

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.