

RISE AND FALL OF THE MUSTACHE

BY ROBERT J. BURDETTE.

AS they sit and stand there, looking at each other, the dingy old counting-room with the heavy shadows lurking in every corner, with its time-worn, heavy brown furnishings, with the scanty dash of sunlight breaking in through the dusty window, looks like an old Rubens painting; the beginning and the finishing of a race; the old man, nearly ready to lay his armor off, glad to be nearly and so safely through with the race and the fight that Tom, in all his inexperience and with all the rash enthusiasm and conceit of a young man, is just getting ready to run and fight, or fight and run, you never can tell which until

he is through with it. And the old man, looking at Tom, and through him, and past him, feels his old heart throb almost as quickly as does that of the young man before him. For looking down a long vista of happy, eventful years, bordered with roseate hopes and bright dreams and anticipations, he sees a tender face, radiant with smiles and kindled with blushes; he feels a soft hand drop into his own with its timid pressure; he sees the vision open, under the glittering summer stars, down mossy hillside, where the restless breezes, sighing through the rustling leaves, whisper their tender secrets to the noisy Katydid; strolling along the winding paths, deep in the bending wild grass, down to the star-like aisles of the dim old woods; loitering where the meadow brook sparkles over the white pebbles or burrows around the great flat stepping-stones; lingering on the rustic foot-bridge, while he gazes into eyes eloquent and tender in their silent love-light; up through the long pathway of years, flecked and checkered with sunshine and cloud, with storm and calm, through years of struggle, trial, sorrow, disappointment, out at last into the grand, glorious, crowning beauty and benediction of hard-won and well-deserved success, until he sees, now, this second Laura, re-imagining her mother as she was in the dear old days. And he rouses from his dream with a start, and he tells Tom he'll "Talk it over with Mrs. Trent, and see him again in the morning."

So they are duly and formally engaged; and the very first thing they do, they make the very sensible, though very uncommon, resolution to so conduct themselves that no one will ever suspect it. And they succeed admirably. No one ever does suspect it. They come into church in time to hear the benediction—every time they come together. They shun all other people when church is dismissed, and are seen to go home the longest way. At picnics they are missed not more than fifty times a day, and are discovered sitting under a tree, holding each other's hands, gazing into each other's eyes and saying—nothing. When he throws her shawl over her shoulders, he never looks at what he is doing, but looks straight into her starry eyes, throws the shawl right over her natural curls, and draws them out by the hair pins. If, at sociable or festival, they are left alone in a dressing room a second and a half, Laura emerges with her ruffe standing around like a railroad accident; and Tom has enough explanation on his shoulder to go around a young ladies' seminary. When they drive out, they sit in a buggy with a seat eighteen inches wide, and there is two feet of unoccupied room at either end of it. Long years afterwards, when they drive, a streetcar isn't too wide for them; and when they walk, you could drive four loads of hay between them.

And yet, as carefully as they guard their precious little secret and as cautious and circumspect as they are in their walk and behavior, it gets talked around that they are engaged. People are so prying and suspicious.

And so the months of their engagement run on; never before, or since, time flies so swiftly. Unless, it may be, some time when Tom has an acceptance in bank to meet in two days, that he can't life one end of—and the wedding day dawns, fades, and the wedding is over. Over, with its little circle of de-

pressive and excitement, with its touches of home life, that leave their lasting impression upon Laura's heart, although Tom, with man-like blindness, never sees one of them. Over, with ma, with the thousand and one anxieties attendant on the grand event in her daughter's life, hidden away under her dear old smiling face, down, away down, under the teardrop-glistening eyes, deep in the loving heart; ma, hurrying here and fluttering there, in the intense excitement of something strangely made up of happiness and grief, of apprehension and hope; ma, with her sudden disappearances and flushed reappearances, indicating struggles and triumphs in the turbulent world down stairs; ma, with the new-fangled belt, with the dinner-plate buckles, fastened on wrong side foremost, and the flowers dangling down the wrong side of her head, to Sophie's intense horror and pantomimic telegraphy; ma, flying here and there, seeing that every thing is going right, from kitchen to dressing-rooms; looking after everything and everybody, with her hands and heart just as full as they will hold, and more voices calling "ma" from every room in the house, that you would think one hundred was could answer. But she answers them all, and she sees after everything, and just in the nick of time prevents Mr. Trent from going downstairs and attending the ceremony in a loud-furred dressing-gown and green slippers; ma, who, with quivering lip and glistening eyes, has to be cheerful, and lively, and smiling; because if, as she thinks of the dearest and best of her flock going away from her fold, to give her life and her happiness into another's keeping, she gives away for one moment, a dozen reproachful voices cry out, "Oh, ma!" How it all comes back to Laura, like the tender shadows of a dream, long years after the dear, dear face, furrowed with marks of patient suffering and loving care, rests under the snow and the daisies; when the mother love that glistened in the tender eyes has closed in darkness on the dear old home; and the nerveless hands, crossed in dreamless sleep upon the pulseless breast, can never again touch the children's heads with caressing gestures; how the sweet vision comes to Laura as it shone on her wedding morn, rising in tender beauty through the blinding tears her own excess of happiness calls up, as the rainbow spans the cloud only through the mingling of the golden sunshine and the falling rain.

And pa, dear old shabby pa, whose clothes will not fit him as they fit other men; who always dresses just a year and a half behind the style; pa, wandering up and down through the house, as though he were lost in his own home, pacing through the hall like a sentinel, blundering aimlessly and listlessly into rooms where he has no business, and being repelled therefrom by a chorus of piercing shrieks and hysterical giggling; pa, getting off his well worn jokes with an assumption of merriment that seems positively real; pa, who creeps away by himself once in a while and leans his face against the window, and sighs, in direct violation of all strict household regulations, right against the glass, as he thinks of the little girl going away to-day from the home whose love and tenderness and patience she knows so well. Only yesterday, it seems to him, the little baby girl, bringing the first music of baby prattle into his home, then a little girl in short dresses, with school girl troubles and school-girl pleasures; then an older girl, out of school and into society, but a little girl to pa still. And then— But somehow, this is as far as pa can get, for he sees, in the flight of this, the first, the following flight of the other fledglings; and he thinks how silent and desolate the old nest will be when they have all mated and flown away. He thinks, when their flight shall have made other homes bright and cheery and sparkling, with music and prattle and laughter, how it will leave the old home hushed and quiet and still. How in the long, lonesome afternoons, mother will sit by the empty cradle that rocked them all, murmuring the sweet old cradle songs that brooded over all their sleep, until the rising tears check the swaying cradle and choke the song—and back over river and mountain and prairie that roll and stretch and rise between the old home and the new ones, comes back the prattle of her little ones, the rippling music of their laughter, the tender caresses of their songs, until the hushed old home is haunted by memories of its children—gray and old they may be, with other children clustering about their knees, but to the dear old home they are "the children" still. And dreaming thus, when pa for a moment finds his little girl alone—his little girl who is going away out of the home whose love she knows, into a home whose tenderness and patience are all untried—he holds her in his arms and whispers the most fervent blessing that ever throbbed from a father's heart; and Laura's wedding day would be incomplete and unfeeling without her tears. So is the pattern of our life made up of smiles and tears, shadows and sunshine. Tom sees none of the background pictures of the wedding day. He sees none of its real, heartfelt earnestness. He sees only the bright, sunny tints and happy figures that the tearful, shaded background throws out in golden relief; but never stops to think that, without the shadows, the clouds, and the somber tints of the background the picture would be flat, pale and lusterless.

And then the presents. The assortment of brackets, serviceable, ornamental and cheap. The French clock, that never went, that does not go, that never will go. The nine potato mashers. The eight mustard spoons. The three cigar stands. Eleven match safes; assorted patterns. A dozen ties, charity fair style, blue dog on a yellow background, barking at a green boy climbing a red fence after seal brown apples. The two chums, old pattern, straight handle and dasher, and they have as much thought of keeping a cow as they have of keeping a section of artillery. Five things they didn't know the names of, and never could find any body who could tell what they were for. A nickel-plated corkscrew, that Tom, in a fine burst of indignation throws out of the window, which Laura says is just like her own

impulsive Tom catches his death of cold and ruins the knees of his best trousers crawling around in the wet grass hunting for that same corkscrew. Which is also just like her own impulsive Tom.

Then the young people go to work and buy e-very-thing they need, the day they go to house-keeping. Everything, just as well, Tom says, to get every thing at once and have it delivered right up to the house as to spend five or six or ten or twenty years in stocking up a house, as his father did. Laura thinks so too, and she wonders that Tom should know so much more than his father. This worries Tom himself, when he thinks of it, and he never rightly understands how it is, until he is forty-five or fifty years old and has a Tom of his own to direct and advise him. So they make out a list, and revise it, and rewrite it, until they have everything down, complete, and it isn't until supper is ready the first day that they discover there isn't a knife, a fork, or a plate or a spoon in the new house. The first day the washerwoman comes, and the water is hot, and the clothes are all ready, it is discovered that there isn't a washtub nearer than the grocery. Further along in the day the discovery is made that while Tom has bought a clothes line that will reach to the north pole and back, and then has to be coiled up a mile or two in the back yard there isn't a clothes pin in the settlement. In the course of a week or two Tom slowly awakens to the realization of the fact that he has only begun to get. If he should live two thousand years, which he rarely does, and possibly may not, he would think, just before he died of something they wanted the worst way for five centuries, and had either been too poor to get, or Tom had always forgotten to bring up. So long as he lives, Tom goes on bringing home things that they need—absolute, simple necessities, that were never so much as hinted at in that exhaustive list. And old Time comes along, and knowing that the man in the new house will never get through bringing things up to it, helps him out and comes around and brings things too. Bring a gray hair now and then, to stick in Tom's mustache, which has grown too big to be ornamental, and too awkward and unmanageable to be comfortable. He brings little cares and little troubles and little trials and little but-ter-bills, and little grocer's bills, and little tailor bills, and nice large millinery bills, that pluck at Tom's mustache and stroke it the wrong way and make it look more and more as pa's did the first time Tom saw it. He brings, by and by, the prints of baby fingers and pats them around on the dainty wall paper. Brings sometimes a voiceless messenger that lays its icy finger on the baby lips, and hushes their dainty prattle, and in the baptism of its first sorrow, the darkened home has its tenderest tie to the upper fold. Brings by and by the tracks of a boy's muddy boots, and scatters them all up and down the clean porch. Brings a messenger one day, to take the younger Tom away to college. And she quiet the boy leaves behind him is so much harder to endure than his racket, that old Tom is tempted to keep a brass band in the house until the boy comes at last, and it does make life seem terrible real and earnest to Tom, and how the old laugh rings out and ripples all over Laura's face, when they see old Tom's first mustache budding and struggling into life on young Tom's face.

Still old Time comes round, bringing each year whiter frosts to scatter on the whitening mustache, and brighter gleams of silver to glint the brown of Laura's hair. Bringing the blessing of peaceful old age and a love-locked home to crown the noble, earnest, real human lives, bristling with human faults, marred with human mistakes, scarred and seamed and rifted with human troubles, and crowned with the compassion that only perfection can end upon imperfection. Comes, with happy memories of the past, and quiet confidence for the future. Comes, with the changing scenes of day and night; with winter's storm

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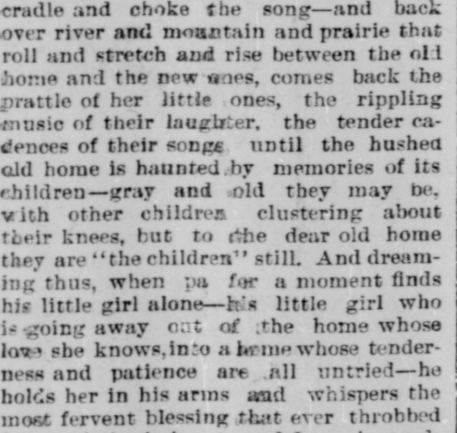
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