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DAN RICE



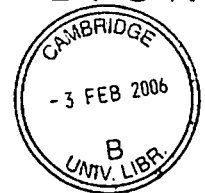
THE ORIGINAL HUMORIST AS HE APPEARED IN HIS  
**GREAT UNION SPEECH.**  
Before the MEDICAL STUDENTS. Phaidra Dec. 20<sup>th</sup> 1852

# DAN RICE



THE MOST FAMOUS MAN  
YOU'VE NEVER HEARD OF

DAVID CARLYON



PUBLIC AFFAIRS  
NEW YORK

2001

XIX 506

his determination "to make Equestrian exhibition worthy of the countenance of the intellectual and refined." No reformer has done more than Rice. insisted the *Pictorial*. He has "rendered the arena like it was in olden times, a place of classic resort. The groveling babbler in spotted dress, and the low buffoon he has driven from the ring, and now in his 'Great Show,' stands out proudly as the acknowledged humorist of the day."<sup>4</sup>

Demonstrating the advance of Rice's stature, the *Cincinnati Enquirer* copied the *Pictorial* for the start of its annual circus preview. Copying was a practical convenience for an editor who had less to write to fill the daily quota—but it was also an endorsement. The *Enquirer* reinforced that endorsement by adding a preface: "Of Dan we can say," it began,

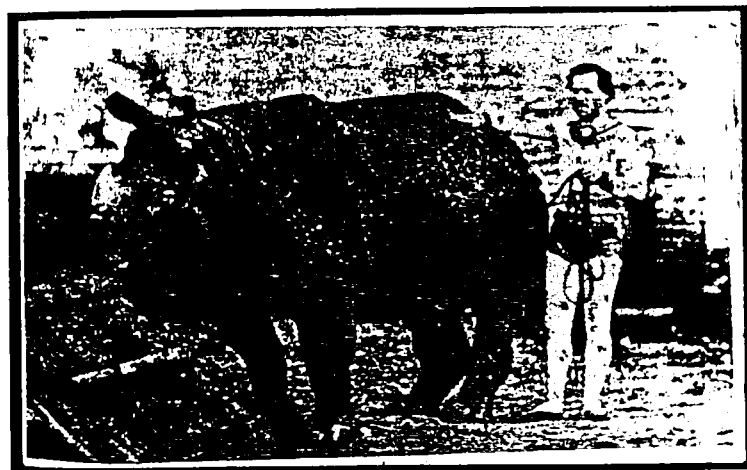
he has a genius for fun. His humors are adapted to the times, his hits local, his satire telling, his wit pointed, his jokes harmless, and his conversational powers unlimited. . . . He is the great master-spirit of the nineteenth century—the man who, above all, the people most admire. With an enviable reputation for integrity of character, and a universal fame as the most amusing man of modern times, his name is a tower of strength. Among the upper circles. . . . Dan Rice is the magnet of attraction.<sup>5</sup>

He insisted that his Great Show was not merely inoffensively acceptable, it was a positive force for reform. He boasted of his stars' "Refinement and Originality." Thomas Canham's Keystone Orchestra did not simply play the usual polkas, marches, and patriotic airs, but also selections from Verdi and Mendelssohn. Rice's talent for engaging audiences rose to its greatest strength just as audiences were most eager for what he offered: authenticity, respectability, especially refinement.<sup>6</sup>

Rice even presented his rhinoceros as refined. The Living Unicorn, it had been exhibited on the Barnum & Howes Asiatic Caravan in 1854, was sold or loaned to Cushing the next year, and then not exhibited in 1856, perhaps because it was a poor draw. A rhinoceros could not do much. Comparing the animal's horn and the clown's prominent nose, the *Clipper* joked that "Rice" was short for rhinoceros. (The word had not yet been trimmed to "rhino," which was still slang for money, suggesting a folk source for "pay through the nose.") When Cushing and Howes prepared to present a circus in England in 1856, they wondered what to do with their hog-in armor. It was troublesome to transport, and the English

might not take to it. Meanwhile, Rice had demonstrated that comic mules drew audiences. So Howes and Cushing offered to buy Rice's pair. He was willing, because he could train more. He put the price at \$5,000, but when he was offered \$1,000 and the rhinoceros, Rice swapped. Though he asserted the rhino was worth \$4,000, making the deal a good one, to the show world he had been "sold." What could he do with a rhinoceros?

He could train it. One day in Girard, leaning against the animal's pen, he lit his cigar with a red hot poker. The rhinoceros nudged him at that moment, so Rice jabbed back, forcing a retreat. The next day, the animal backed up when it saw the showman holding the poker. That told Rice it could learn, so he set to work. Or he set Noyes to work. As with Lalla Rookh, Rice took credit for the training, but he also acknowledged Noyes's contribution. In May 1857, Rice presented the first trained rhinoceros in the United States, and perhaps the first performing rhinoceros since the days of ancient Rome. Rice named it Old Put, for Israel Putnam,



Rice's rare performing rhinoceros, "Old Put."

the general who had defended West Point during the Revolution. The tricks were simple. Old Put climbed steps, "spoke," lay down, and sat back on its haunches. Differences in its "trot, gambol, and run" depended on the music played by the band. Rice did create a small drama by yelling "Fire!" so that the animal could hit a bell with its horn, as if raising the alarm. Otherwise the limited range of actions posed a publicity problem, as Howes and Cushing had discovered. After proclaiming that Rice exercised his will over "the most obdurate disposition of animal nature," what else could be said? One tactic was to change the subject. In an article on the rhinoceros in the 1858 *Pictorial*, the publicity agent wrote about his astonishment at the animal's description, about the greatness of Rice, and the grandness of Excelsior. A trip to see the critter left him discussing the trip, not the critter. Finally, the one horned "machine" made an appearance in a few lines at the end of the account. It was "the largest one ever captured," a claim difficult to assess because Old Put was also "the only Rhinoceros in America." The more important publicity tactic was respectability: against a backdrop of columns and drapery, the animal was pictured with one foot on a pedestal like a middle class gent posing in a portrait gallery.<sup>8</sup>

Barely two weeks into the 1857 season, breaking his vow never to hit a man again, Rice was arrested in Rochester for assault and battery. In June he was beaten up himself, this time by a machinist in Syracuse. (He then missed shows, which led to complaints in Oswego: His replacement was dull, Excelsior was not presented, and the rhinoceros was "unanimously voted a humbug and a bore.") At Attica in August, another "general knocking down and dragging out" made the news. Officers sent to quell matters were themselves beaten away. The citizens then "took hold of the matter in earnest," fetching guns from the local arsenal. A well-regulated militia being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms against a circus was not infringed, so Rice's company surrendered a few men to arrests. As for Rice, just before a flying visit to his family in Girard, he was horned by his rhino. His publicity joked about the "uncivil 'hist'" [hoist], but it was serious. The animal was reputed to have killed one keeper, and Rice did not fully recover until the following spring.<sup>9</sup>

Rice toured Canada through the summer of 1857, including stops in Montreal and Toronto. His publicity employed a new way to announce his circus, the ads in the *Toronto Daily Globe* exhorting "Wait for the Carnival!!" Moving south through New York, Rice reached Brooklyn, where his tent was "crowded to suffocation" with 5,000 people. In the *Daily Eagle*, Rice touted the \$75,000 his circus had cost.

Announcing he would winter in Philadelphia, Rice ended the season in Pittsburgh. Smoky City papers loyally cheered. A "protegé of Pittsburgh," he had become the "leading showman of the age," with an "outfit better and more extensive than any ever owned by man individually." His "success in life is a pattern for the rising generation." He summarized the appeal of his show as it reached its fullest form:

- 1st. THE TIGHT ROPE ELEPHANT.
- 2d. THE TAME RHINOCEROS.
- 3d. THE TRICK CAMEL.
- 4th. THE TALKING HORSE.
- 5th. THE COMIC MULES.
- 6th. THE TANDEM MANAGE MARES.
- 7th. THE only ORIGINAL HUMORIST, DAN RICE!

Some of the praise came because he brought money into the local economy, more "we are informed, . . . than any merchant in the city." (When Spalding closed in Cincinnati, he paid accumulated salaries of \$15,000, and much of that went into the stores.) Part of it, too, was local pride. Presenting his "Comic Positions on Horseback"—another rare riding appearance—Rice was a Pittsburgh boy who "has won the race." As had become typical, the *Post* was especially pleased by the class of people who patronized his show. "One of our oldest and most valued subscribers told us that he was glad to find that the circus was so modified, that it was worthy of the support of those who viewed refinement as one of the best claims that could be put forward for public patronage. Who says that Dan Rice is not a man of uncommon intellectual acumen."<sup>10</sup>

The backwoods Rice had been traveling for years had long been regarded as an empty wasteland to be overwhelmed. The later image of Africa as a trackless, forbidding jungle was originally applied to the

American interior, where Michigan was considered impenetrable forest, and Nebraska a desert. But a new vision was growing. Increasingly, Americans saw value in the sweep of the continent. The United States, it was said, had a "manifest destiny" to rule from the Atlantic to the Pacific, and beyond, as Dan's jokes about annexing Cuba attest.<sup>11</sup> About the time that the doctrine of Manifest Destiny acquired its name, in 1846, that vision was finding expression in the landscapes of the painters known as the Hudson River School. Capturing the country's awesome beauty, they painted craggy mountains and sheltered meadows, waterfalls, and wide vistas that their fellow citizens had never seen or, seeing, had scorned. These painterly images sometimes served a more practical purpose. In 1852, the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad sought to increase the value of its land by hiring William Louis Sonntag to paint pleasing pictures that might persuade people to settle along its tracks. America's first major school of painting was also a marketing tool.

The Hudson River School was reaching its prime along with Rice. At first glance, that is a mere coincidence of time. The painters ignored the clamorous and growing cities, which had the greatest concentration for audiences, to create a prettified image of sparsely populated, mostly tranquil vastness. A scholar pointed out that the peacefulness of the paintings constituted "an essential denial of the grim conflagration of Civil War." Before that denial came a denial of the massed energy and confusion of the growing antebellum republic. The painterly vision of peace, rendered in delicate shades and subtle light, obscured the cold, dirty, and wet world that Americans lived—and in which Rice labored. For him, Hudson River meant river towns and their constant fights. That rawness extended to the energy out of which Rice created his comedy. Yet his participation in the same urge to transcend coarseness, to drape a pretty veil over crude life, made him an intellectual kin to the Hudson River School. Both the clown and the painters were responding to and helping further a culture-wide urge of elevation. Like them, Rice was creating an elevated image, though his subject was himself, and his canvas was the circus ring. The *Cincinnati Enquirer* was not being ironic when it called him a "genius for fun."<sup>12</sup>

## ENCLOSURE



Men and women shivered against the chill as they made their way up Broadway. At Prince Street, they entered the elegant Metropolitan Hotel and passed through the brightly lit lobby to Niblo's pleasure palace. The first arrivals bustled into the chilly theater at the 6:30 P.M. call of "Doors." Empty rows gave way to pairs and pockets of people, chatting, yelling to friends. Outside was cold and dark; here, conviviality reigned. As more made their way up the narrow stairs, noise increased. Anticipation grew. Individuals were becoming an audience.

Rice was now a major figure in amusements. With all the options that Manhattan offered, including the American Museum, promised by Barnum to be comparable to eating "hasheesh," multitudes chose Rice. The Broadway Theatre had dropped *Mazeppa*, "fearful that Rice's show might diminish their receipts." His Great Show averaged receipts of \$500 a night through February. With tickets ranging from the ironically labeled "aristocratic price" of 25¢, up to a plebeian \$1 for a seat in a private box, that meant 1,000 people a show, probably more. His benefit garnered over \$800. (Overall through the winter of 1857–1858, at Baltimore's

Maggie's skill, which was probably limited anyway to her character as the epitome of womanly modesty.

Beyond Maggie's personal respectability, Rice applied the theme of the idealized woman as a guarantee of order. Whitman wrote about more than Rice's show when he commented that the "presence of ladies (in thousands) has tended no doubt to the purification of the circus." It was precisely the pitch Barnum made for Lind, which Emerson repeated, rhapsodizing that Lind "needs no police. Her voice is worth a hundred constables, and instantly silenced the uproar of the mob." Similarly, Mrs. Rice's "virtue has the effect of keeping vice in check."<sup>19</sup>

Then, more than a performer, she was preceptor of an "elegant school of Lady Equestrianism." At Niblo's, Mrs. Dan Rice offered no riding tricks but "Instructive Illustrations of Horsemanship, arranged for and dedicated to the Ladies of New York." Her "Saddle Exercises" provided a healthful model that "the whole sex should emulate."

Dauntless, though graceful, dashing, though chaste, impulsive, though modest, she diffuses fascination in the road exercises that charms all beholders. . . . by her example she has induced many a sentimental miss who was pining with *ennui* in the boudoir, to seize the rein, direct the sporting palfrey and dash over the plain, thus dispelling all the ill results of an idle life.<sup>20</sup>

Later ages would cluck about passive Victorian ladies but another, more active image was stirring. Whitman, concerned about "frail, constitutioned" women, urged the same solution as Rice, athleticism and exercise. This sturdier model was offered in plays and novels as the True Woman.<sup>21</sup> Rice capitalized on that avatar to challenge the suspicion of female performers as painted women. If ladies learned "the natural science of riding" from Maggie, "the bloom of health would appear on their cheeks, and cosmetics and carmine would never be resorted to." That echoed middle-class *Harper's*, which observed that riding gave a lady a "flush of health" and "full development of figure." Maggie also offered spirituality. In her horse, White Surrey, could be seen "Etherealized Poetical Motions truly Vivifical to the Connoisseurs of the Modern Equestrian School." In all, she "exerts a silent influence of sanctity on all around her. . . . the tendencies of the place all turn to purity and self-respect." (Be-

yond publicity persiflage, she held sway backstage. The old minstrel, Brower, led the company in presenting her with a fancy bridle, in thanks for "the womanly attention" she paid to a sick member of the company.<sup>22</sup>

On May Day 1858, an admirer sent Maggie a "philo-poem." He framed it in antebellum authenticity as "a simple gift, with the heart's pure prayer." The writer held her in high regard not only because she was married to Dan "but also for her own merit as a true woman—Heaven's last, but best gift to Man."<sup>23</sup>

### 3. THE RHINOCEROS

Excelsior was not the only animal Rice adorned with gentility. Lalla Rookh was sagacious, the mules were "educated," and the Waltzing Camel followed "the votaries of Terpsichore." Yet Rice could tease his own aspirations, as he labeled the rhinoceros "unfashionably gross." (Similarly, scoring off an old friend, Rice named the awkward camel "Van Orden.") When the rhinoceros got out of its pen and encountered the proprietor, William Niblo, the episode prompted mock politesse reminiscent of the tale of Lalla Rookh's nocturnal stroll.

"Niblo's Interview With A New Actor."—A few evenings since, as the popular and successful manager of "The Garden" was taking his evening's round, to see that all was right about the house—the gas turned off and the fires out—he encountered suddenly, in the middle of the stage, a new actor upon his boards. It was nothing less than the rhinoceros of Dan Rice. . . . Niblo, with his usual courtesy, said "Good evening," and the rhinoceros snorted, which was as much as to say, Will you take a horn? The manager incontinently declined the invitation, making the best of his way behind the scenes to get some one to put his new friend out.<sup>24</sup>

4. Wm. H. Greene, the "Pride of the Pike," formerly reinsman to the Hon. Henry Clay, will ride, drive and manage three span of Spirited Grey Horses.

Attention wavers at performances. Later audiences, trained to the idea that attention must be paid, blame themselves. Nineteenth-century crowds assumed that if they were bored, it was because the performance was boring. After all, regular attendance made them experts. So audi-

Street. In the words of the *Commercial*, "many of our fast men . . . are generally supposed to have 'seen the Elephant' under nearly every possible aspect;—now that they have seen the *aquatic* animal, their education may be considered as complete." Both the *Clipper* and the *Spirit of the Times* carried long accounts of the event—though the *Spirit* snubbed Rice by not mentioning his name.<sup>11</sup>

Rice paid dearly for the triumph. A month later, Lalla Rookh died in Indiana, of "lung fever" reportedly brought on by her dip, a diagnosis influenced by the age's belief that baths were unhealthy. Rice reportedly had refused \$20,000 for Lalla Rookh. By coincidence, the elephant on the West Coast Rice's Great Show also expired after a plunge into a river, tumbling over falls in northern California.<sup>12</sup>

Rice soldiered on. Without the draw of Lalla Rookh, he reverted to old strategies. In Madison, Indiana, he announced that he was in his favorite city; he admitted children free; he gave firemen a benefit; he alluded to the virtual endorsement of the authorities in waiving the license fee; and he invited praise for "banishing the clown altogether" from his circus. In Louisville, "Genial Dan" played the retirement card again, announcing that "the people's clown" might be giving his last performances, which drew the "most fashionable people" and the "most prominent clergymen in Louisville. . . . (This is a fact; no 'blowing' about it.)" The spirits of Excelsior and Lalla Rookh continued to hover over the show, at least in images in the ads.<sup>13</sup>

In St. Louis, Rice bought a steamboat, the *James Raymond*, named for the deceased menagerie man. Rice acquired the side-wheeler from Spalding, who had used it to push his *Floating Palace*. With their feud now history, business was business. Predictably, the St. Louis audience comprised "the elite of the community," and Rice was "unquestionably an original genius." After Carondelet, Cape Girardeau, and Cairo came a week in Memphis. Rice was able to exhibit for free because he gave a benefit yielding \$2,000 to the Sons of Malta, a fraternal organization to which the mayor belonged. It was also in Memphis that Rice allowed a local marksman to test the boast that the rhinoceros's hide was impervious to bullets. Fortunately, they fell to the ground, flattened by the thick skin.<sup>14</sup>

On Rice's second day in Memphis, Lincoln was elected president. Angry voices screamed for war, shouting in the South that they would secede, in the North that they would force submission. The majority, including most of the minority who had voted for Lincoln in the four-way split, worried about the growing influence of the abolitionists. As things heated up and the sections drew further apart, Rice stuck to his plans. He continued "away, away, away down South in Dixie."

Ultimately—and accurately—“Any slander that Greeley can obtain against Rice is ‘old pie’ for Horace.” Then the *Clipper* turned again, like another twist in the Mississippi, deploring Rice’s “intense Southernism” (as well as his “sardonic fun over his debts”). Labeling Rice “A Chameleon Clown,” the papers asserted the existence of a list “of Minute Men, signed by Dan and his company, to defend the South unto the death!” There was no list. Finally, in August, the *Clipper* didn’t know what it thought, printing opposing views from Minnesota. “Squibbob” complained that Rice was only “a sort of Union man,” who called his kangaroo “Jeff Davis” but “very coolly stated that when in the South he called him ‘Abe Lincoln.’” Another observer on the scene, “Chips,” disagreed: “Rice was serenaded at his hotel, called out, and made as sensible a national speech as I ever listened to.”<sup>16</sup>

Down the Ohio Rice went, and up the Mississippi. In St. Louis, he again declared that he did not aspire to politics. He no longer rode the *James Raymond*. Rice later said that General Fremont had confiscated it, though it was not pressed into service until 1863. Another source passed on a story that the Confederates used it for patrol duty, her calliope playing on moonlit nights. In Lyons City, Iowa, Rice said that he appeared in the ring to prove he wasn’t dead, or if dead, he was only to save funeral expenses. He made his first venture to Wisconsin, though he said he had been there in his early days.<sup>17</sup>

Now Rice lost another animal. In La Crosse, he lampooned the town council as extortionists for their \$50 license, and the *Tri-Weekly Democrat* complained on his behalf, pointing out that his company had spent \$600 in town on clothing, jewelry, and supplies. Then, as Rice’s troupe steamed north on the *Lucerne*, towing a barge carrying the rhinoceros cage, a fast Minnesota packet boat, the *Key City*, swept downriver around a bend, making waves that rocked the barge, plunging Old Put’s cage into the water. The current prevented any rescue. Rice estimated the loss at \$20,000, though his agent was able to milk the calamity for publicity by filling the local papers with fanciful details. The *Clipper* was not pleased by the fictions: “What motive the La Crosse *Democrat* can have had in misleading its readers, we are at a loss to conceive. We know that Dan Rice is up to such dodges, but an editor of a newspaper is supposed to have some respect for his patrons, be his own reputation good or bad.” After the

bloated, stinking carcass of the rhinoceros was hauled from the river, Rice sued the *Key City* for the loss.<sup>18</sup>

In two years, Rice had lost *Excelsior*, *Lalla Rookh*, and *Old Put*, three of the greatest draws of mid-century circus. Any one of them could attract a crowd; together they had made Rice a formidable manager.

In Chicago, site of the convention that had nominated Lincoln, Rice played to 50,000 people in September. He had been delivering his version of Union sentiments all over. When he passed through Cleveland, where “his ‘voice is for war’ to the last gasp,” he said he had a plan to raise a cavalry unit of 1,000 circus riders, and had been contacted by a call from Washington to discuss the matter. In Girard, he gave another speech as he joined the local state senator, Morrow B. Lowry, in bidding Eric volunteers farewell. Rice again denied interest in politics, though he called himself a “disciple of principles” enunciated by Douglas. Rice admitted he had opposed the election of Lincoln as a sectional candidate, but claimed that Lincoln was following Douglas’s doctrines. The question now, he announced, was not abolition, not Republicanism or “Democracy but that of actual war.” The South must be beaten, no matter what the cost. “Fiat justitia, ruat caelum.” Let justice be done though the heavens fall. In Chicago, the *Post* pronounced itself “anxious to listen to his adventures down south, and his ideas of things in Secessia,” while the *Chicago Tribune* appreciated his “good sound political common sense,” and promised soon to “show to the public that Rice, under the guise of Motley, has done the Federal cause much service.”<sup>19</sup>

Then Rice led his Great Show home. The *Cincinnati Enquirer* reported that he was lying in clover after a profitable season, but the Utica paper painted a different picture. His politics continued, though the *Clipper* disapproved. “From the moment he enters the ring till the curtain falls on the last act, he endeavors to prove himself a union man; he pitches into everybody, with the exception of Abe Lincoln and his Cabinet. This will do very well on the Stump, but in the Ring it is out of place.”<sup>20</sup> Those offended by his hits on the times were growing in number, and now even a show business paper had decided that they should not be part of the show business.

In Girard he talked again, fleshing out what was becoming his standard Union speech. He declared that his observations around the country