

The
PALIMPSEST



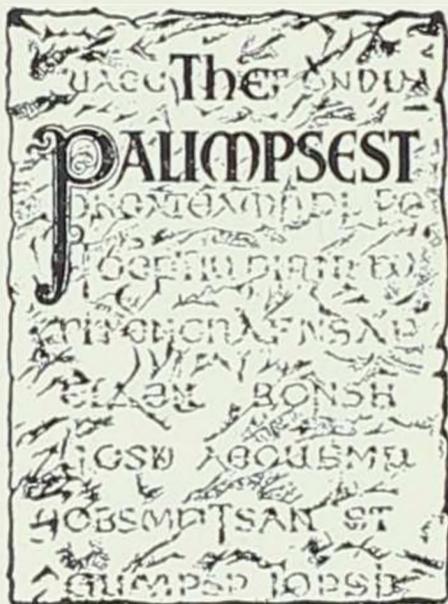
Burdette in his Den at "Sunnycrest," Pasadena

Robert J. Burdette

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The Meaning of Palimpsest

In early times a palimpsest was a parchment or other material from which one or more writings had been erased to give room for later records. But the erasures were not always complete; and so it became the fascinating task of scholars not only to translate the later records but also to reconstruct the original writings by deciphering the dim fragments of letters partly erased and partly covered by subsequent texts.

The history of Iowa may be likened to a palimpsest which holds the record of successive generations. To decipher these records of the past, reconstruct them, and tell the stories which they contain is the task of those who write history.

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ROBERT J. BURDETTE

FRANK P. DONOVAN, JR.

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Illustrations

All illustrations are from various books by or about Burdette in the State Historical Society of Iowa library.

Author

Frank P. Donovan, Jr., is a specialist in railroad history and a frequent contributor to *THE PALIMPSEST*.

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Adopted by Iowa

"I was born in Pennsylvania, weaned in Ohio, kidnapped by Illinois, adopted by Iowa and married to California," Robert J. Burdette, the humorist, declared. His "adoption" by Burlington proved to be a happy one, for that Iowa community gave him the encouragement and help to become a nation-wide figure. Through the town's local paper, the Burlington *Hawk-Eye*, Burdette found an admirable springboard for his wit. His columns were so widely reprinted that before the end of the nineteenth century he became one of America's best-liked humorists and lecturers.

Later he turned to the pulpit, becoming a popular Baptist minister. But he is chiefly remembered today for his homespun, grassroots humor as it came from the press of the hilly town on the Mississippi River. If Iowa can be said to have a state humorist that man is Robert Jones Burdette.

Born in Greensboro, Pennsylvania, July 30, 1844, his family moved to Cumminsville, Ohio, two years afterward. He was the oldest of eight

children, two of whom died at an early age. Young Burdette had a happy childhood in Ohio and later in Peoria, Illinois, where his parents made their home in 1852. His literary account and sentimental memories of youth reveal an antipathy for mathematics, a fondness for history and a genuine liking for "composition writing." Burdette stood "third in his class — a class of three," he whimsically reflected, and graduated from high school in 1861.

During the Civil War he enlisted in the 47th Illinois Regiment from Peoria, going in as a private and being mustered out the same, three years later. For the next decade Burdette dabbled in many things, apparently seeking to find himself. He taught school for a few months near Peoria and entered government employ as a mail clerk in the same Illinois city. He also served as an "extra" man on trains handling U. S. Mail on what is now the Toledo, Peoria & Western — Pennsylvania route to Logansport, Indiana.

Not content with postal work he went to New York and studied art at the Cooper Institute. Next he took up arms again and embarked on the blockade runner *Lillian* for Cuba where he was injured while landing military supplies for the Cuban insurgents. In 1869 he returned to Peoria to try his hand at journalism.

Burdette's first newspaper work was with the Peoria *Daily Transcript* and his earliest assign-

ment was to interview Horace Greeley who had just arrived in town. In writing for the paper the young reporter could not resist making droll comments and investing the most commonplace people with whimsy. But his employer failed to see the humor, and Burdette subsequently turned his talents to the rival *Peoria Review*, which he helped to organize in 1871.

With the *Review's* demise in 1874, Burdette was out of a job. Inasmuch as he had married Carrie S. Garrett, the daughter of a Peoria businessman, shortly after starting his newspaper career, Burdette's essentially jovial nature was sobered by the thought of earning a livelihood for her as well as for himself. But it was his comic, philosophical outlook on life, so much in evidence in his reporting, that led to new employment. In short, the owners of the Burlington *Daily Hawk-Eye* had noted with interest the levity and spirit in Burdette's copy. So when the *Peoria Review* was about to expire, Charles Y. Wheeler of the prosperous *Hawk-Eye* called on Robert Burdette.

The outcome was the talented young newspaperman was offered a position on the *Hawk-Eye* as its city editor and reporter. Furthermore he came with a contract which was almost a *carte blanche* to peddle his humor as his fancy dictated. And he did. By so doing the circulation of the historic Iowa paper rose in proportion to the laughs elicited by the genial foolery of the new editor.

Hawk-Eye Days

Burdette's six years with the Burlington *Hawk-Eye* served as a turning point in his life. When he started with the paper he was a groping local humorist; when he left it he had become a national figure. He found the paper a conservative Republican journal — the oldest newspaper in Iowa. It was a solid, undramatic publication, paying its bills and in business to stay. Burdette had at least one thing in common — he was an ardent Republican. Here the similarity ended. While the *Hawk-Eye* was serious he was not. If the paper favored straight facts, Burdette sought to featurize. And whereas the daily liked orthodox reporting the new editor wanted to dramatize.

The first tiff the young newspaperman appears to have had was with Dr. Charles Beardsley, the editor. Beardsley intimated he wanted more news and less mirth. But the circulation rose as Burdette's humor took hold. The subscribers chuckled at the ludicrous situations drummed up by the man from Peoria. The business office was happy. The paper was making more money. So in the end Beardsley relented and afterward became an ardent supporter of the unpredictable "Bob" Burdette.

Like a cartoonist only in a time when there were no "comics" as we know them today, Burdette had his caricatures drawn in prose. There was Old Bilderback and Master Bilderback, his mischievous son. Again, there were Messrs. Middlerib and Dresseldorf and other local folk of his invention. They had the foibles and idiosyncracies heir to the citizens of Burlington and to rural America. All were very domestic and fanciful, made-to-order for the period. Read today most of them fall flat. If not, they seem insufferably dated and hopelessly naive. But humor, like history, must be evaluated in its chronological perspective. Taken piecemeal and in moderate doses Burdette is still funny.

"Rents," said Mr. Middlerib, with a sigh of not unmixed satisfaction, "are coming down. Yesterday morning I tore the back of my coat on the wood-shed door, last night I snagged the foundation of my trousers on a nail in a store box, and this morning I fell down on the frozen sidewalk and split the knee of the same trousers clear across. Rents are certainly getting lower."

"Yes," responded Mrs. Middlerib, looking across toward the busy figure at the sewing machine, "and seamstresses are getting hire."

Dated? Of course. But still risible.

Or if you prefer something more fanciful and of the farm try this for size:

"You don't look at all well," a venerable gob-

bler out in the North Hill poultry yard remarked to a melancholy looking young rooster, a short time before Thanksgiving day.

"No," was the reply, "I have reason to look solemn: I expect to die necks tweak."

Burdette had a way of finding humor in the commonplace. For example, in going to and from work he passed an old cutter on a side road on South Hill. The decrepit vehicle, stranded by a thaw or left abandoned as a Halloween prize, was an eyesore. But not to the "Burlington Hawkeye Man." He wrote a droll skit about it titled "The Red Sleigh on Maple Street." It caught the public's fancy, and the homely "critter" went a-sleighing in people's imagination from coast to coast.

More often his buffoonery was of a local nature, like the Sixth Street Bridge fiasco. After a great deal of pressure from the city fathers, the Burlington Railroad finally built a large and expensive bridge over its tracks. But the town's finances were at such a low ebb it did not have sufficient funds to build the approaches. There it stood, the mute reminder of a dream that turned to a nightmare. Not so to Burdette. He called it Happy Hollow and extolled the shade it provided for squatters, the joy it gave children and the shelter it afforded stray dogs, wandering geese and other animals.

When Frank Hatton, later to become postmas-

ter general in President Chester T. Arthur's cabinet, headed the *Hawk-Eye* he gave Burdette every encouragement. Indeed, the little Iowa paper was quoted all over the land, for the press in hundreds of communities began appropriating a column, a tale or an anecdote by the Burlington funny man. It was an era before syndication and small town papers welcomed free humorous fillers.

It was this experience as city editor and special correspondent for the *Hawk-Eye* that gave Burdette the self-confidence and support he needed to blaze his own trail as a public speaker. Dr. Beardsley had encouraged him to write a fullpage lecture. His invalid wife, whom he referred to as "Her Little Serene Highness," was ever an inspiration. (He read all his copy to her before it went into the paper.) The time was propitious. Humorous lecturers appealed to adults like the circus enthralled youngsters. It was an era which spawned a picturesque, itinerant school of "literary comedians" who acted out what they wrote.

When Burdette took the train to Keokuk one December day in 1876 to give his maiden talk on "The Rise and Fall of the Mustache," he entered a new career. As he afterwards described it:

"I had no voice, no elocutionary training, no presence, no attitude, no gesture; my pronunciation was faulty, and my grammar uncertain; I had nothing but my lecture and my wife. How could I fail?"

Literary Comedian

Robert Burdette's lecture on "The Rise and Fall of the Mustache" was an instant success. His Keokuk audience reveled in the humorous, bizarre talk lasting two hours and fifteen minutes. He started by propounding the question: Did Adam have a mustache? He suggested that the Biblical character may have had a mustache but he never raised it. No sources are given for this deduction. After some oblique references to Cain and Abel, Burdette dwelt on the growth, development, maturity and old age of the boy of his day.

There was, of course, the pre-mustache stage when "He [the boy] reaches the dime novel age. He wants to be a missionary. Or a pirate. So far as he expresses any preference, he would rather be a pirate, an occupation in which there are more chances of making money, and fewer opportunities for being devoured. . . . he dreams of hanging his dear teacher at the yard arm . . ."

On the fifty-eighth page of the finely printed lecture we find the boy, now an old man, with "the eye of the relentless old reaper" resting upon his gray mustached countenance ". . . standing right in the swarth, amid the golden corn." Then there is "The sweep of the noiseless scythe that never

turns its edge, Time passes on . . . and the cycle of a life is complete."

To enliven the talk there are *passim* references to Enoch and Methusaleh, Patroclus and Achilles, Julius Caesar and George Washington; also "Jack the Giant Killer," "Puss in Boots," and "Beethoven's sonata in B flat." It was without question the only lecture of its kind!

Today the reader will smile at the thought of such an oration; and he will find the reading hard-going. It is now among the least read of all Burdette's writings. But in his time it, as a speech, was most popular; and his listeners not only chuckled, they laughed heartily. Part of its success is due to the fact it was written for the era; and fully as important, it was delivered by a comedian in his own right. Burdette, like the other platform humorists of his period, knew how to tell and act-out a story. The lecture was delivered nearly five thousand times in almost every state in the union.

On the strength of this talk Burdette wrote and published his first book — *The Rise and Fall of the Mustache and Other "Hawk-Eyeteams."* The distribution was handled by the Burlington Publishing Company, Burlington, Iowa. President of the firm was Robert J. Burdette. Other members of the company included Frank Hatton and his brother Harry Hatton, J. L. Waite and James Putnam. The book was dedicated "To Frank

Hatton . . . and my associates on the Hawkeye
. . . ”

The “Mustache” item was the lead story, with sixty-four other “Hawk-Eyetems,” embracing skits, anecdotes, stories, essays and poems. Containing 328 pages of small print with period-piece drawings, the work is as dated as a McGuffey Reader. Nearly all of the contents had appeared originally in the *Hawk-Eye*.

The best part of the volume is the honest humor of the preface. It reads:

The appearance of a new book is an indication that another man has found a mission, has entered upon the performance of a lofty duty, actuated only by the noblest impulses that can spur the soul of man to action. It is the proudest boast of the profession of literature, that no man ever published a book for selfish purposes or with ignoble aim. Books have been published for the consolation of the distressed; for the guidance of the wandering; for the relief of the destitute; for the hope of the penitent; for uplifting the burdened soul above its sorrows and fears; for the general amelioration of the condition of all mankind; for the right against the wrong; for the good against the bad; for the truth. This book is published for two dollars per volume.

The same year his book was issued he had an overture from the Redpath Lyceum Bureau to speak under the auspices of that nation-wide agency. He accepted the offer and was soon making extensive lecture tours. He spoke on many topics, among which were “The Pilgrimage of a

Funny Man," "Sawing Wood," "Rainbow Chasers," and "Home." Nevertheless, the "Mustache" lecture was always his Number One meal ticket.

One winter day after he had made a speech on that popular subject in Spencer, Indiana, he met James Whitcomb Riley. The two lecturers left on the same train together and by the time they reached Indianapolis they had become fast friends. Riley paid tribute to "The Burlington Hawkeye Man" in his poem "The Funny Little Man." It begins:

" 'Twas a funny little fellow
Of the very purest type —
For he had a heart as mellow
As an apple over-ripe;
And the brightest little twinkle
When a funny thing occurred,
And the lightest little tinkle
Of a laugh you ever heard."

The Hoosier poet ended the verse observing, "What a funny Little angel he will make!"

Riley also dedicated his book *Out to Old Aunt Mary's* to the Iowa humorist. And Burdette had been instrumental in getting the Redpath Bureau to sponsor the poet on well-publicized lecture tours. Burdette also directed some rhymes Riley-wise "wetout ary apology."

Throughout the years the two men corresponded with each other and visited whenever possible. Both were overgrown boys at heart, full of pranks,

jokes and sport. It is recorded that while waiting for a night train in Indianapolis they spent the evening talking very enthusiastically about the circus. Soon they started performing under an imaginary "Big Top" with Burdette acting as ringmaster putting Riley through his paces. To vary the act the Iowan became an elephant, lumbering and stomping around the room, with the bard as his keeper.

One of the high points of Burdette's career was when he appeared on the lecture platform with Riley and Josh Billings in Philadelphia's select Academy of Music. Usually, however, he had his own program, rendering it in his own inimitable way. In shuttling over the country he frequently crossed the paths of other humorists, such as Eli Perkins, Bill Nye and Mark Twain. In January, 1885, when he made a repeat performance, he found Mark Twain also scheduled to speak that week. The two men made an agreement not to lecture on the same night. Although they competed with each other they were always good friends.

In 1883 Burdette settled in Ardmore, a suburb of Philadelphia, where in the latter city he hoped to get better medical care for his invalid wife. The next year he reluctantly severed his relationship with the *Hawk-Eye* to give more time to lecturing. After the death of "Her Little Serene Highness" that year, he found the Ardmore home unbearable

and afterwards moved to nearby Bryn Mawr. In an autobiographical sketch written for *Lippincott's Monthly* during this trying period, he attributed his success "to the gentles, best and wisest of critics and collaborators, a loving and devoted wife."

With the passing of Clara Burdette he went up to the Adirondack Mountains for a rest and to recuperate from his arduous traveling and lecturing. While there he occasionally filled the pulpit of a small Baptist church. Not long afterward he was licensed to preach in the Lower Marion Baptist Church at Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania. While in the East he had established contacts with the *Philadelphia Times* and the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* and was a frequent contributor to their columns.

An admirer and friend of the colorful Russell H. Conwell, renowned for his lecture on "Acres of Diamonds" and founder of Philadelphia's Temple University, Burdette wrote a biography of the versatile Baptist minister. The book was called *The Modern Temple and Templers*. Previous to this he had corralled more of his newspaper work in *Hawk-Eyes* and *Schooners that Pass in the Dark* and had written a sketchy *Life of William Penn*. In 1897 he published *Chimes from a Jester's Bells* with an attractive cover sketch depicting a jester in a belfry. The design was drawn by his son, Robert, of whom he was very fond. The volume contained some of Burdette's best stories and sketches and it was well received.

A Letter For Posterity

When "Bob" Burdette left Burlington he did not, as we have seen, give up his connections with the *Hawk-Eye*. Instead he continued to write a "letter" a day for the newspaper. These missives covered a period of five years. They were notes and reflections while touring the country "with a grip and umbrella in one hand and a time card in the other." All had the informal spontaneous humor for which he was famous.

Popularity is a strange thing. At one time he was known throughout the land for his lecture on "The Rise and Fall of the Mustache." Today that talk is only embalmed in older books. On the other hand, his "letter" on "The Brakeman at Church" has been continuously reprinted in current anthologies. If there is one item of Burdette's which will go down to posterity, it is that unique selection.

The letter in which the "Brakeman" appeared was penned in Indiana and dated December 29, 1879. Its popularity was immediate, and after publication in the *Hawk-Eye* the paper reissued it as a pamphlet and distributed it by the tens of thousands. Newspapers from coast to coast featured it. Publishers included it in pocket memo-

random books, which were widely circulated. Entertainers read it on public platforms and school teachers used it in elocution classes. The letter reads as follows:

THE BRAKEMAN AT CHURCH

On one bright winter morning, the twenty-ninth day of December, Anno Domini, 1879, I was journeying from Lebanon, Indiana, where I had sojourned Sunday, to Indianapolis. I did not see the famous cedars, and I supposed they had been used up for lead-pencils, and moth-proof chests, and relics, and souvenirs; for Lebanon is right in the heart of the holy land. That part of Indiana was settled by Second Adventists, and they have sprinkled goodly names all over their heritage. As the train clattered along, stopping at every station to trade off some people who were tired of traveling for some other people who were tired of staying at home, I got out my writing-pad, pointed a pencil, and wondered what manner of breakfast I would be able to serve for the ever hungry "Hawkeye" next morning.

I was beginning to think I would have to disguise some "left-overs" under a new name, as the thrifty house-keeper knows how to do, when my colleague, my faithful yoke-fellow, who has many a time found for me a spring of water in a desert place — the Brakeman, come down the aisle of the car. He glanced at the tablet and pencil as I would look at his lantern, put my right hand into a cordial compress that abode with my fingers for ten minutes after he went away, and seating himself easily on the arm of the seat, put the semaphore all right for me by saying:

"Say, I went to church yesterday."

"Good boy," I said, "and what church did you attend?"

"Guess," was his reply.

"Some Union Mission chapel?" I ventured.

"N-no," he said, "I don't care to run on those branch roads very much. I don't get a chance to go to church every Sunday, and when I go, I like to run on the main line, where your trip is regular, and you make a schedule time, and don't have to wait on connections. I don't care to run on a branch. Good enough, I reckon, but I don't like it."

"Episcopal?" I guessed.

"Limited express!" he said, "all parlor cars, vestibuled, and two dollars extra for a seat; fast time, and only stop at the big stations. Elegant line, but too rich for a brakeman. All the trainmen in uniform; conductor's punch and lanterns silver-plated; train-boys fenced up by themselves and not allowed to offer anything but music. Passengers talk back at the conductor. Trips scheduled through the whole year, so when you get aboard you know just where you're going and how long it will take you. Most systematic road in the country and has a mighty nice class of travel. Never hear of a receiver appointed on that line. But I didn't ride in the parlor car yesterday."

"Universalist?" I suggested.

"Broad gauge," the Brakeman chuckled; "does too much complimentary business to be prosperous. Everybody travels on a pass. Conductor doesn't get a cash fare once in fifty miles. Stops at all way-stations and won't run into anything but a union depot. No smoking-car allowed on the train because the company doesn't own enough brimstone to heat a match. Train orders are rather vague, though; and I've noticed the trainmen don't get along very well with the passengers. No, I don't go on the broad gauge, although I have some good friends on that road who are the best people in the world. Been running on it all their lives."

"Presbyterian?" I hinted.

"Narrow gauge, eh?" said the Brakeman; "pretty track; straight as a rule; tunnel right through the heart of a mountain rather than go around it; spirit level grades; strict rules, too; passengers have to show their tickets before they get on the train; cars a little bit narrow for sleepers; have to sit one in a seat and no room in the aisle to dance. No stop-over tickets allowed; passenger must go straight through to the station he's ticketed for, or stay off the car. When the car's full, gates are shut; cars built at the shops to hold just so many, and no more allowed on. That road is run right up to the rules and you don't often hear of an accident on it. Had a head-on collision at Schenectady union station and run over a weak bridge at Cincinnati, not many years ago, but nobody hurt, and no passengers lost. Great road."

"May be you rode with the Agnostics?" I tried.

The Brakeman shook his head emphatically.

"Scrub road," he said, "dirt road-bed and no ballast; no time-card, and no train dispatcher. All trains run wild and every engineer makes his own time, just as he pleases. A sort of 'smoke-if-you-want-to' road. Too many side tracks; every switch wide open all the time, switchman sound asleep and the target-lamp dead out. Get on where you please and get off where you want. Don't have to show your tickets, and the conductor has no authority to collect fare. No, sir; I was offered a pass, but I didn't like the line. I don't care to travel over a road that has no terminus.

"Do you know, I asked a division superintendent where his road run to, and he said he hoped to die if he knew. I asked him if the general superintendent could tell me, and he said he didn't believe they had a general superintendent, and if they had, he didn't know any more about the road than the passengers did. I asked him who he reported to, and he said, 'Nobody.' I asked a conductor who

he got his orders from, and he said he didn't take no orders from any living man or dead ghost. And when I asked the engineer who gave him orders, he said he'd just like to see any man on this planet try to give him orders, black-and-white or verbal; he said he'd run that train to suit himself or he'd run it into the ditch. Now, you see, I'm not much of a theologian, but I'm a good deal of a railroad man, and I don't want to run on a road that has no schedule, makes no time, has no connections, starts anywhere and runs nowhere, and has neither signal man, train dispatcher or superintendent. Might be all right, but I've railroaded too long to understand it."

"Did you try the Methodist?"

"Now you're shoutin'!" he cried with enthusiasm, "that's the hummer! Fast time and crowds of passengers! Engines carry a power of steam, and don't you forget it. Steam-gauge shows a hundred and enough all the time. Lively train crews, too. When the conductor shouts 'All a-b-o-a-r-d!' you can hear him to the next hallelujah station. Every train lamp shines like a head-light. Stop-over privileges on all tickets; passenger can drop off the train any time he pleases, do the station a couple of days and hop on to the next revival train that comes thundering along with an evangelist at the throttle. Good, whole-souled, companionable conductors; ain't a road on earth that makes the passengers feel more at home. No passes issued on any account; everybody pays full traffic rate for his own ticket. Safe road, too; well equipped; Wesleyan-house air brakes on every train. It's a road I'm fond of, but I didn't begin this week's run with it."

I began to feel that I was running ashore; I tried one more lead:

"Maybe you went with the Baptists?"

"Ah, ha!" he shouted, "now you're on the Shore line! River Road, eh? Beautiful curves, lines of grace at every

bend and sweep of the river; all steel rail and rock ballast; single track, and not a siding from the round-house to the terminus. Takes a heap of water to run it, though; double tanks at every station, and there isn't an engine in the shops that can run a mile or pull a pound with less than two gauges. Runs through a lovely country — river on one side and the hills on the other; and it's a steady climb, up grade all the way until the run ends where the river begins, at the fountain head. Yes, sir, I'll take the River Road every time for a safe trip, sure connections, good time, and no dust blowing in when you open a window. And yesterday morning, when the conductor came around taking up fares with a little basket punch, I didn't ask him to pass me; I paid my fare like a little Jonah — twenty five cents for a ninety-minute run, with a concert by the passengers thrown in. I tell you what it is, Pilgrim, never mind your baggage, you just secure your passage on the River Road if you want to go to —"

But just here the long whistle announced a station, and the Brakeman hurried to the door, shouting —

"Zions-VILLE! ZIONS-ville! All out for Zions-ville! This train makes no stops between here and Indianapolis!"

The above version of "The Brakeman at Church" is from *Chimes from a Jester's Bells*, copyrighted in 1897. It represents a better edited and slightly altered version of the original, which first appeared in the *Hawk-Eye* of 1879.

The letter is both "dated" and "dateless." It brings out extraordinarily well his genial, inoffensive humor and what one critic calls Burdette's unexpected collocation of dissimilar ideas."

It is interesting to review the circumstances under which it was written. Burdette was traveling

between Chicago and Indianapolis on what is now the New York Central which, as the story indicates, goes through Lebanon and Zionsville. The reference to the narrow gauge (in discussing the Presbyterians) is not as fanciful as it may seem. Burdette's train crossed the right of way of the present Nickel Plate Road at Clark's Hill, Indiana. In 1879, however, it was being graded westward from Frankfort, Indiana, to St. Louis, Missouri, as a three-foot gauge line. Furthermore, Iowa had several slim-gauge short lines.

As for the broad gauge (in referring to the Universalists) it should be noted that the Erie Railroad, one of the largest trunk lines of the day, had its main stem a six-foot gauge. It was not until 1880 that its entire main line from Jersey City to Chicago was narrowed to the standard American gauge of four feet, eight and a half inches.

The elegance of the "vestibuled" cars (of the Episcopalians) was something to marvel at before the turn of the century. Most passenger coaches had open platforms which were very dangerous for people passing from one car to another while the train was in motion, to say nothing of the hazards of winter weather.

The amusing reference to "Wesleyanhouse" air brakes, mentioned elsewhere in the "letter" is inspiration. The name is, of course, a combination of John Wesley, founder of Methodism, and George Westinghouse, perfecter of the air brake.

The Parents of Robert J. Burdette



Frederick Edwin Burdette



Mrs. Sophia Eberhart Burdette



Birthplace of Robert J. Burdette — Greensboro, Pennsylvania

THE
RISE AND FALL
OF
THE MUSTACHE
AND OTHER
"HAWK-EYETEMS."

BY ROBERT J. BURDETTE,
The Humorist of the Burlington "Hawk-Eye."

ILLUSTRATED BY R. W. WALLIS.

BURLINGTON, IOWA:
BURLINGTON PUBLISHING COMPANY.
1877.

Title Pages
of Four of
Burdette's Books



By ROBERT J. BURDETTE,
[THE "BURLINGTON HAWKEYE" MAN.]



NEW YORK;
G. W. Carleton & Co., Publishers
MADISON SQUARE.
MDCCCLXXX.

CHIMES
FROM A
JESTER'S BELLS

STORIES AND SKETCHES BY
ROBERT J. BURDETTE

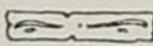
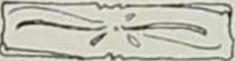
PART I. THE STORY OF ROLLO
PART II. STORIES AND SKETCHES

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COVER DESIGN BY ROBERT J. BURDETTE, JR.



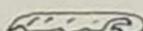
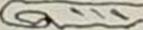
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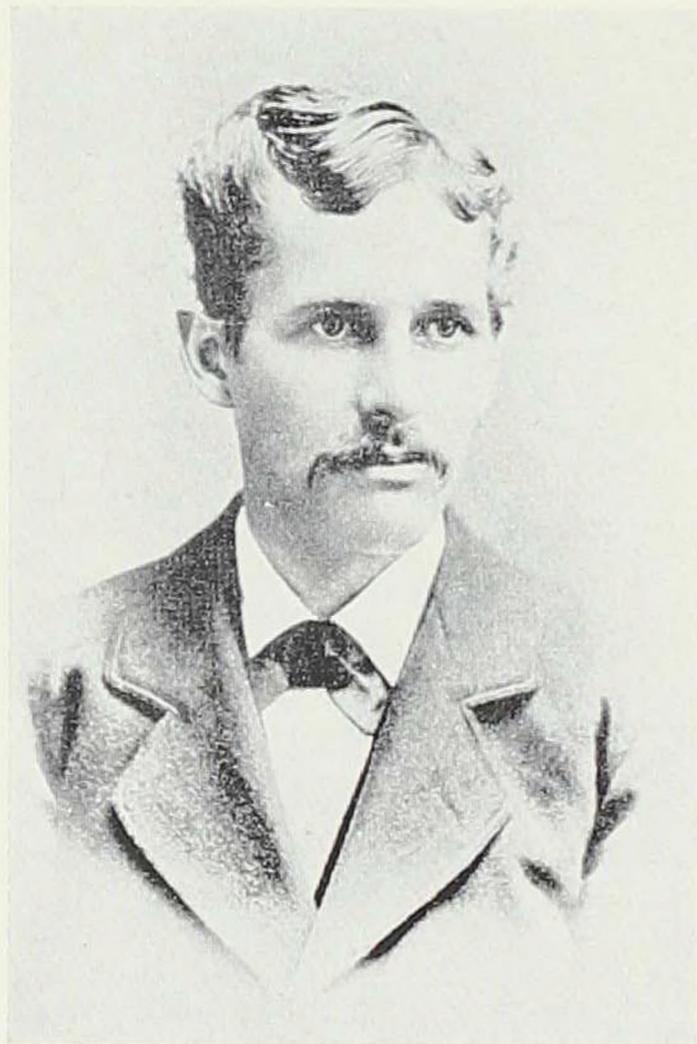
SMILES PICTURES BY
YOKED WITH WILL VAWTER
SIGHS  
BY ROBERT J. BURDETTE

"Nobly he yokes
A smiling with a sigh,
As if the sigh
Was that it was
For not being such a smile."

CYMBELINE

INDIANAPOLIS 
THE BOWEN-MERRILL COMPANY
 PUBLISHERS

Robert J. Burdette



Burdette of the "Roaming Robert"
Letters



At beginning of Lecture Career —
1877

"Sunnycrest"



The Home of Dr. and Mrs. Burdette in Pasadena, California

Theologically speaking, the references to the "head-on collision at Schenectady" and the "weak bridge at Cincinnati" concern matters relating to the early history of the Presbyterian Church. The former could very likely refer to a period in the 1850's when the Union College at Schenectady was requested to make an accounting of the monies received during the previous 25 years to the Regents and the Legislature of New York. The Cincinnati reference might be to the slavery issue and the Civil War activities, or to the Lane Theological Seminary during the period of the New School and the Old School controversy and split in the Presbyterian Church from 1838 to 1870.

The Press and the Pulpit

"The Physician of the Merry Heart," as the Iowa-trained journalist was dubbed, continued to blaze his own lecture trail. But in the dual capacity as a licensed minister he also preached to one-night congregations on as wide a circuit as he did in the role of a jester. In 1899, however, he moved to California to serve as supply pastor in the First Presbyterian Church of Pasadena. The same year Burdette married Mrs. Clara (Bradley) Wheeler Baker, widow of a theologian who had been a friend of his. Not a Presbyterian himself, he nonetheless enjoyed his work with that congregation but longed to get back to his own communion.

The chance came in 1903 when he was selected for the pastorate of the Temple Baptist Church in Los Angeles. He was subsequently ordained and in later years conferred a Doctor of Divinity by Kalamazoo College and an LL.D. by Occidental. Rev. Burdette became a very successful minister in the new church, and he increased the enrollment from 285 charter members to a membership of 1069. The average attendance at the two Sunday services was three thousand. Meanwhile, the Sunday School grew from 175 pupils to nearly a thousand.

Moving from Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania, to Pasadena, California, meant the final transition from an itinerant "funny man" to a dedicated clergyman. He was as popular in the pulpit as he had been on the road. Although he now took life more seriously, he never lost his sense of humor. In truth, there was as much of the minister in the jester as there was the humorist in the clergyman.

"I'm fond of people," he philosophized, "I believe in them, I love them, I sympathize with them. I like to meet them, and to walk with them, and have them about me, so long as they can stand me."

Newspaper work now became an avocation, for to the end of his life he was never without journalistic affiliations. He frequently contributed to the Los Angeles *Times* and for many years had a column on church affairs. He was also a friend and admirer of Harrison Gray Otis, owner of the paper. When the Times Building was dynamited on October 1, 1910, resulting in the death of twenty-one employees, Rev. Burdette acted as chaplain and delivered the funeral oration.

Burdette wrote even more extensively for the *Sunday School Times*; and his Civil War reminiscences, *The Drums of the 47th*, originally appeared serially in that organ. Nor did he neglect his other writings. In 1900 he brought together under one cover most of his light verse in *Smiles*

Yoked with Sighs. Opening the book with mirth, he exhumed a bearded joke, declaring:

“There’s none can tell about my birth
For I’m as old as the big round earth.”

The volume was issued by The Bowen-Merrill Company; and it contained caricatures drawn by Will Vawter, who did pen-and-ink sketches for Riley, Bill Nye and others under the same imprint. Twelve years later the house (renamed Bobbs-Merrill) brought out *Old Time and Young Tom*. In it Burdette reprinted “The Rise and Fall of the Mustache,” in revised form for the “more decorious grandchildren” of the original audience. The clergyman, who seldom let his sermons exceed twenty minutes, apparently could not bring himself to trim his fading classic. It ran to 85 pages.

Burdette’s historically-minded nature found an outlet in editing the California Edition of *American Biography and Genealogy* as well as a book on prominent “Angelenos.” He also penned several locally printed booklets discussing his philosophy of life and religion.

Nearly all of Burdette’s work was inspirational, written at one setting while in the incandescence of creation. He did not have the temperament to produce a well-documented biography or write history buttressed by profound research. Perhaps it was just as well, for that type of mind rarely elicits the spontaneous humor and flash of wit for

which Burdette is known. His verse, too, was amusing and light, often sentimental and sometimes pensive. Some of it had enough lasting value to appear in the current Bartlett's *Quotations*.

He had a genial, wholesome disposition — jealousy had little part in his make-up. He was a friend of nearly all the humorists of his era, and he personally knew many of the traveling lecturers. He always rejoiced in the good fortunes of his colleagues, particularly his dear friend Riley. Mark Twain spoke highly of him; Eli Perkins, George Ade, Josh Billings and Strickland Gillilan (of the "Finnigin to Flannigan" fame) held him in high esteem.

He liked to correspond with his old Iowa associates and spoke with great affection of his *Hawk-Eye* days. Toward the sunset of his life he lamented to his good friend James B. Weaver, of Des Moines, a son of the distinguished Iowa pioneer, that ill health would not permit him to return as a guest of the Iowa Press and Author's Club. Burdette had a genius for making friends and keeping them!

The little man with the big smile, ready wit and love for mankind fervently wanted to live the Biblical "three score years and ten." His wish was granted. He celebrated his seventieth birthday in 1914. A spinal injury, however, resulting from a fall several years earlier, brought about his death on November 19, 1914.

Burdette in American Humor

What is Burdette's role in American literature, and how does he fare today? Let us answer the former question first. But in so doing it is necessary to discuss his fellow "literary comedians" and bumper crop of cracker barrel philosophers who flourished roughly from the middle of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth.

In 1867, when Burdette was teaching school near Peoria, Charles F. Browne, better known as Artemus Ward, died. Browne, a humorist and lecturer, was the first of the literary comedians to spread indigenous American humor to England. His "Artemus Ward's Sayings," originally run in the Cleveland *Plain Dealer*, were the record of imaginary adventures of an itinerant showman. Robert Burdette in all likelihood never saw Ward; but he did know most of the other funny men who roamed the country; for, indeed, he competed with them and they with him.

There was, for example, the celebrated Petroleum V. Nasby, another journeyman printer like Ward, whose real name was David R. Locke. Nasby won fame with his overdrawn Copperhead, whose atrocities in spelling and grammar closely resembled Ward's cacography. Lincoln is said to

have held up business of state as he read with delight the spattered English of Nasby extolling the Union cause.

Another exponent of autochthonous American wit in Burdette's day was the inimitable Josh Billings, christened Henry Wheeler Shaw. Two-and-three-line aphorisms were his forte — plain, pungent and earthy. For a time he had a teller of tall tales by the name of Melville D. Landon conducting his lecture tours. Then Landon, as Eli Perkins, went free wheeling on his own with marked success. To this list of traveling mirth-makers must also be added the lanky, bald-headed Edgar W. Nye, who as Bill Nye achieved great popularity, particularly in the Midwest. Nye teamed up with the poet Riley, and the twosome swept the country with their mellow wit. Yet read today, Nye's humor seems tepid, monotonous and very dated.

Here, then, was the world of Robert Burdette, a nation imbued with Jeffersonian democracy, still largely rural, where native wit and common "horse sense" were more to be desired than books and degrees. "Roaming Robert," like his fellow humorists, spoke for the common man. He was the product of his time, and his lectures and letters were tailored to his generation. In an era before the motion picture (to say nothing of the automobile, radio and television) the traveling lecturer coming to town was heralded like the premiere

showing of Cinerama and similar motion pictures in recent years.

Burdette was like most of his colleagues of the literary comedian school in that he was born in the East and later came to the Midwest. Furthermore, his success stemmed largely from appeal to folks beyond the Alleghenies. His wit, like that of his contemporaries, was unsophisticated if not naive, literate but not "literary," written for the period and not for posterity. All used the newspaper as a stepping-stone to fame on the road. Most of their writing was ephemeral. At best the bulk of their work was like the impression gained on a one way trip: it is new, amusing, fleeting. But rereading it smacks of returning over the same old route: it is apt to appear boring, tiresome and vapid.

There are other similarities. Their sense of place, other than the general American scene, was not pronounced. True, Burdette's columns had a strong Midwestern flavor; and, while Burlington is informally described, the setting is more or less incidental. Finally, none of the literary comedians used the integrated, organized planning found in the better novels nor could they hold the sustained interest required of a book-length story.

So much for characteristics in common. How did Burdette differ from his fellows? From his start in Iowa to his last years in California Robert Burdette wrote under his own name. Pseudo-

nyms were not for him. Nor did he willfully misspell words or revert to the grammatical gyrations of Artemus Ward and Petroleum V. Nasby. While occasionally resorting to epigrams and terse philosophical quips, he had little of Josh Billings adroitness for grinding out aphorisms. And whereas exaggeration was an important element of his wit, he left the telling of tall, preposterous tales to his friend Eli Perkins. There is, on the other hand, some resemblance between the stories of Burdette and those of Bill Nye; yet the former is usually bucolic and smacks of the village, whereas the latter tends more toward the town and city.

By and large, however, the literary comedians were all of a piece. None of them had the lasting qualities of, say, Mark Twain. To quote Petroleum V. Nasby: "Wat posterity will say, I don't know; neither do I care. . . . It's this generashen I'm going for." The same could be said for Robert Burdette.

As a matter of fact the dated, homespun, grass-roots waggery of "The Burlington Hawkeye Man" and his contemporaries had run its course. To be sure, there were descendants like Finley Peter Dunne's "Mr. Dooley," Ken Hubbard's Hoosier bumpkin "Abe Martin," and Will Rogers, with his "Oklahomely" wit. But they merely served as a transition between the earthy, cracker barrel philosopher of yesterday and the "modern"

wit compounded of less spit and more polish. There is a world of difference between "The Rise and Fall of the Mustache" and the urbane, sophisticated pages of *The New Yorker*. Nonetheless, Robert Jones Burdette spoke to the condition of his time as Clarence Day, Robert Benchley and James Thurber do to ours. The "funny little fellow" from the river-town of Burlington gave to Iowa and the nation a heritage of good humor; he made contemporary life on the farm and prairie happier, pleasanter and more endurable. Can more be said for the humorists of today?

Selections by the Editor

Bob Burdette's humor is revealed in the following selections. The universal appeal of Burdette is readily demonstrated. Missing a train, smoking that "first" cigar, getting drenched by the old water wagon, the bewitching albeit stern schoolmarm, and the seeds one bought that never grew, these have been common experiences. The production of hundreds of such delightful yarns and poems reveals the many-sided character of this versatile poet, preacher, and humorist. [THE EDITOR.]

Getting Ready for the Train

When they reached the depot, Mr. Man and his wife gazed in unspeakable disappointment at the receding train, which was just pulling away from the bridge switch at the rate of a thousand miles a minute. Their first impulse was to run after it; but as the train was out of sight, and whistling for Sagetown before they could act upon the impulse, they remained in the carriage and disconsolately turned the horses' heads homeward.

"It all comes of having to wait for a woman to get ready," Mr. Man broke the silence with, very grimly.

"I was ready before you were," replied his wife.

"Great heavens!" cried Mr. Man, in irrepressible impatience, jerking the horses' jaws out of place, "just listen to that! And I sat out in the buggy ten minutes, yelling at you to come along, until the whole neighborhood heard me!"

"Yes," acquiesced Mrs. Man, with the provoking placidity which no one can assume but a woman, "and every time I started down stairs you sent me back for something you had forgotten."

Mr. Man groaned. "This is too much to bear," he said, "when everybody knows that if I was going to Europe, I

would just rush into the house, put on a clean shirt, grab up my gripsack, and fly; while you would want at least six months for preliminary preparations, and then dawdle around the whole day of starting until every train had left town."

Well, the upshot of the matter was, that the Mans put off their visit to Peoria until the next week, and it was agreed that each one should get ready and go down to the train and go, and the one who failed to get ready should be left. The day of the match came around in due time. The train was to go at 10:30, and Mr. Man, after attending to his business, went home at 9:45.

"Now then," he shouted, "only three-quarters of an hour to train time. Fly around; a fair field and no favors, you know."

And away they flew. Mr. Man bulged into this room and rushed through that one, and dived into one closet after another with inconceivable rapidity, chuckling under his breath all the time, to think how cheap Mrs. Man would feel when he started off alone. He stopped on his way up stairs to pull off his heavy boots, to save time. For the same reason he pulled off his coat as he ran through the dining-room, and hung it on the corner of the silver closet. Then he jerked off his vest as he rushed through the hall, and tossed it on a hook in the hat-rack, and by the time he reached his own room he was ready to plunge into his clean clothes. He pulled out a bureau drawer and began to paw at the things, like a Scotch terrier after a rat.

"Eleanor!" he shrieked, "where are my shirts?"

"In your bureau drawer," quietly replied Mrs. Man, who was standing placidly before a glass, calmly and deliberately coaxing a refractory crimp into place.

"Well, by thunder, they ain't!" shouted Mr. Man, a little annoyed. "I've emptied every last thing out of the drawer, and there isn't a thing in it that I ever saw before."

Mrs. Man stepped back a few paces, held her head on one side, and after satisfying herself that the crimp would do, and would stay where she had put it, replied:

"These things scattered around on the floor are all mine. Probably you haven't been looking in your own drawer."

"I don't see," testily observed Mr. Man, "why you couldn't have put my things out for me, when you had nothing else to do all morning."

"Because," said Mrs. Man, settling herself into an additional article of raiment with awful deliberation, "nobody put mine out for me. 'A fair field and no favors,' my dear."

Mr. Man plunged into his shirt like a bull at a red flag.

"Foul!" he shouted, in malicious triumph. "No button on the neck!"

"Because," said Mrs. Man, sweetly, after a deliberate stare at the fidgeting, impatient man, during which she buttoned her dress and put eleven pins where they would do the most good, "because you have got the shirt on wrong side out."

When Mr. Man slid out of that shirt, he began to sweat. He dropped the shirt three times before he got it on, and while it was over his head he heard the clock strike ten. When his head came through he saw Mrs. Man coaxing the ends and bows of her neck-tie.

"Where's my shirt studs?" he cried.

Mrs. Man went out into another room and presently came back with gloves and hat, and saw Mr. Man emptying all the boxes he could find in and about the bureau. Then she said:

"In the shirt you just took off."

Mrs. Man put on her gloves while Mr. Man hunted up and down the room for his cuff buttons.

"Eleanor," he snarled, at last, "I believe you must know where those buttons are."

"I haven't seen them," said the lady, settling her hat, "didn't you lay them down on the window-sill in the sitting room last night?"

Mr. Man remembered, and he went down stairs on the run. He stepped on one of his boots, and was immediately landed in the hall at the foot of the stairs with neatness and dispatch, attended in the transmission with more bumps than he could count with a Webb's adder, and landing with a bang like the Hellgate explosion.

"Are you nearly ready, Algernon?" asked the wife of his family, sweetly, leaning over the balusters.

The unhappy man groaned. "Can't you throw me down that other boot?" he asked.

Mrs. Man pityingly kicked it down to him.

"My valise?" he inquired, as he tugged away at the boot.

"Up in your dressing room," she answered.

"Packed?"

"I do not know; unless you packed it yourself, probably not," she replied, with her hand on the door knob; "I had barely time to pack my own."

She was passing out of the gate, when the door opened, and he shouted:

"Where in the name of goodness did you put my vest? It has all my money in it!"

"You threw it on the hat rack," she called back, "good-bye, dear."

Before she got to the corner of the street she was hailed again.

"Eleanor! Eleanor! Eleanor Man! Did you wear off my coat?"

She paused and turned, after signaling the street car to stop, and cried,

"You threw it on the silver closet."

And the street car engulfed her graceful figure and she was seen no more. But the neighbors say that they heard Mr. Man charging up and down the house, rushing out at the front door every now and then, and shrieking up the deserted streets after the unconscious Mrs. Man, to know where his hat was, and where she put the valise key, and if she had any clean socks and undershirts, and that there wasn't a linen collar in the house. And when he went away at last, he left the kitchen door, side door and front door, all the down-stair windows and the front gate wide open. And the loungers around the depot were somewhat amused just as the train was pulling out of sight down in the yards, to see a flushed, perspiring man, with his hat on sideways, his vest buttoned two buttons too high, his cuffs unbuttoned and neck-tie flying and his grip-sack flapping open and shut like a demented shutter on a March night, and a door key in his hand, dash wildly across the platform and halt in the middle of the track, glaring in dejected, impotent, wrathful mortification at the departing train, and shaking his trembling fist at a pretty woman, who was throwing kisses at him from the rear platform of the last car.



My First Cigar

'Twas just behind the woodshed,
One glorious summer day,
Far o'er the hills the sinking sun
Pursued his westward way;
And in my safe seclusion
Removed from all the jar
And din of earth's confusion
I smoked my first cigar.

It was my first cigar!
It was the worst cigar!
Raw, green and dank, hide-bound and rank
It was my first cigar!

Ah, bright the boyish fancies
Wrapped in the smoke-wreaths blue;
My eyes grew dim, my head was light,
The woodshed round me flew!
Dark night closed in around me —
Black night, without a star —
Grim death methought had found me
And spoiled my first cigar.



It was my first cigar!
A six-for-five cigar!
No viler torch the air could scorch —
It was my first cigar!

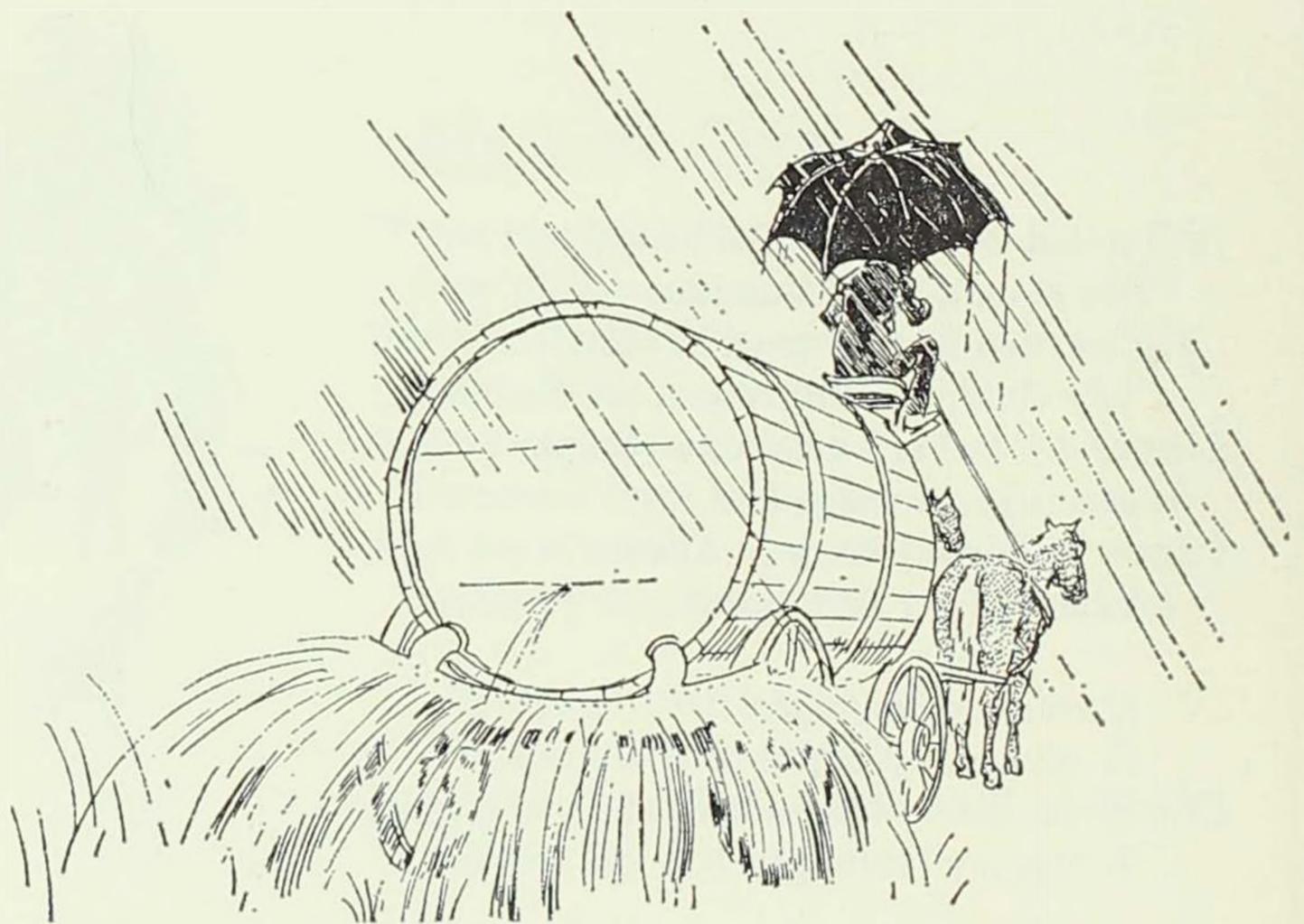
All pallid was my beaded brow,
The reeling night was late,
My startled mother cried in fear,
"My child, what have you ate?"
I heard my father's smothered laugh,
It seemed so strange and far,
I knew he knew I knew he knew
I'd smoked my first cigar!

It was my first cigar!
A give-away cigar!
I could not die — I knew not why —
It was my first cigar!

Since then I've stood in reckless ways,
I've dared what men can dare,
I've mocked at danger, walked with death,
I've laughed at pain and care.
I do not dread what may befall
'Neath my malignant star,
No frowning fate again can make
Me smoke my first cigar.

I've smoked my first cigar!
My first and worst cigar!
Fate has no terrors for the man
Who's smoked his first cigar!





Aquarius

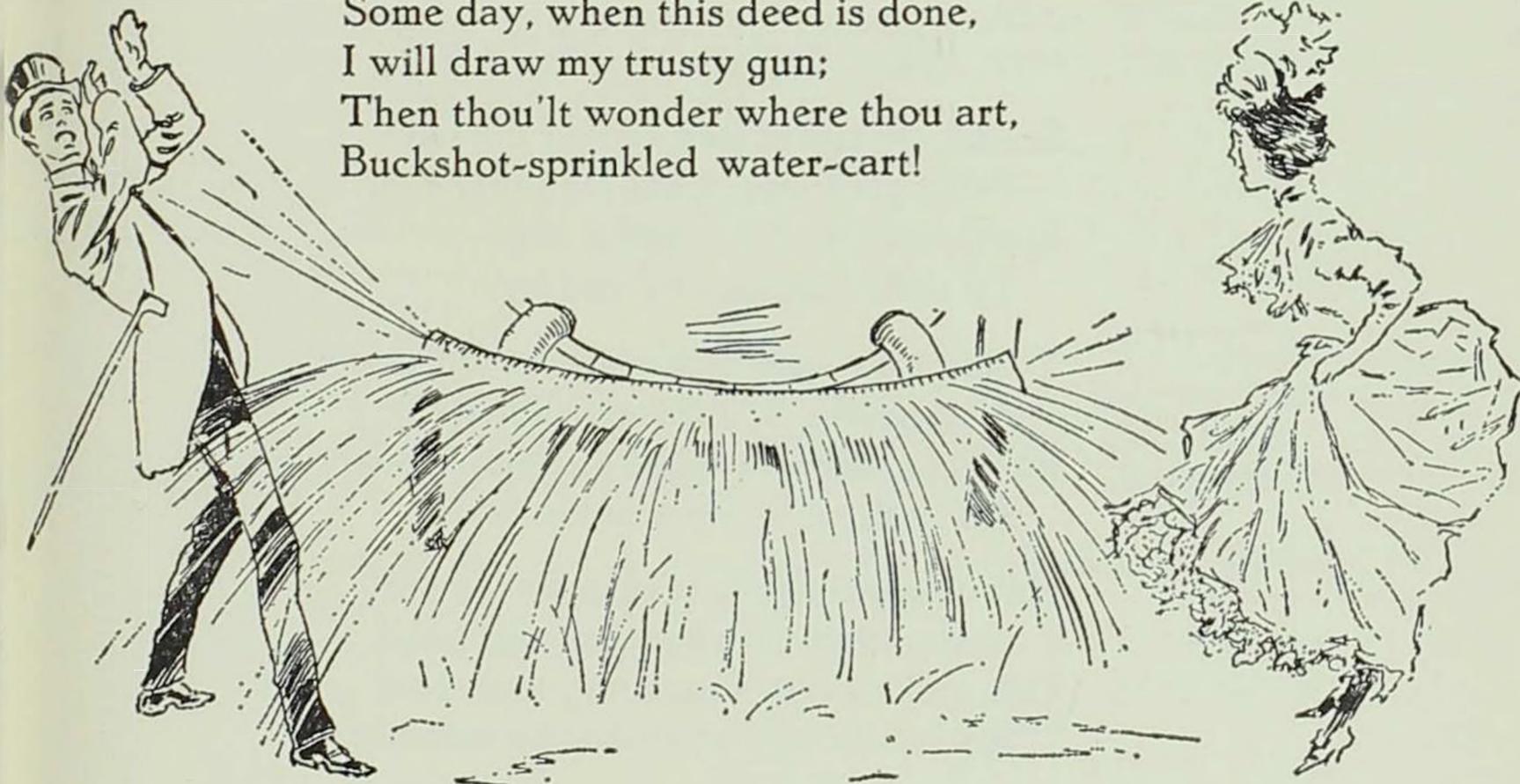
Sprinkle, sprinkle, water-cart,
Oft I wonder where thou art;
Never can I find thee nigh
When the dust is deep and dry.

When the sun puts on his cloud
And the rain-pour patters loud,
Then you wing your little flight —
Sprinkle, sprinkle left and right.

When the crossings, Sunday clean,
Full of well-dressed folk are seen,
Vainly then they dodge and scream,
Sprinkled with thy pluvial stream!

And when bright my shoes are "shined,"
And my hands in gloves confined,
Rattling down the thirsty street,
How you soak my hands and feet.

Some day, when this deed is done,
I will draw my trusty gun;
Then thou'lt wonder where thou art,
Buckshot-sprinkled water-cart!



The Seedman

How doth the busy nurseryman
Improve each shining hour;
And peddle cions, sprouts and seeds
Of every shrub and flower.

How busily he wags his chin,
How neat he spreads his store,
And sells us things that never grew
And won't grow any more.

Who showed the little man the way
To sell the women seed?
Who taught him how to blow and lie
And coax and beg and plead?

He taught himself, the nurseryman;
And when his day is done
We'll plant him where the lank rag weeds
Will flutter in the sun.

But oh, although we plant him deep
Beneath the buttercup,
He's so much like the seed he sells,
He never will come up.

The School Ma'am

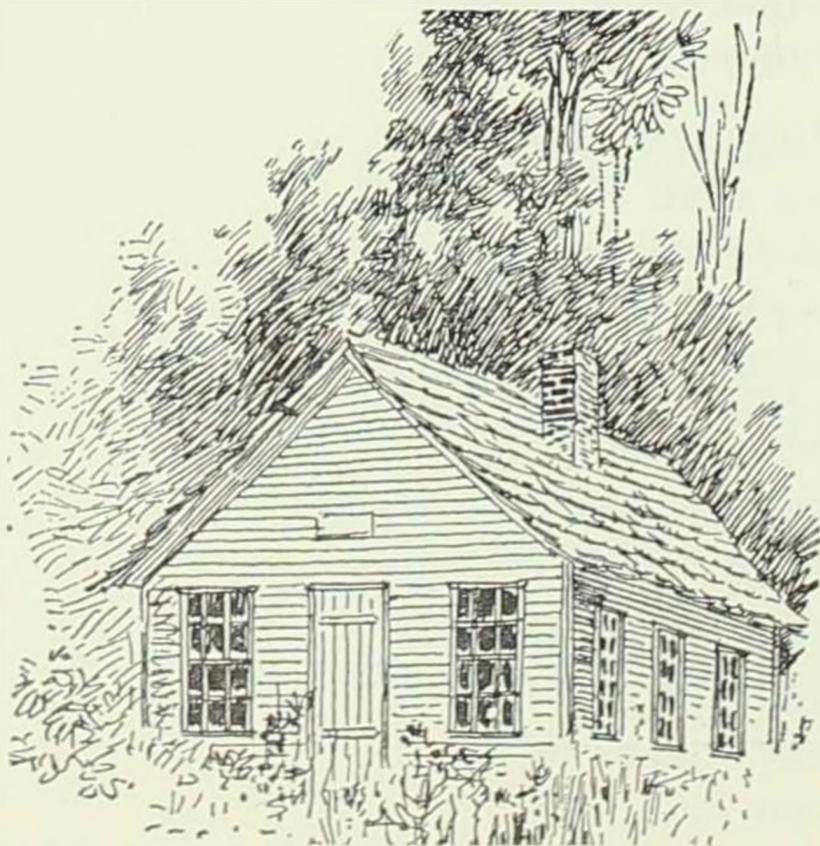
See where she comes adown the lane
With gladness in her laughing eye,
But in her hand the rattan cane
To stifle laughter by and by.

Young love lurks in her merry tone,
And nestles in her roguish looks,
But long, hard, crooked questions moan
And sob and gibber in her books.

Her dimpled hand, that seeks the curl
Coquetting with her graceful head,
Can make a boy's ears ring and whirl
And make him wish that he were dead.

How much she kens, this learned rose,
Of human will and human won't;
One wonder is, how much she knows,
The other is, how much I don't.

Sweet pedagogue, much could I tell
The merry boys who greet thy call —
Thy mother cuffed my ears, right well,
When she was young and I was small.



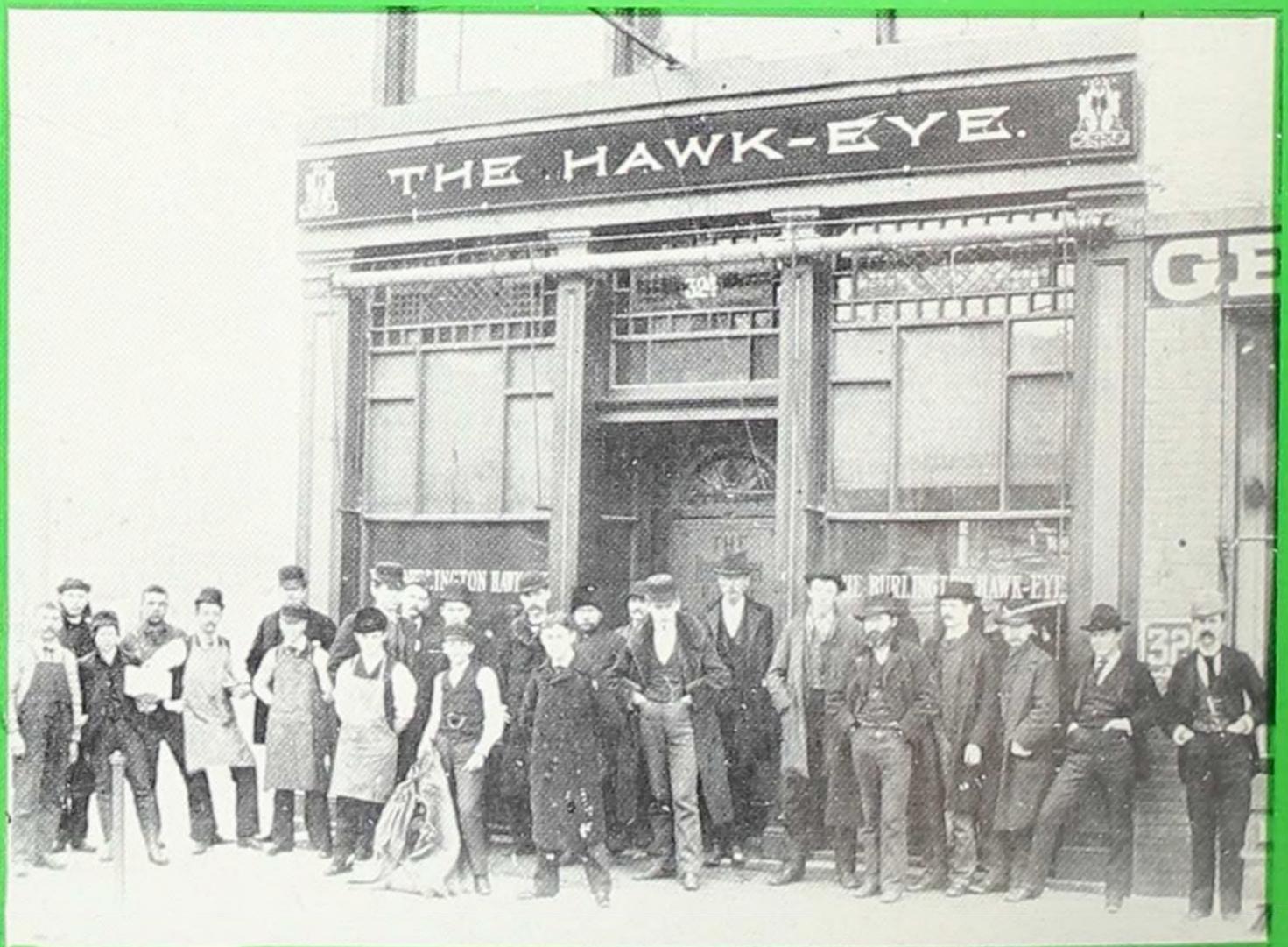
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Many "Old-Timers" at the *Hawk-Eye* Were Friends of Burdette