

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.