The Bald Eagle

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

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"I'll have you chronicled, and chronicled, and cut and chronicled, and sung in all−to−be−praised sonnets, and grav'd in new brave ballads, that all tongues shall troule you in sæcula sæculorum."

Old Comedy.

In one of the little villages sprinkled along the delicious valley of the Connecticut, there stood, not many years ago, a little tavern called the Bald Eagle. It was an old−fashioned building, with a small, antique portico in front, where, of a lazy summer afternoon,the wise men of the village assembled to read newspapers, talk politics, and drink beer. Before the door stood a tall, yellow sign−post, from which hung a white sign, emblazoned with a fierce bald−headed eagle, holding an olive branch in one claw, and a flash of forked lightning in the other. Underneath was written, in large, black letters, "The Bald Eagle; Good Entertainment for Man and Beast; by Jonathan Dewlap, Esq."

One calm, sultry, summer evening, the knot of village politicians had assembled, according to custom, at the tavern door. At the entrance sat the landlord, Justice of the Peace and Quorum, lolling in a rocking chair, and dozing over the columns of an electioneering handbill. Along the benches of the portico were seated the village attorney, the schoolmaster, the tailor, and other personages of less note, but not less idle, nor less devoted to the affairs of the nation.

To this worthy assembly of patriotic citizens, the schoolmaster was drowsily doling forth the contents of the latest Gazette. It was at that memorable epoch of our national history, when Lafayette returned to visit, in the evening of his days, the land that owed so much to his youthful enthusiasm; and to see, in the soft decline of life, the consummation of his singular glory, in the bosom of that country where it first began. His approach was every where hailed with heart−stirring joy. There was but one voice throughout the land; and every village through which he passed, hailed him with rural festivities, addresses, odes, and a dinner at the tavern.

Every step of his journey was regularly and minutely recorded in those voluminous chronicles of our country, the newspapers; and column after column was filled with long notices of the dinners he had eaten, and of the toasts drank, and of the songs sung on the occasion.

As the schoolmaster detailed to the group around him an account of these busy festivals, which were so rapidly succeeding each other all over the country, the little soul he possessed kindled up within him. With true oratorical emphasis he repeated a long list of toasts, drank on a recent celebration of the kind "the American Eagle," "the day we celebrate," "the New England Fair," "the Heroes who fought, bled, and died at Bunker Hill, of which I am one!" and a thousand others equally patriotic. He was interrupted by the merry notes of the stage−horn, twanging in long−drawn blasts over the blue hills that skirted the village; and shortly after a cloud of dust came rolling its light volume along the road, and the stage−coach wheeled up to the door.

It was driven by a stout, thickest young fellow, with a glowing red face, that peeped out from under the wide brim of a white hat, like the setting sun from beneath a summer cloud. He was dressed in a wrentailed gingham coat, with pocket−holes outside, and a pair of gray linen pantaloons, buttoned down each leg with a row of yellow bell

buttons. His vest was striped with red and blue; and around his neck he wore a colored silk handkerchief, tied in a loose knot before, and tucked in at the waistband. Beside him on his coach−box sat two dusty travellers in riding−caps, and the group within presented an uncomfortable picture of the miseries of travelling in a stage−coach in the month of June.

In an instant all was noise and confusion in the bar−room of the inn. Travellers, that had just arrived, and those about to set off in the evening coach, came crowding in with their baggage; some eager to secure places, and others lodgings. A noisy group was gathered at the bar, within which the landlady was bouncing to and fro in a huff, and jingling a great bunch ofkeys, like some wild animal at a raree−show, stalking about its cage, whisking its tail, and jingling its iron chain.

The fireplace was filled with pine boughs and asparagus tops; and over it the wall was covered with advertisements of new−invented machines, patent medicines, tollgate and turnpike companies, and coarse prints of steamboats, stage−coaches, opposition lines, and Fortune's home forever. In one corner stood an old−fashioned oaken settee, with high back and crooked elbows, which served as a seat by day, and a bed by night: in another was a pile of trunks and different articles of a traveller's equipage: travelling−coats hung here and there about the room, and the atmosphere was thick with the smoke of tobacco and the fumes of brandy.

At length the sound of wheels was heard at the door. "Stage ready!" shouted the coachman, putting his head in at the door; there was a hurry and bustle about the room; the travellers crowded out; a short pause succeeded; the carriage door was slammed to in haste; and the coach wheeled away, and disappeared in the dusk of evening.

The sound of its wheels had hardly ceased to be heard, when the tailor entered the bar−room with a newspaper in his hand, and strutted up to the squire and the schoolmaster, who sat talking together upon the settee, with a step that would have done honor to the tragedy hero of a strolling theatre. He had just received the tidings that Lafayette was on his way north. The stage−driver had brought the news; the passengers confirmed it; it was in the newspapers; and of course there could be no doubt upon the subject. It now became a general topic of conversation in the bar−room. The villagers came in one by one; all were on tiptoe; all talked together Lafayette, the Marquis,the Gin'ral! He would pass through the village in two days from then. What was to be done? The town authorities were at their wits' end, and were quite as anxious to know how they should receive their venerable guest, as they were to receive him.

In the mean time, the news took wing. There was a crowd at the door of the post−office talking with becoming zeal upon the subject; the boys in the street gave three cheers, and shouted, "Lafayette forever!" and in less than ten minutes the approaching jubilee was known and talked of in every nook and corner of the village. The town authorities assembled in the little back parlor of the inn, to discuss the subject more at leisure over a mug of cider, and conclude upon the necessary arrangements for the occasion. Here they continued with closed doors until a late hour, and, after much debate, finally resolved to decorate the tavern hall, prepare a great dinner, order out the militia, and take the general by surprise. The lawyer was appointed to write an oration, and the schoolmaster an ode, for the occasion.

As night advanced, the crowd gradually dispersed from the street. Silence succeeded to the hum of rejoicing, and nothing was heard throughout the village but the occasional bark of a dog, the creaking of the tavern sign, and the no less musical accents of the one−keyed flute of the schoolmaster, who, perched at his chamber window in nightgown and slippers, serenaded the neighborhood with "Fire on the Mountains," and half of "Washington's March;" whilst the grocer, who lived next door, roused from sweet dreams of treacle and brown sugar, lay tossing in his bed, and wishing the deuce would take the schoolmaster, with his Latin and his one−keyed flute.

As day began to peep next morning, the tailor was seen to issue out of the inn yard in the landlord's yellowwagon, with the negro hostler Cæsar mounted behind, thumping about in the tail of the vehicle, and grinning with huge delight. As the gray of morning mellowed, life began its course again in the little village. The cock hailed the

daylight cheerly; the sheep bleated from the hills; the sky grew softer and clearer; the blue mountains caught the rising sun; and the mass of white vapor, that filled the valley, began to toss and roll itself away, like ebb of a feathery sea. Then the bustle of advancing day began; doors and windows were thrown open; the gate creaked on its hinge; carts rattled by; villagers were moving in the streets; and the little world began to go, like some ponderous machine, that, wheel after wheel, is gradually put in motion.

In a short time the tailor was seen slowly returning along the road, with a wagon−load of pine boughs and evergreens. The wagon was unloaded at the tavern door, and its precious cargo carried up into the hall, where the tailor, in his shirt sleeves, danced and capered about the room, with a hatchet in one hand, and a long knife in the other, like an Indian warrior before going to battle. In a moment the walls were stripped of the faded emblems of former holidays; garlands of withered roses were trampled under foot; old stars, that had lost their lustre, were seen to fall; and the white pine chandelier was robbed of its yellow coat, and dangled from the ceiling, quite woe−begone and emaciated. But erelong the whole room was again filled with arches, and garlands, and festoons, and stars, and all kinds of singular devices in green leaves and asparagus tops. Over the chimney−piece were suspended two American flags, with a portrait of General Washington beneath them; and the names of Trenton, Yorktown, Bunker Hill, peeped out from between the evergreens, cut in red morocco, and fastened to the wall with a profusion of brass nails. Every part of the room was liberally decorated with paper eagles; and in a corner hung a little black ship, rigged with twine, and armed with a whole broadside of umbrella tips.

It were in vain to attempt a description of all the wonders that started up beneath the tailor's hand, as from the touch of a magician's wand. In a word, before night, every thing was in readiness. Travellers that arrived in the evening brought information that the general would pass through the village at noon the next day; but without the slightest expectation of the jubilee that awaited him. The tailor was beside himself with joy at the news, and pictured to himself with good−natured self−complacency the surprise and delight of the venerable patriot, when he should receive the public honors prepared for him, and the new blue coat, with bright buttons and velvet collar, which was then making at his shop.

In the mean time the landlady had been busy in making preparations for a sumptuous dinner; the lawyer had been locked up all day, hard at work upon his oration; and the pedagogue was hard ridden by the phantom of a poetic eulogy, that bestrode his imagination like the nightmare. Nothing was heard in the village but the bustle of preparation, and the martial music of drums and fifes. For a while the ponderous wheel of labor seemed to stand still. The clatter of the cooper's mallet was silent, the painter left his brush, the cobbler his awl, and the blacksmith's bellows lay sound asleep, with its nose buried in the ashes.

The next morning at day−break the whole military force of the town was marshalled forth in front of the tavern, "armed and equipped as the law directs." Conspicuous among this multitude stood the tailor,arrayed in a coat of his own making, all lace and buttons, and a pair of buff pantaloons, drawn up so tight, that he could hardly touch his feet to the ground. He wore a military hat, shaped like a clam−shell, with little white goose feathers stuck all round the edge. By his side stood the gigantic figure of the blacksmith, in rusty regimentals. At length the roll of the drum announced the order for forming the ranks, and the valiant host displayed itself in a long, wavering line. Here stood a tall lantern−jawed fellow, all legs, furbished up with a red waistcoat, and shining−green coat, a little round wool hat perched on the back of his head, and downward tapering off in a pair of yellow nankeens, twisted and wrinkled about the knees, as if his legs had been screwed into them. Beside him stood a long−waisted being, with a head like a hurra's nest, set off with a willow hat, and a face that looked as if it were made of sole−leather, and a gash cut in the middle of it for a mouth. Next came a little man with fierce black whiskers, and sugar−loaf hat, equipped with a long fowling−piece, a powder−horn, and a white canvass knapsack, with a red star on the back of it. Then a country bumpkin standing bolt upright, his head elevated, his toes turned out, holding fast to his gun with one hand, and keeping the other spread out upon his right thigh. Then figured the descendant of some revolutionary veteran, arrayed in the uniform, and bearing the arms and accoutrements of his ancestor, a cocked hat on his head, a heavy musket on his shoulder, and on his back a large knapsack, marked U. S. Here was a man in straw hat and gingham jacket; and there a pale, nervous fellow, buttoned up to the chin in a drab great−coat, to

guard him against the morning air, and keep out the fever and ague.

"Attention the whole! Front face! Eyes right!Eyes left! Steady! Attention to the roll−call!" shouted the blacksmith, in a voice like a volcano.

"Peleg Popgun!"

"Here."

"Tribulation Sheepshanks!"

"He e e re."

"Return Jonathan Babcock!"

"Here."

And so on through a whole catalogue of long, hard names.

"Attention! Shoulder arms! Very well. Fall back there on the extreme left! No talking in the ranks! Present arms! Squire Wiggins, you're not in the line if you please, a little farther in a little farther out there, I guess that will do. Carry arms! Very well done. Quick time, upon your post march!"

The little red−coated drummer flourished his drum−sticks; the bandy−legged fifer struck up Yankee−doodle; Cæsar showed his flat face over the horizon of a great bass drum, like the moon in an eclipse; the tailor brandished his sword; and the whole company, wheeling with some confusion round the tavern sign−post, streamed down the road, covered with dust, and followed by a troop of draggle−tailed boys.

As soon as this company had disappeared, and the dub of its drum ceased to be heard, the too−too of a shrill trumpet sounded across the plains, and a troop of horse came riding up. The leader was a jolly, round−faced butcher, with a red fox tail nodding over his head, and came spurring on, with his elbows flapping up and down, like a pair of wings. As he approached the tavern, he ordered the troop to wheel, and form a line in front a manœuvre, which, though somewhat arduous, was nevertheless executed with wonderful skill and precision.

This body of light−horse was the pride of the whole country round; and was mounted and caparisoned in a style of splendor, that dazzled the eyes of all the village. Each horseman wore a cap of bear−skin, crested with a fox tail, a short blue jacket, faced with yellow, and profusely ornamented with red morocco and quality binding. The pantaloons were of the same color as the jackets, and were trimmed with yellow cord. Some rode with long stirrups, some with short stirrups, and some with no stirrups at all; some sat perpendicular upon their saddles, some at an obtuse angle, and others at an angle of forty−five. One was mounted on a tall, one−eyed bone−setter, with his tail and ears cropped; another on a little red nag, with shaggy mane, and long switch tail, and as vicious as if the very devil were in him. Here was a great fellow, with long, curly whiskers, looking as fierce as Mars himself; there, a little, hooked−nose creature, with red crest, short spurs, elbows stuck out, and jacket cocked up behind, looking like a barn−door "rooster," with his tail clipped, just preparing to crow.

When this formidable troop was formed to the satisfaction of their leader, the word of command was given, and they went through the sword exercise, hewing and cutting the air in all directions, with the most cool and deliberate courage. The order was then given to draw pistols. Ready! aim! fire. Pop pop poo, went the pistols. Too too too, went the trumpet. The horses took fright at the sound; some plunged, others reared and kicked, and others started out of the line, and capered up and down, "like mad." The captain being satisfied with this display of the military discipline of his troop, they wheeled off in sections, and rode gallantly into the

tavern−yard, to recruit from the fatigues of the morning.

Crowds of country people now came driving in from all directions, to see the fun and the general. The honest farmer, in broad−brimmed hat and broad−skirted coat, jogged slowly on, with his wife and half a dozen blooming daughters, in a square−top chaise; and country beaux, in all their Sunday finery, came racing along in wagons, or parading round on horse−back, to win a sidelong look from some fair country lass in gypsy hat and blue ribbons.

In the meantime the schoolmaster was far from being idle. His scholars had been assembled at an early hour, and after a deal of drilling and good advice, were arranged in a line in front of the school−house, to bask in the sun, and wait for the general. The little girls had wreaths of roses upon their heads, and baskets of flowers in their hands; and the boys carried Bibles, and wore papers on their hats, inscribed, "Welcome, Lafayette." The schoolmaster walked up and down before them, with a ratan in his hand, repeating to himself his poetic eulogy; stopping now and then to rap some unlucky little rogue over the knuckles for misdemeanor; shaking one, to make him turn out his toes; and pulling another's ear, to make him hold up his head and look like a man.

In this manner the morning wore away, and the hour, at which it had been rumored that the general was to arrive, drew near. The whole military force, both foot and horse, was then summoned together in front of the tavern, and formed into a hollow square, and the colonel, a swarthy knight of the forge, by the aid of a scrawl, written by the squire and placed in the crown of his hat, made a most eloquent and patriotic harangue, in which he called the soldiers his "brothers in arms, the hope of their country, the terror of their enemies, the bulwark of liberty, and thesafeguard of the fair sex." They were then wheeled back again into a line, and dismissed for ten minutes.

An hour or two previous, an honest old black, named Boaz, had been stationed upon the high−road, not far from the entrance of the village, equipped with a loaded gun, which he was ordered to discharge by way of signal, as soon as the general should appear. Full of the importance and dignity of his office, Boaz marched to and fro across the dusty road, with his musket ready cocked, and his finger on the trigger. This manœuvring in the sun, however, diminished the temperature of his enthusiasm, in proportion as it increased that of his body; till at length he sat down on a stump in the shade, and leaning his musket against the trunk of a tree, took a short−stemmed pipe out of his pocket, and began to smoke. As noon−day drew near, he grew hungry and homesick; his heart sunk into his stomach. His African philosophy dwindled apace into a mere theory. Overpowered by the heat of the weather, he grew drowsy, his pipe fell from his mouth, his head lost its equipoise, and dropped, like a poppy, upon his breast, and sliding gently from his seat, he fell asleep at the root of the tree. He was aroused from his slumber by the noise of an empty wagon, that came rattling along a cross−road near him. Thus suddenly awakened, the thought of the general's approach, the idea of being caught sleeping at his post, and the shame of having given the signal too late, flashed together across his bewildered mind, and springing upon his feet, he caught his musket, shut both eyes, and fired, to the utter consternation of the wagoner, whose horses took fright at the sound, and became unmanageable. Poor Boaz, when he saw the mistake he had made, and the mischief he had done, did not wait long to deliberate,but throwing his musket over his shoulder, bounded into the woods, and was out of sight in the twinkling of an eye.

The sharp report of the gun rang far and wide through the hush of noontide, awakening many a drowsy echo that grumbled in the distance, like a man aroused untimely from his rest. At the sound of the long−expected signal−gun, the whole village was put in motion. The drum beat to order, the ranks were formed in haste, and the whole military force moved off to escort the general in, amid the waving of banners, the roll of drums, the scream of fifes, and the twang of the horse trumpet.

All was now anxious expectation at the village. The moments passed like hours. The lawyer appeared at the tavern door, with his speech in his hand; the schoolmaster and his scholars stood broiling in the sun; and many a searching look was cast along the dusty highway to descry some indication of their guest's approach. Sometimes a little cloud of dust, rolling along the distant road, would cheat them with a vain illusion. Then the report of musketry, and the roll of drums, rattling among the hills, and dying on the breeze, would inspire the fugitive hope,

that he had at length arrived, and a murmur of eager expectation would run from mouth to mouth. "There he comes! that's he;" and the people would crowd into the street to be again disappointed.

One o'clock arrived; two, three, but no general! The dinner was overdone, the landlady in great tribulation, the cook in a great passion. The gloom of disappointment began to settle on many a countenance. The people looked doubtingly at each other, and guessed. The sky, too, began to lower. Volumes of black clouds piled themselves up in the west, and threatened a storm. The ducks were unusually noisy and quarrelsome around the green pool in thestable yard; and a flock of ill−boding crows were holding ominous consultation round the top of a tall pine. Every thing gave indication of an approaching thunder−gust. A distant, irregular peal rattled along the sky, like a volley of musketry. They thought it was a salute to the general. Soon after the air grew damp and misty; it began to drizzle; a few scattered drops pattered on the roofs, and it set in to rain.

A scene of confusion ensued. The pedagogue and his disciples took shelter in the school−house; the crowd dispersed in all directions, with handkerchiefs thrown over their heads, and their gowns tucked up, and every thing looked dismal and disheartening. The bar−room was full of disconsolate faces. Some tried to keep their spirits up by drinking; others wished to laugh the matter off; and others stood, with their hands in their pockets, looking out of the window, to see it rain, and making wry faces.

Night drew on apace, and the rain continued. Still nothing was to be heard of the general. Some were for despatching a messenger to ascertain the cause of this delay; but who would go out in such a storm! At length the monotonous too−too of the horse trumpet was heard; there was a great clattering and splashing of hoofs at the door; and the troop reined up, spattered with mud, drenched through and through, and completely crest−fallen. Not long after, the foot company came straggling in, dripping wet, and diminished to one half its number by desertions. The tailor entered the bar−room reeking and disconsolate, a complete epitome of the miseries of human life written in his face. The feathers were torn out of his clam−shell hat, his coat was thoroughly sponged, his boots full of water, and his buff pantaloons clung tighter than ever to his little legs. He trembled like a leaf; one might have taken him for Fever and Ague personified. The blacksmith, on the contrary, seemed to dread thewater as little as if it were his element. The rain did not penetrate him, and he rolled into the bar−room like a great sea−calf, that, after sporting about in the waves, tumbles himself out upon the sand to dry.

A thousand questions were asked at once about the general, but there was nobody to answer them. They had seen nothing of him, they had heard nothing of him, they knew nothing of him! Their spirit and patience were completely soaked out of them; no patriotism was proof against such torrents of rain.

Every heart seemed now to sink in despair. Every hope had given way, when the twang of the stage−horn was heard, sending forth its long−drawn cadences, and enlivening the gloom of a rainy twilight. The coach dashed up to the door. It was empty not a solitary passenger. The coachman came in without a dry thread about him. A little stream of water trickled down his back from the rim of his hat. There was something dismally ominous in his look; he seemed to be a messenger of bad news.

"The gin'ral! the gin'ral! where's the gin'ral?"

"He's gone on by another road. So much for the opposition line and the new turnpike!" said the coachman, as he tossed off a glass of New England.

"He has lost a speech!" said the lawyer.

"He has lost a coat!" said the tailor.

"He has lost a dinner!" said the landlord.

It was a gloomy night at the Bald Eagle. A few boon companions sat late over their bottle, drank hard, and tried to be merry; but it would not do. Good−humor flagged, the jokes were bad, the laughter forced, and one after another slunk away to bed, full of bad liquor, and reeling with the fumes of brandy and beer.