

PLATFORM EXPERIENCES

COMMENCEMENT OF PRENTICE MULFORD'S ORATORICAL CAREER.

He Tried His First Lecture on a Selected Audience in a County Court House, and Next on the County—The County Survived—Characteristics of Audiences.

Recommended by the Author.

XII.



N REACHING Sonora, Tuolumne county, I went to work and dug potatoes for a living. Impressed by the power of the notes I wrote what I called my lecture. This I carried by horseback across the country in the woods, between barns, and sometimes at early morn or the daybreak hours—for the length of journey to Sacramento stood open night and day, so that would might enter and sleep in the bunks or on a mat in the bar itself, as many did in those days.

Many a time I delved and delved this lecture, enlarging it to rocks, trees, birds, and sometimes to unseemly animals, writhing about whose snarled appearance well cover me with confusion and stamping blushing hues.

At last I decided to risk myself on an experimental audience. I borrowed one for the occasion. Going into the main street of Sonora one evening, I selected half a dozen appreciative souls and said, "I now meet in a concert house. I would have a few words with you." There was a young clerk, his deputy, a woman, a school-teacher, and a boy followed me who had been to the concert house. I introduced myself as a speaker, and two or three others, who knew me in two towns, came forward to inform the crowd that I had brought them hither to serve as experimental audience to a lecture I was going to deliver. After which I gorged into the subject, and found that portion of the brain which with some always wants independent of the rest, wondering that I should be really taken in by live auditors.

There is a section of a man's faculties, during the operation of speaking in public, which will always go wandering around on its own hook, picking up all manner of unpleasant thoughts and impressions. A propensity it is over on the watch to find something which shall annoy the other half. It seems to me that no one can become a very successful speaker or actor until this idle, vagrant part of the mind is put down altogether, total forgetfulness of all else save the work in hand is established, and self consciousness abolished. However, I spoke half the place to my borrowed audience, and then, feeling that I could really "say" the odd things they could go home. But Dr. —, constituting himself a speaker, rose and declared that having uttered as hearts for half the lecture they thought they were entitled to another half. Being thus encircled, I gave them the other half.

A great apprehension was now taken from my mind. I could speak to a crowd without becoming my life, and deemed myself all right as a lecturer if not as orator. I did not then realize how vast is the difference between mere speaking and the properly delivering of words and sentences. As a minimum, but large or small, however little are the time, place and manner of ordinary conversing to public speaking, how a break must be put on every word and syllable, posh down its accentuation and make it available in a half hour great the necessary for deliberation in delivery, how the force and meaning of entire sentences may be lost by a gaudy, imperfect and too rapid enunciation; how the trained speaker keeps perfect control of himself, not only as to his delivery, but the mood underneath it which should prompt how much depends on the establishment of a certain kind of sympathy between speaker and audience, and how much the establishment of such chain depends on the speaker's versatility to accommodate himself to the character, intelligence, moods and requirements of different audiences.

I state this, having since my debut in the Sonora court house learned these things, and learned also that nature has not given me the power to surmount all these difficulties. I am not a good speaker, as many doubtless discovered before I did. However, my friends whom I consulted said by all means give the lecture in public, knowing, of course, that I wanted them to encourage me, and feeling this to be the best way of getting rid of me. So I had posters printed and commenced public life on a small field. I hired a hall, admittance twenty-five cents. I felt guilty as I read this on the bills. I read one alone furtively by moonlight, because after they were posted and the plunge taken I was ashamed to appear by daylight on the streets. It seemed so presumptuous to ask respectable God-fearing citizens of that town to sit and hear me. This was a result of the regular oscillations of my mental and temperamental seesaw.

I was always too far above the proper scale of self esteem one day and too far below it the next. The real debut was not so easy as the preliminary, borrowed, begins one. There were the hard, stern, practical people present, who counted on receiving their regular "two bits" worth of genuine, solid fact, knowledge and profitable information, who discounted

all nonsense, didn't approve of it and didn't understand it. I felt their cold and withering influence as soon as I mounted the platform. Not many of such heavy were present, but that was enough to poison. I saw their judgment of my effect in their faces. I weakly allowed these faces, and the opinions I deemed shadowed forth on them, to paralyze, psychologize and conquer me. I allowed my eyes, numberless times, to wander and meet their stony, cynical gaze, and as each time the basilisk orbs withered up my self assertion and self esteem. Becoming more and more demoralized, I sometimes cowardly omitted or forgot what I deemed my boldest matter and subjects. However, the large majority of the audience being kindly disposed toward me, heard, applauded and pronounced the lecture a "success."

Some ventured, when it was over, to advise me that the subject matter was much better than the manner of its delivery. Of that there was not the least doubt. In speaking I had concentrated matter enough for two hours' prologue. Every iota one, and a part of the mental strain and anxiety during the lecture was to race my words so as to finish within the limits of an hour on time. I feared wounding the audience, and so took one of the best methods of doing so.

The next day self-patriot going up to fever heat, and my comparative failure not being so bad as the one I had committed—my estimate of myself was at zero, I determined on passing my newly found vacation and "sharing Tuolumne County." Carried by the train, I started out on a tour beyond the bounds of good judgment and overwhelped with another torrent of consciousness. I was still another lecture, and advertised this. The curiosity, compassion and good nature of my friends induced me to do it. Indeed, during the tour, I planned a course, or rather a constant succession of lectures, which might, if remunerated, have extended to the present time. But on the second stage I talked largely to empty benches—strangers of audience I have since become accustomed to, and with whom I am on terms of that friendship and sympathy only begotten of long acquaintance. The benches were relieved here, and thereby encouraged looking hearer who had come in on a free ticket, and who, I tell, wanted to get out again as quickly as possible. Then I knew that my friends did not care to hear me any more. This was bitter, but necessary and painful.

I next gave the lecture at Columbia, Columbia, though but four miles distant, was then the rival of Sonoma as the metropolis of Tuolumne county, and it was necessary to secure a Columbian audience in addition to those attempting to star it across the provincial cities of Jimtown, Coloma, Camp Don Pedro's and Pine Leaf. I visited Columbia, hired the theater for \$250, and, after my effort, had a satisfaction of hearing from a friend that the audience was a large and critical magnitude of the town had concluded to vote me a "success." Then I spoke at Jamestown, Califerville, Mariposa, Shelling's and other places with very moderate success.

Perhaps I might have arisen to greater distinction or notoriety than that realized on the Tuolumne field had I better known that talents of any sort must be handled by its possessor with a certain dignity to insure respect. Now, I traveled from town to town on foot. I was most dusty and perspiring, tramping on the road, by people who knew me as the newly arisen local lecturer. I should have travel'd in a carriage. I poorned my own bill, I should have employed the local bill-sticker. I lectured for ten cents per hour when I should have charged fifty. Some time I dispensed with an admittance fee altogether and took of contributions. In Colerville the trouper du jour of Colerville came back in the last days with dimmed looking like new arrival experiments. I can sincerely say to such as may follow me in my undiscussion of such a career—"Never had yourself cheap." If you put a good picture in a poor frame it is only the few who will recognize its merit.

Once in New York I spoke to a fair audience in a hall on the ground floor. Things went on beautifully till 9 o'clock, when a big brass band struck up in the corner half over my head and some fifty couples commenced walking. It was an earthquake reversal. It ruined me for the night.

On another fearful occasion I was speaking at Bridgehampton, Long Island, on the subject of temperance. I lectured on temperance occasionally, though I never professed to be a temperance orator. A thought one day took possession of me, "Why not run for the legislature?"

I consulted with one of the pillars of our party. He belonged to the Flat. I took the pillar behind Dan Mum's store on Rattleback creek and avowed my intention. The pillar took a big chew of tobacco, stared, grinded and said, "Why not?" I consulted with another pillar behind Bob Love's store in Montezuma. He was throwing dirt from a prospect hole with a long handled shovel. He leaned on the shovel, blew his nose in a natural without artificial aid, grinded, and after some deliberation said, "Why not?" I found another pillar of our party slumming out a reservoir near Jamestown. He was enveloped in yellow mud to his waist, and smaller bodies of mud plastered him upward. A short pipe was in his mouth and a shotgun shovel in his hand. He said, "Go in for

my good. I was unsuccessful. Virtue has its own reward, so has vice. The wicked do not always flourish like green bay trees. Indeed, judging from a home experience, I am not prepared to say that they flourish at all. The fall political campaign of 1866-7 came on while I was carrying my comic lecture about the camps of Tuolumne, Stanislaus and Mariposa. A thought one day took possession of me, "Why not run for the legislature?"

I consulted with one of the pillars of our party. He belonged to the Flat. I took the pillar behind Dan Mum's store on Rattleback creek and avowed my intention. The pillar took a big chew of tobacco, stared, grinded and said,

"Why not?" I made the same remark to myself, and replied, "Why not?" The assembly was a good gate

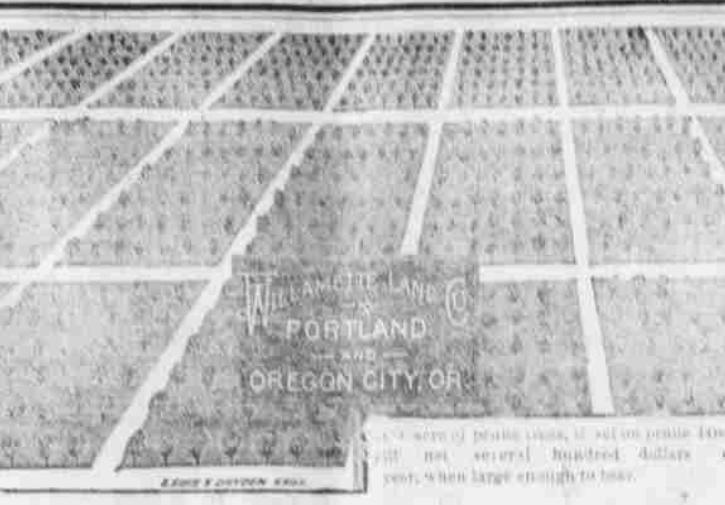
for entering the political field. My ideas of its duties were vague. Of my own

qualifications for the post I dared not think.

They may have been about equal to those with which I entered the Henry's galley as a wet cook. But what matter? Other men better qualified

than I had gone to Sacramento, received

their ten dollars per diem and came



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PRENTICE MULFORD'S ASPIRATIONS
TO BE A LEGISLATOR.

He Forget What Side He Was On, and
the Results Were Disastrous—Conversed
the County with a Non-Political Comic
Lecture—Horseback Oratory.

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