

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.

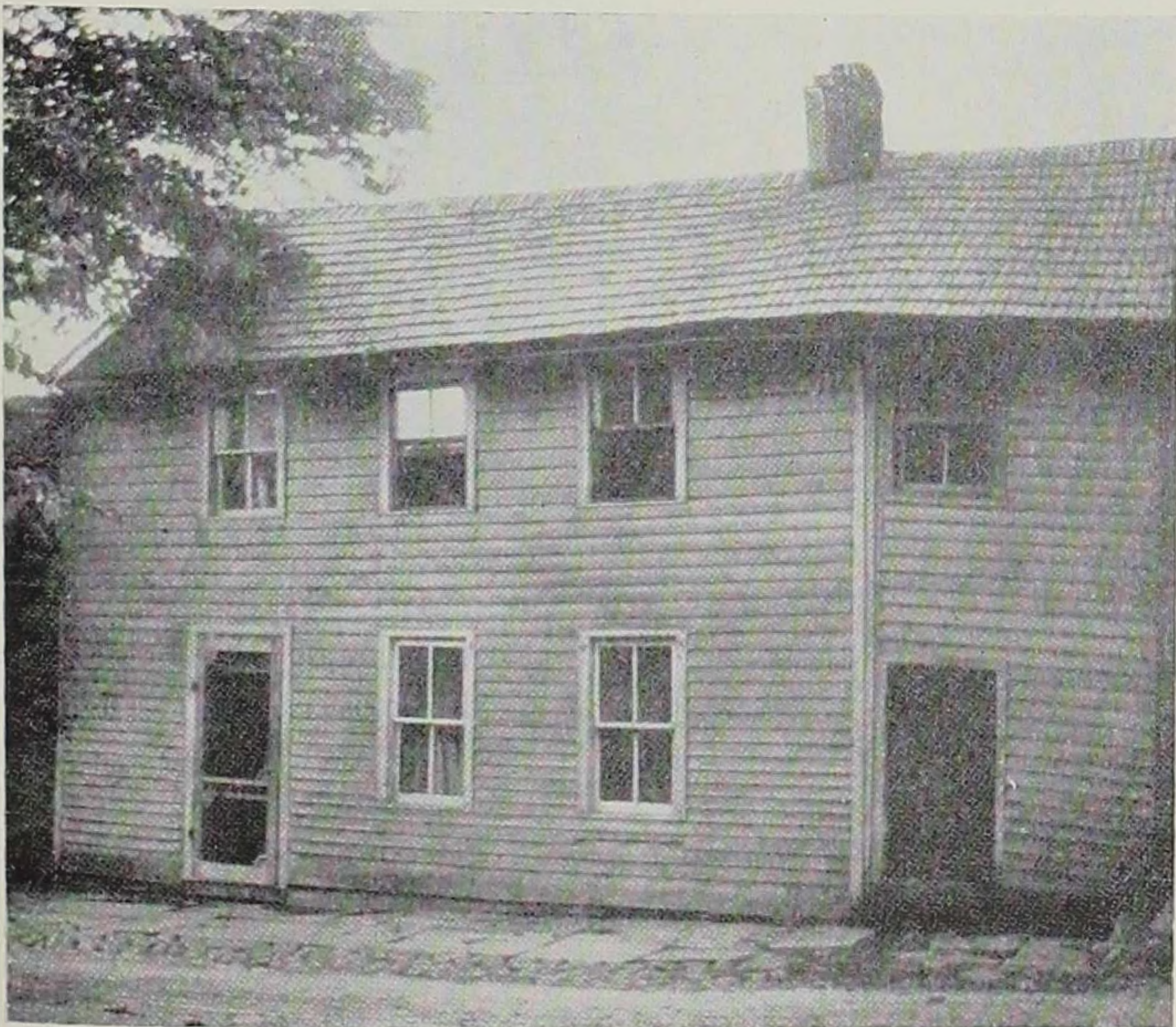
The Parents of Robert J. Burdette



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

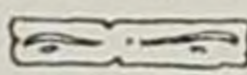
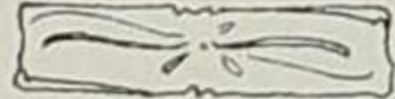
PART I. THE STORY OF ROLLO
PART II. STORIES AND SKETCHES

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY LOUIS BRAUNHOLD
COVER DESIGN BY ROBERT J. BURDETTE, JR.



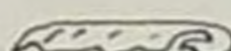
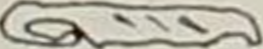
INDIANAPOLIS AND KANSAS CITY
THE BOWEN-MERRILL COMPANY

M DCCC XCVII

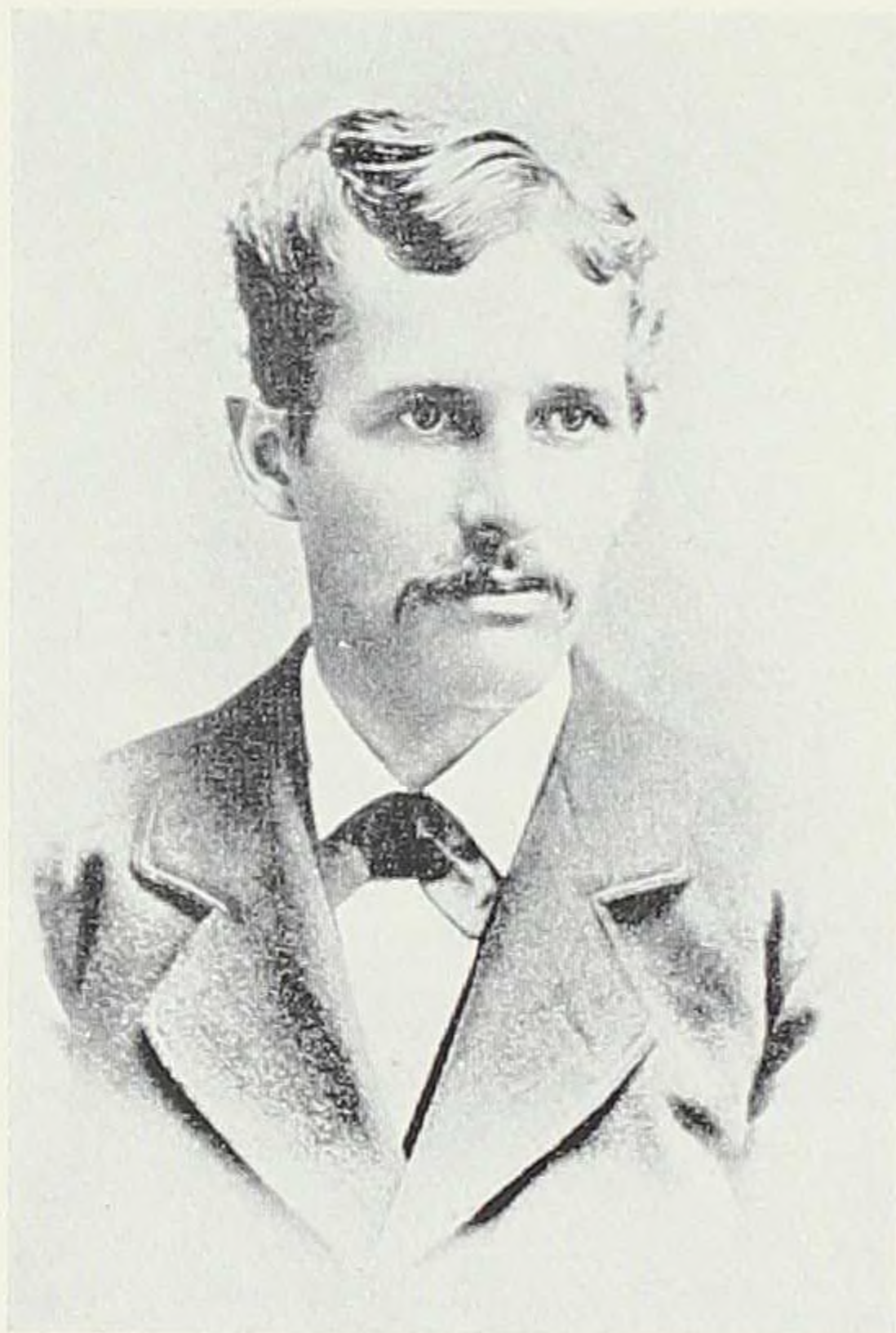
SMILES PICTURES BY
YOKED WITH WILL VAWTER
SIGHS  
BY ROBERT J. BURDETTE

"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.