

A Moustache, and What Came of It

I, Alfred Troptop, was on the point of leaving home and the friends of my youth, to enter business with my uncle in Philadelphia. I was just twenty-two, and was generally thought good-looking, had received a liberal education, and, altogether, might put myself down as well known and liked in New York, and a credible member of my father's establishment. Only two events had occurred to disturb the peaceful monotony of a harmless career—one, my entrance into a military company; the other the pledging of my affections to my cousin Arabella, who came for a month from Philadelphia, stayed with us, and sealed my fate forever. In a word, I loved, and was beloved again.

I don't mind confessing that this was the main cause of my willing acceptance of a seat in her father's office in Philadelphia; and thus it came to pass that I was just on the point of beginning life in the Quaker city—I and my moustache. Here my troubles may properly be said to have begun. Let me be honest, and trace them at the onset to their cause.

My uncle was a methodical, plodding lawyer, who lived principally in his office, and barely tolerated life out of it. Again and again had my father pressed upon me the necessity of assuming as quiet and respectable a manner as possible. And yet, when I stepped on board the steamer which was to take me to Philadelphia, it was in a new military-looking suit, which cost nearly fifty dollars; hair as short as scissors could make it, and parted with the greatest precision; and my moustache curling upward at the corners of my mouth, in regular military style—as the hair dresser assured me.

It was a lovely morning we steamed merrily down the bay. The water was perfectly smooth, the band was playing "Dixie's Land," and I sat in the stern in most approved military attitude, twisting my moustache and haughtily looking about me.

Arabella! Where was thy image? Alas! confined to oblivion in my breast pocket. One look at it would have saved me. I gazed at a living, loving image near me, and was infatuated. She sat beside me, in all the fascination of a muslin dress and coquettish straw hat, with a pair of dark eyes glancing beneath it; and I wished she would tumble overboard, straw hat and all, that I might be so happy as to rescue and enslave her forever.

She belonged, so I perceived, to a stout, merry-looking old gentleman, who walked up and down, looked at the distant coast through a telescope, talked to everybody around, and was evidently in high spirits with himself and the world around generally. We fell into conversation. The fair one joined in the chat and laugh. I was in Paradise. How I blessed my good fortune!

"In the army, I presume, sir," said the Paterfamilias.

I couldn't have denied it for the world. So I bowed with dignity. The fair creature looked at me admiringly. The father said:

"I knew it."

He spoke in a loud voice and other people heard him, and he surveyed me with interest—especially a gentleman also with a mustache and a military air, an individual with freckles and eye-glass and a quiet-looking person—who had the appearance of a clergyman. I mention these three for a reason which will be seen hereafter.

“Your hand, sir; I love the military,” said the old gentleman. “A fine set of fellows every one of them. Let me see, what is your regiment?”

I hadn’t studied the military list for nothing.

“The 120th United States Smashers,” I said boldly. It was Frank Gamble’s old regiment. I had met him a few months back, and heard from him a good deal of it and its mess. The gentleman with the mustache looked at me more earnestly than ever.

“I’m a peaceable man myself,” said the old gentleman. “Never fired a gun in my life; winked my eyes all the time they were shooting at the review last week; but I love the military, sir; proud to make your acquaintance. Grimble, sir, is my name, and that’s my daughter Alice. She likes an officer, too, I know.”

She blushed, I think. I know I did.

“Now, excuse my freedom,” continued my new acquaintance; “I’m a plain man. We’ll make a pleasant day of it. Just tell us a few of your adventures; I know you have lots of them; and may be I’ll give you a few of mine afterward.”

I was under the influence of that demon of a mustache, and, in my infatuation, called Frank Gamble to my aid. I gave them all his stories second hand, and a few more. Men whom I had never known I was fool enough to represent as my bosom friends; tales of the United States Smashers, which had convulsed me with laughter when I heard them, I repeated as incidents of my own experience. I figured as the principal actor in the mess scenes of the 120th. The gentleman with the mustache, he with the freckles and he who looked like a parson, all listened with several others. Mr. Grimble threw in, “Well, that is capital!” and turned round to the rest for their approval, and we were quite a merry party. I was the lion—the military man. I was quite in my glory.

Dinner was announced in the saloon; we all went down to it together. I sat beside Miss Grimble and flirted with her. I ordered a bottle of champagne, which cost me five dollars, and Mr. Grimble ordered another. After dinner when the ladies were gone, I had a third bottle up; and somehow the gentleman with the freckles, and the clerical one, all joined in with us, and we swallowed champagne as if it were our usual beverage. We were very merry and talkative; but I began to feel a little uncomfortable. I had only three dollars left in my pocket, and was afraid I may be called on to stand something more; in which case I should have been in a terrible fix. I may remark, by the way, that I carried a one-hundred dollar bank note in my pocket, in trust for my uncle—some unsettled account between him and my father—but of course that was sacred. We went on deck again, and smoked together.

“And to think,” said he with the freckles, “that great horse-race comes off in New York to-day. What kind of a book have you?”

Now it happened that I had never bet. But I said carelessly, “Oh! so, so; let me see, what was the odds last night. Even?” I said confidently.

“Now,” said my companion, “I am not a betting man, but I don’t mind a five or two on Maccaroni. They will have the winner by telegraph when we get to Philadelphia.”

“Anything you like,” I said recklessly.

“I can’t spend more than fifty,” freckles replied, and he booked it.

Fifty dollars on a horse I knew nothing about; and I with only three dollars of my own! Of course I trembled, and cried off at once? Not a bit. I was a military man with a mustache. I noted it down, and turned the conversation with an easy air, as if fifty dollars, more or less, were a perfect trifle. When I had finished my cigar, and walked back to Miss Grimble, and talked and flirted with her on the quarter deck, the afternoon sped on, the light-house rose up before us, and we drew near the harbor.

I had promised to look after the Grimble’s baggage, and as I walked toward the paddle-boxes for that purpose, my friend with the mustache stopped me.

“I must beg your pardon,” said he. “From what I have unavoidably heard today, you belong to the 120th. Now, curiously enough, it happens that I am going over to the rendezvous of the United States Smashers in a few days, and should be glad of a letter of introduction to that brother officer of yours—Sharples; I heard you mention him. I am here for a day or two, and will call on you. Where are you putting up?”

“Aye, that’s a question I was going to ask,” said he of the freckles. He was close behind us, and so was the clergyman. Somehow this brought the lawyer’s office, and my uncle, and the end of my journey at once before me.

“Going to stop?” I said hesitating. “Oh, with some friends of mine.”

“Are they coming to meet you?”

“No,” I said, “I don’t suppose they will.”

“Then I tell you what,” went on my freckled acquaintance—he of the mustache had turned suddenly away to my great relief, “I tell you what, I’ve got a capital joke. We’ve had a jolly passage, and I like you. You’re just the fellow for my money. Let’s have a little dinner and a bottle of wine together, out of the bet, you know. The winner to stand it. Send on your things by a boy, and tell them you’ve met an old friend. Come, is it a bargain?” and he slapped me on the back.

“Halloa! Here we are at the pier,” he continued, before I could answer. “Who’s the winner?” yelling to the crowd.

“Maccaroni” shouted a fellow.

“By George! I’ve won my fifty and lost the dinner! You can’t hang back at any rate—and can’t get out of it, nohow. Look after your traps, and we’ll be off together.”

Even at that moment, at the eleventh hour, as it were, I might have been saved. The man of freckles I felt to be a sharper; green as I was I knew it. But there I was owing him fifty dollars, and only my uncle’s bank note in my pocket. Anything, however, to postpone payment. Perhaps I could appeal to his generosity after a glass of wine; perhaps—

But by the time I had got thus far, the Grimble had bidden me good by, and I was off with my tempter to the hotel. I entered it and was lost!

What a luxurious dinner!—several courses a good deal of wine, punch afterward. The bill said so, and I believe it was correct. I drank recklessly to drown the prickings of conscience, until at last, with an imbecile smile, as if I liked it, I actually took out the note to pay the fifty dollars. My companion gave me fifty in exchange.

How long the orgie lasted I don’t know. I remember my companion asking me to excuse him for a minute, and going out. I recollect of being dimly conscious that I was alone, and sleepy. I suppose I did sleep.

A rude shake awoke me. There was quite a crowd—the landlord, several waiters, two policemen, and a background of curious spectators. In front—could it be real?—was my silent friend of the steamer, who was so like a parson.

“James Moss, I arrest you as a swindler and utterer of base coin. It’s no use making any fuss, so give yourself up quietly.”

Was he addressing me? or was it all a horrid nightmare? I tried to collect myself. There he was speaking again.

“The game’s up, my man. Not badly played, but lost. Where’s your companion eh?”

Somebody—the landlord, I suppose—intimated he had left, saying I would settle the bill.

“Then I pity you, that is all,” said the friend in black. “Search him, officers.”

No, it should never come to that. I found voice at last—I found limbs. With the former I protested my innocence; with the latter I believe I made an attempt to escape. I am sensible I was much knocked about. At last I found myself bruised, hoarse, and—O, ye powers!—handcuffed, held down in a chair, while my pockets were searched and emptied. Out came the fifty dollars

which remained of my uncle's note. The man in black pounced upon them, looked at them, examined them, and threw them on the table and laughed.

"I thought so. Counterfeit every one of them. How much for your dinner, landlord? Take him away, my men."

The truth flashed on me. The man with freckles was the real Simon Pure; he had swindled me out of my hundred dollars, and I was being sacrificed in his place. But explanations were of no use now. Perhaps my words were little incoherent. Bare-headed, the coat half off my back—praying, beseeching, the verriest wretch on earth—I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror. I was hurried through the streets, thronged with pleasure-seekers enjoying the calm summer evening. Amid an applauding, excited crowd, who would hardly let us pass—heads thrust out of windows above—people struggling for a view—I was dragged between two policemen, personifying the reputed counterfeiter and cheat, James Moss. Some ladies and gentlemen were at an open window. What do I perceive? The Grimble! and with them—yes, it must be—I see her, and she recognizes me; they all do—Arabella! A shriek, and Mr. Grimble's "Bless my soul!" were the last sounds I heard as I fainted.

Early next morning I was taken to the police court. To my torn, beggarly appearance of the previous evening was added the seedy, sodden look produced by a night's lodging in the cell. Everything about me was wretchedness. How I reviled that abominable mustache, the cause of all my woes! I implored the jailer to cut it off for me, or let me do it myself; but no.

"You'll have it off fast enough, my fine-fellow, when you get sent up," he remarked, "and your hair is a bit shorter."

Oh! the unutterable shame and misery as I looked around the crowded court. Arabella and Miss Grimble were not there, but half the town was; my uncle, and Mr. Grimble, and the gentleman with the mustache, and my clerical captor.

The latter spoke first. He was a detective—William Shaw, as he stated of New York. He had heard that James Moss was coming over to Philadelphia the day before. Took a passage in the same steamer. The description of Moss put into his hands was, "young man, sunburnt, has a look of intemperance, a large mustache, talks loud, passes himself off as a military man. He appealed to the court to satisfy himself by inspection, with regard to the correspondence, as to personal appearance. As to manners, he gave evidence that the prisoner had passed himself off as an officer before the whole steamer; had caused everyone to notice him; offered bets on the race; ordered an expensive dinner at the R— Hotel; had been apprehended there; resisted with violence, and was found with \$50 counterfeit money (now produced) on his person.

For confirmation of this he called upon two gentlemen who had both been repeatedly addressed by the prisoner during the passage. Here he pointed to him with the mustache and Mr. Grimble. The landlord gave the history of the dinner at once. Finally he requested leave to carry the prisoner back to New York by the next steamer.

That nothing might be wanting, the gentleman with the mustache came forward. He was an officer of the 120th U.S. Smashers. He came over from New York with the prisoner. Prisoner declared himself to belong to his (the witness') regiment; he knew it to be a false and determined to expose him. Heard him mention various well-known names in the 120th, coupled with slanderous tales, for the amusement of the whole steamer. Prisoner had even offered to give him a letter of introduction to his own brother.

My uncle got up. I wished the earth would open and swallow me. He spoke in a cold, mechanical manner, and kept his eyes away from me. I felt my punishment was indeed heavy, when I heard him tell the court that it was from no desire to spare me that he came forward, but simply from a sense of justice. That he wished from his heart that I had really been James Moss, and not what I was—his miserable fool of a nephew. And as I listened, the shame I had brought on myself overcame me completely. The court, with the mocking faces in it, seemed to vanish, and I heard, as I a dream, a fierce battle about my identity, during which it gradually came out that James Moss was the man with the freckles, and I his dupe; and that he had wisely taken the night train to Baltimore. The detective was foaming with rage at having been again buffled by the chief delinquent; the court set me free, with a stinging reprimand, and the people outside shouted to bring the fellow out that they might duck him.

Only one idea possessed me. I determined to leave Philadelphia at once and forever: to cut off and cast from me that cursed mustache, and be the son of my father once more.

Let me hasten to an end. At my uncle's request a guard of policemen protected me to the pier; he himself paid my passage. Amid the ironical cheers of the visitors and natives of Philadelphia, I found my self on board the very boat that had witnessed my folly; even the deck-hands [grinned] as I rushed head long into the cabin, never to come up again till we reached New York.

What need to say any more? I lost Arabella; I lost my situation and my uncle's favor at the same time; I was disgraced at home and abroad; and all—I pledge you my word—all through a mustache.

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