

## AUNT MARIA AND THE AUTOPHONE

Thomas Frederick Crane

SOME time since I had occasion to see a friend off on a train which crawled from the shabby little station on the hill west of the town. By some mistake we arrived there a half-hour too early, and found the waiting-room occupied by a single person--an elderly farmer evidently-who was dozing on a box drawn close to the whitewashed stove.

My friend -albeit only a commercial traveller for the Chicago firm of Butcher, Packer, and Co., dealers in pressed meats, hams, etc.- prided himself greatly on his love for music and poetry; but as his models were Wagner and Browning, our discussions were always stormy and fruitless. He had finally given up all efforts to make me sympathize with him in regard to the latter, but still hoped to convert me to his own views in respect to the former. So as we too drew near the stove-for it was a raw December day-my friend was just concluding an enthusiastic reference to "the music of the future." His eloquence had once or twice the effect of making the other occupant of the room move uneasily on his box, but he did not open his eyes until my friend declared, in a most impressive manner : "The Americans, sir, are naturally a musical people, but the kind of music which shall kindle their hearts to a divine rapture has not yet been discovered. When it is, they will rise responsive to it like one man."

"You're right there, stranger," said the elderly party, stretching himself. " That's just what I used to say to the old woman. I said, ' Ma, don't worry about Aunt Maria'- Aunt Maria's the old woman's sister, you see; she lives with us, and takes care of the children, 'specially John Henry- 'don't worry about Maria. It ain't that there isn't any music in her soul, but you ha'n't found the right instrument yet.' Ma smiled kind of melancholy like and allowed that she didn't believe there was any music on earth that'd please her sister. 'Then just wait,' says I, 'for some other place;' but ma mumbled out something about she'd like to see the effect of a harp upon Maria. I wanted to cheer her up a little (the old woman looks a leetle too much on the dark side) ; so says I, ' Well, ma, if the harp don't work, perhaps they'll try her with a sackbut, or a timbel, or some of them ere Old Testament instruments, and like as not they'll fetch her with one of them.'

"You see, stranger, we 're the musicalest family in the whole county. When I married ma, she says, 'Abner' (that's me)- 'Abner,' says she, 'I kin do without a rag carpet in the kitchen, but I can n't live without a melodjun in the parlour.

"So we had a melodjun in the parlour, and the children came naturally by their love for music. Why, bless your soul! I may say they took to it with their first breaths, and kept it up always after. The girls had the melodjun, and the boys had everything from a willow whistle to a fiddle, and when Martha and Stella was draggin' a duet out of the melodjun in the parlour, and Jehiel and Jonathan scrapin' out the 'Arkansaw Traveller' in the kitchen on a fiddle and banjo, it was a musical abode.

“Everything went along all right until Aunt Maria came. Lordy! how that woman did hate music! Nobody had any peace in the house, and what’s the worst, a sort of bad luck came over the harmless instruments themselves. Jonathan’s fiddle strings was always getting broke before he’d half tuned up, and the pesky melodjun took to leaking so that both gals together, one on the pedals and the other on the keys, could hardly pump ‘Old Hundred’ out of her Sundays. Some did suspect Maria, but,” said the old man, looking cautiously around, “ I don’t think she was altogether to blame; howsomever,” with a significant wink, “ she got the credit of it.

“When John Henry -he’s the youngest- came, Maria’s heart seemed to kind of soften. His first drum lasted a week, and I noticed she never had anything to say agin *his* vocal accomplishments. Well, when John Henry was four years old, the old woman began to look around and see what instrument he’d be likely to take to. Aunt Maria said it was a burning shame to make that innocent child a stumblin’-block in the way of Christians, but I said I guessed John Henry could stand it -if we could.

“The next day ma went down to the village to sell her butter and eggs, and when she came home at night she had a small bundle which she put away in the parlour until after supper. I know’d what it was -leastways, not exactly, but I guessed by the way the old woman slung the dishes on the table that night that we should hear some news soon. When the dishes was washed up ‘Ma’ says I, ‘didn’t I see you bring in a bundle jest now ?’

‘You did, Abner,’ says she, and she smiled from one ear to the other. ‘Abner,’ says she, ‘I’ve found an instrument at last for John Henry.’ Aunt Maria fetched a kind of cross between a sigh and a groan but nobody paid any attention to her. ‘Well, ma,’ says I, ‘let’s have it.’ So out she brought the bundle, and there was a sort of accordjun on two legs, and a lot of bits of white paper as full of holes as the old woman’s colander. We all got around the table while ma showed us how it worked. ‘You see,’ says she, ‘you jest poke in the paper -here, John Henry, this is your’n, and you shall have the first try; there -you shove the paper in there, and work your hand so, and it plays all the music on the paper.’ ‘Ma,’ says I, ‘do you mean to say, as a member in good and regular standin’, that that ‘ere instrument plays them holes?’ But John Henry had grabbed the instrument, and jest as sure as I set here, stranger, that four-year-old child squeezed out ‘Old Hundred’ jest as solemn and a derned sight faster than ma’s melodjun. But you oughter to see Aunt Maria; she straightened up and glared at that innocent child as if she wished he had lived in Palestine about the year one, and bolted out of the room without a word.

“Well, stranger, it was a sight to see John Henry on the kitchen floor with that ‘ere thing between his little knees, and playing the ‘Sweet Bye-and-Bye’ in a way to make tears come to everybody’s eyes, exceptin’ always Aunt Maria’s. For a month our house was the most popularest house at the Corners, and John Henry gave a free concert every night for an hour before he went to bed. The strangest thing,” said the old man, in a mysterious tone, “was that that ‘ere instrument kept in playin’ order all the time, whether it was because John Henry took it to bed with him every night, or whether it was from the superior build of the consarn, I can’t say. Perhaps “ -with a wink- “Aunt Maria didn’t understand its innerd construction as well as she did a fiddle or a melodjun.

“Well, as I say, the instrument kept in playin’ order all winter; the music, ‘specially the pop’lar tunes, was a little the worse for wear, but that’s all. ‘I want to be an angel’ and one or two others got tored in two about the middle of March, and John Henry asked Aunt Maria to mend them one day, and, bless you ! she loved that darlin’ child too much to refuse him anything, so she pasted the tunes together as well as she could, and next day John Henry took his instrument to Sunday-school. You see, he’d taken it a number of times, and the teacher thought it kind of ‘livened up the exercises. But this day, jest as John Henry was slowly and surely grindin’ out ‘ I want to be an angel,’ and had got to the middle of the tune (where it was tored, you see), when all at onst out he came with ‘Whoa, Emma!’” and the innocent child was too much surprised to stop until the teacher suspended the musical exercises for that day. John Henry didn’t git no prize that year, but I hold that Aunt Maria was morally responsible.

You see, she had so little music in her -leastwise we thought so then- that she couldn’t even be trusted to paste two tunes together.

“Howsomover, as spring came on, we thought we kind of noticed a change in Maria. It wasn’t that she was gittin’ musical -that was, perhaps, to much too expect on this arth, as I said to ma--but she was growin’ mellow somehow. I think it was all owing to John Henry’s tender influence. You ask how I knew she was gettin’ mellow, stranger ? Well, you see, John Henry’s instrument still kept in workin’ order. She and John Henry would disappear by the hour, and what they did no one knew. Ma said one day she thought she had heard John Henry playin’ on his instrument in Maria’s room, leastwise she had heard a noise there, but it didn’t sound like any instrument in that house. ‘Perhaps,’ said I, ‘it was Maria singin’.’ But the more I thought it over, the more mysterious the thing seemed, and I made up my mind I’d git to the bottom of it. So one day, when ma and the girls had gone to town, and the boys were hoein’ potatoes, I jest slipped into the house and listened awhile. By-and-by I thought I heard a sound in the direction of Maria’s room, and so I took off my boots and crawled softly up the stairs; but, lordy! I might just as well have kept them on, for when I got up near the door I heard the most dreadful noises you ever dreamed of. If I had had any hair, it would have stood up and run off my head. I first thought that Maria was torturin’ that innocent child, and was goin’ to bust in the door, but I thought I’d first take a peep through the keyhole. What do you think I saw, stranger? John Henry was in his favourite attitude in the middle of the floor, workin’ the instrument with one hand, and feedin’ the music in with the other, and Aunt Maria sat in her rockin’-chair, rockin’ slowly to and fro, and keepin’ time with her hands. Her glasses were pushed up on her forrard, and tears of joy was runnin’ down her checks, and John Henry kept playin’ faster and faster; but what music ! No tune that I had ever hearn - and we had all sorts in that house d one time or anuther - came from that instrument. I thought something was wrong, and in I rushed. Aunt Maria cried, ‘Oh!’ and fell back in her chair, lookin’ dreadful sheepish; but John Henry!

Stranger, what do you think that lamb did? Why, he just winked at his pa, and when I asked him what that infernal row meant, he said, kind of under his breath, ‘Why, you see, pa, one day I got one of them tunes in hindside foremost, and Aunt Maria we pleased that I’ve gone on that way ever since, hindside foremost or upside down.’

“ I said to ma that night when she got home : ‘You see, ma, you was wrong about Maria; she’s got as much music in her as the rest of the family, but she’s obliged to

take hers in a peculiar way. She can't take it straight, but just give it her hindside foremost, or upside down, and she enjoys it as much as anyone.'"

Just then a whistle blew, and my friend's train came along. He got into the car with a dazed expression on his face, as if an idea was trying to crystallize into words. As the train was moving away he came rushing out on the rear platform, and putting up his hands in the form of a speaking-trumpet, he shouted, " Try your Browning hindside foremost," and as the train swept around a curve I heard faintly on the clear, cold air, "or upside down." -