

## A Tribute to Grass

By R. A. Oakley

Of the many tributes that have been offered to grass there is none that exceeds in literary brilliancy that from the pen of John J. Ingalls, for many years senator from Kansas, the State which he once referred to as "a land of great extremes and no golden mean," "where the appetite of the community demands the stimulus of revolution," and "where a traveler if he listened to the voice of experience would not start upon his pilgrimage at any season of the year without an overcoat, a fan, a lightning rod, and an umbrella." In the Kansas Magazine in 1872 under the caption "Bluegrass," Ingalls not only gave free rein to his poetical and philosophical imagination, but he also applied the lash, with the result that a classic was produced, parts of which have been quoted and misquoted until they have become almost an essential feature of calendar, text-book and bulletin. Some of the best parts of Ingalls' essay, however, have been allowed to remain in obscurity probably because they are too local in their scope to be generally appreciated. A few of his readers have been captious enough to say that his dissertation was written more to advertise Kansas than to glorify bluegrass; but this is unfair criticism. He simply used Kansas as an example of base metal, and bluegrass as the great alchemist; although it must be admitted that it was in Kansas that he received his inspiration. Other readers object to his philosophy and science and facetiously contend that there could have been no philosophers, biologists, or meteorologists on the board that issued him his poetical license. This is probably true; certainly he never could have attained the heights he reached with any considerable load of technical ballast. Imagination was his impelling force, and to have throttled it would have killed it entirely. Ingalls' regard for grass was unbounded, and it was its utility as well as its beauty that stirred his enthusiasm and drew from him the following sincere and incomparable appreciation of its worth to mankind:

"Next in importance to the Divine profusion of water, light, and air, those three great physical facts which render existence possible, may be reckoned the universal beneficence of grass. Exaggerated by tropical heats and vapors to the gigantic cane congested with its saccharine secretion, or dwarfed by polar rigors to the fibrous hair of northern solitudes, embracing between these extremes the maize with its resolute pennons, the rice plant of southern swamps, the wheat, rye, barley, oats, and other cereals, no less than the humbler verdure of hillside, pasture, and prairie in the temperate zone, grass is the most widely distributed of all vegetable beings, and is at once the type of our life and the emblem of our mortality. Lying in the sunshine among the buttercups and dandelions of May, scarcely higher in intelligence than the minute tenants of that mimic wilderness, our earliest recollections are of grass; and when the fitful fever is ended, and the foolish wrangle of the market and forum is closed, grass heals over the scar which our descent into the bosom of the earth has made, and the carpet of the infant becomes the blanket of the dead.

"As he reflected upon the brevity of human life, grass has been the favorite symbol of the moralist, the chosen theme of the philosopher. 'All flesh is grass,' said the prophet; 'my days are as the

grass,' sighed the troubled patriarch; and the pensive Nebuchadnezzar, in his penitential mood, exceeded even these, and, as the sacred historian informs us, did eat grass like an ox.

"Grass is the forgiveness of nature—her constant benediction. Fields trampled with battle, saturated with blood, torn with the ruts of cannon, grow green again with grass, and carnage is forgotten. Streets abandoned by traffic become grass-grown like rural lanes, and are obliterated. Forests decay, harvests perish, flowers vanish, but grass is immortal. Beleaguered by the sullen hosts of winter, it withdraws into the impregnable fortress of its subterranean vitality, and emerges upon the first solicitation of spring. Sown by the winds, by wandering birds, propagated by the subtle horticulture of the elements which are its ministers and servants, it softens the rude outline of the world. Its tenacious fibres hold the earth in its place, and prevent its soluble components from washing into the wasting sea. It invades the solitude of deserts, climbs the inaccessible slopes and forbidding pinnacles of mountains, modifies climates, and determines the history, character and destiny of nations. Unobtrusive and patient, it has immortal vigor and aggression. Banished from the thoroughfare and the field, it bides its time to return, and when vigilance is relaxed, or the dynasty has perished, it silently resumes the throne from which it has been expelled, but which it never abdicates. It bears no blazonry of bloom to charm the senses with fragrance or splendor, but its homely hue is more enchanting than the lily or the rose. It yields no fruit in earth or air, and yet should its harvest fail for a single year, famine would depopulate the world."

While his preferatory tribute was to grass generally, the author has made it clear that he chose bluegrass as the subject of his theme because it was to him the acme of the Great Agrostologist's handiwork. In his estimation, grasses were not all of equal rank but possessed degree of aesthetic and economic value. Bluegrass in his regard was the greatest of them all. "One grass," he says, "differs from another grass. One is vulgar and another patrician. There are grades in its vegetable nobility. Some varieties are useful. Some are beautiful. Others combine utility and ornament. The sour, reedy herbage of swamps is base-born. Timothy is a valuable servant. Redtop and clover are a degree higher in the social scale. But the king of them all, with genuine blood royal, is Blue Grass. Why it is called blue, save that it is vividly and intensely green, is inexplicable, but had its unknown priest baptized it with all the hues of the prism, he would not have changed its hereditary title to imperial superiority over all its humbler kin." Surely here he has awarded it the highest medal of honor!

Changing from the poetical to the philosophical, Ingalls announces his doctrine of the effect of physical environment upon individuals and nations. "Give the philosopher a handful of soil, the mean annual temperature and rainfall and his analysis would enable him to predict with absolute certainty the characteristics of the nation." This line of reasoning leads him to observe that "what a man, a community, a nation can do, think, suffer, imagine, or achieve, depends upon what he eats. Bran eaters and vegetarians are not the kings of men. Rice and potatoes are the diet of slaves. The races that live on beef have ruled the world, and the better the beef the greater

the deeds they have done." Thus he fixes a function of grass in the making of a nation, for surely there can be no beef without grass. "Grass feeds the ox: the ox nourishes man: man dies and goes to grass again; and so the tide of life, with everlasting repetition, in continuous circles, moves endlessly on and upward, and in more senses than one, all flesh is grass. But all flesh is not blue grass. If it were, the devil's occupation would be gone."

The bluegrass region of Kentucky is cited as exemplifying the wonder-work of bluegrass. In what other environment could Henry Clay, the statesman, have been produced, or Lexington the horse? Virile men and beautiful women are accounted by Ingalls among the products of that Eden. "All these marvels are attributable as directly to the poetical influence of blue grass, as day and night to the revolution of the earth. Eradicate it, substitute for it the scrawny herbage impoverished barrens and in a single generation man and beast would alike degenerate into a common decay." The great Kansan here takes occasion to criticize the attitude and course of action of the moral and social reformers "who attempt to ameliorate the conditions of the degraded order by commencing with the Bible, the didactic essay, the impassioned appeal." These, he claimed, would be accepted when the work of reformation was accomplished. "These are the results, not the cause." Conditions must be made more congenial before reform can be hoped for. "Men can not become learned, refined and tolerant while every energy of body and soul is consumed in the task of wresting a bare sustenance from a penurious soil; neither can women become elegant and accomplished when every hour of every day in every year is spent over the washtub and the frying pan. There must be leisure, competence and repose and these can only be attained where the results of labor are abundant and secure." As a contrast to the bluegrass region of Kentucky, Ingalls pictures another section of the country not far removed from Kansas as a horrible contrast where the plane of human existence was then considerably below the level of the moral and social sea. But such distressing conditions, he maintained, are the results of physical environment and are "susceptible of relief." "In the moral pharmacy there is an antidote."

"The salutary panacea is Blue Grass.

"This is the healing catholicon, the strengthening plaster, the verdant cataplasm, efficient alike in the *Materia Medica* of nature and of morals." Here he named the curative agent, and immediately following, in a succinct statement, prescribed a course of treatment and outlined the progressive steps of the patient's recovery. "Seed the country down to blue grass and the reformation would begin. Such a change must be gradual. One generation would not witness it, but three would see it accomplished."

Touching again on Kansas, the author notes, and with a show of pride, that she had then no serious moral handicaps to impede her progress, but he realized that her career, which had started on a very high plane and which had been "constantly upward," could not be indefinitely continued on "prairie grass." This, he admits, "would nourish mustangs, antelope, Texas cattle, but not thoroughbreds. It is the product of an uncultured soil, alternately burned with drought, drenched with sudden showers, and frozen with the rigors of savage winters. Already it is deteriorating under influences that should be

favorable to its improvement. Armies of rank weeds have invaded its domain in the neighborhood of our chief cities, and are encroaching upon its solitudes. If we would have prosperity commensurate with our opportunities, we must look to Blue Grass. It will raise the temperature, increase the rainfall, improve the climate, develop a higher Fauna and Flora, and consequently a loftier attendant civilization."

Bluegrass, to Ingalls, was the greatest of all moderating influences, which in its quiet but effective way improved the climate as well as social and economic conditions. He observed that it was then in 1872 already ameliorating Kansas. "The rains which were wont to run from the trampled pavement of the sod suddenly into the streams, are now absorbed into the cultivated soil, and gradually restored to the air by solar evaporation, making the alternation of the seasons less violent, and continued droughts less probable. Under these benign influences, prairie grass is disappearing. The various breeds of cattle, hogs and horses are improving. The culture of orchards and vineyards yields more certain returns. A richer, healthier and more varied diet is replacing the side-meat and corn-pone of antiquity. Blue grass is marching into the bowels of the land without impediment. Its perennial verdure already clothes the bluffs and uplands along the streams, its spongy sward retaining the moisture of the earth, preventing the annual scarification by fire, promoting the growth of forests, and elevating the nature of man." This is what blue grass had done for the climate and general welfare of Kansas, and with this change Ingalls saw others that came as a direct consequence. For, he says, "Supplementing this material improvement, is an evident advance in manners and morals. The little log school-house is replaced by magnificent structures furnished with every educational appliance. Churches multiply. The commercial element has disappeared from politics. The intellectual standard of the press has advanced, and with the general diffusion of blue grass, we may reasonably anticipate a career of unexampled and enduring prosperity."

Take it from first to last, where can there be found such an evaluation of grass in general, or of blue grass in particular? Surely the author was inspired by sincere admiration and regard rather than by a desire to advertise his State or to create a literary masterpiece! Those who have not read Ingalls' "Blue Grass" in its entirety are urged to do so. In it there are sarcasm, humor, poetry, and description that are unsurpassed in modern writings. Readers in passing from the winter scene along the north fork of the Wildcat which produced the inspiration, on through the many scintillating tributes to grass to the breath-taking picture of a Kansas thunder shower, finally to the vision of the future which bluegrass had made possible for that great State, have but one regret—that Ingalls had never seen a modern putting green with its broad expanse of turf with which nothing in the agrostologist's realm can compare. For had his eyes once gazed upon a perfect green of fescue or creeping bent, or better still of velvet bent, he would have found it necessary to go outside his lexicon for words to express his enthusiasm.

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**When to Roll Putting Greens.**—If the soil of your putting green is firm enough so that heel prints are not made in it, there will be nothing gained by rolling. As a rule, rolling is necessary only in spring.