Okla., 1967). In only two or three instances do his examples duplicate those mentioned above.