

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?"