

THE TAX ON MUSTACHES

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"The Black Cat," a magazine published at London, in the United States, recently offered prizes for the Short Stories and the First prize, of the value of £100, was won by the following story, which we here pleasure in bringing to the notice of our readers on this side of the Atlantic.

THE rivalry between Vincent and Halliday was bitter enough before Miss Belmayne appeared. It then assumed an aspect almost Corsican.

Vincent was the Rome correspondent of the *London Standard*. Halliday was the Roman representative of the *London National*. Vincent was an Oxford man; Halliday's intellectual credentials were dated at Cambridge. Vincent was of middle height, dark, lithe, and athletic. He had an electric energy, and quick, penetrating brown eyes, with a mazy light in them that was attractive; also a brown moustache that approached the feminine ideal. Halliday was of stouter and fatter build, with a blonde, sharp-pointed beard, and a face like Lord Salisbury's. Lord Salisbury was, in fact, secretly his model. He was the cousin of a peer, but notwithstanding this drawback had managed to develop a value of his own, which shows his great force and determination. He was also five years older than Vincent, who was only thirty-one; and in the game of life, if not of love, years have a distinct value of their own. Both men drew lavish salaries, moved in the highest society of Rome, and were polished carpet cavaliers and very popular. Both, too, had weaknesses which revealed their temperaments and are correlated forces in this narrative.

Vincent's weakness was a small sloop yacht which he kept at Naples for vacation cruises. Not having time, in the pressure of events, to love a woman, he loved his yacht. Whenever social, diplomatic, or international affairs did not command his attention, he and his pipe and the yacht had charming hours of mental communion together in his apartments. Whenever leave of absence permitted, the three did Capri, Sorrento, Ischia, and the adjacent Turner paintings of the Bay of Naples in congenial company. On stretching seats, in the calm and gorgeous afterglow, he dreamed of a possible fair one in the nebulous future. This showed his temperament to be romantic.

Halliday's weakness was "The War Cloud in the Balkans." Whenever other news failed he would knit his editorial brow and use his potentest ink and see ominous signs of trouble in Serbia, Bulgaria, and the Balkan Provinces. One can always see ominous signs of trouble in Serbia, Bulgaria, and the Balkan Provinces, and they make an excellent frame on which to hang long and sweeping periods dealing with possible international complications. From which it will be seen that Halliday was ambitious. He always used the most majestic polysyllables that fitted, and these won him the reputation of a powerful and far-seeing correspondent, which reputation he confidently believed that he deserved.

These diverse temperaments caused the two men to secretly scorn each other, and this feeling was not diminished by their alternating newspaper triumphs, important bits of news from the Quirinal or the Ministry, which fell now to one and now to the other, and caused the usual variations of anger and delight.

That it was when Miss Belmayne and her parents arrived at the Grand Hotel for the winter. Parents are, of course, of no importance, but it may be mentioned that Mr. Belmayne had made stoves, and incidentally

accumulated two millions, on the shore of Lake Michigan. Miss Belmayne was one of those girls who, without effort, bore over unprepared Englishmen like ten-pins. She had style, Paris style, and this, when the dressmaker is driven with an intelligent curb, is very fascinating. She was fairly tall, blonde, had ideas, dark-blue eyes, and a frank, sympathetic nature. All these exercised a novel and powerful influence on the two men. They met her on the same evening at a diplomatic reception. The charms mentioned were quite enough for Vincent. He went home, lighted his pipe, put on his slippers, looked at the fire, and said, "By Jove!" He said nothing more to the fire or anything else for two mortal hours. Then he said "By Jove!" again and went to bed. The same charms sufficed to stagger Halladay, but to them he added the two millions. He was older and more practical. He wrote his cousin the peer and told him to be sure to come to Rome that winter. Then he mentally watered his genealogical tree, reached to lay siege to the beautiful Vicksburg with the firm patience of a Grant, and absently took a cold bath. This chilled him, at midnight, but did not check his ardour.

Miss Belmayne took Rome and the Forum and the Coliseum very seriously. This was a novelty to Vincent and Halladay, so they awoke to its grandeur, and took it very seriously indeed. They sent her books, and bronzes, and prehistoric pavements, and fragments of ancient palaces by the cartload. Papa Belmayne, who was indulgent, said he didn't particularly care for a macadamized drawing-room, and engaged another room to hold the ancient architecture. The attentions of the two men soon became constant and very marked. And through archaeological mornings and afternoon drives, on the blocks of the Forum and the steps of the Coliseum, on the Pincian Hill and the roof of St.

Peter's, they fell deeper and deeper in love, but kept their own counsel. The dear girl was as yet unconscious of it, but they hated each other with the hate of the 1850-60 dramas. It was anything—all—to win the adorable beauty and sentence the other fellow to life-long despair.

The primal cause of all the subsequent trouble was Vincent's yacht. He had, on various occasions, shown Miss Belmayne the high responsibility of his position as correspondent of the *Times*. Now and then he wrote his despatches at her hotel, after dinner, and two days later would read

her the powerful, ponderous *Times* editorials, which, telegraphed all over Europe, were based upon the

despatches sent by him. This interested her tremendously. Like every true American girl of nowadays—in her ante-matrimonial, ante-babies-of-her-own-period—she secretly longed to sway nations. To write despatches which set Europe and America in a ferment, which caused Salisbury, the German Emperor, and the Czar to instantly buckle on their skates, as it were, and dash off to do something final, seemed to her the only occupation worthy of woman or of man. She found

nothing so delightful as helping him, and he knew nothing so delightful as her help, notwithstanding that the hotel note-paper was scarcely the proper stationery to bear this freight of heavy thought. When the *Times* arrived she would read the despatches with a thrill of interest born of her indirect connection with the great newspaper. Finally she wanted to write a despatch—just a little one—all by herself. He, reserving rights of correction and revision, consented. It was a safe contribution, not at all sensational, about the sorrows of the olive crop. She wrote it. She also read it, word for word, in prior two days later. That experience was a crisis in her life. Destiny opened out its arms to her as a woman of might and power. Halladay lost ground visibly after that, and



MISS BELMAYNE.

had emotional neuralgia of the most torturing kind.

The cause of the trouble, as before stated, was the yacht. A dirty steam trader from Marseilles, while coming to anchor, had taken off the bowprit of Vincent's secondary idol, together with a large slice of her peerless nose. It was like an accident to a highly esteemed female cousin.

The best medical attention was instantly necessary. Vincent knew the Italians. He knew that, if he did not personally arrange the contract for repairs at Naples, the contractor who did there would afterwards own the yacht, bring suit against his personal fortune, and hold his family responsible for the balance of the money. In short, he had to go to Naples for two days. Miss Belmayne, strange to say, received the news with joy.

"I'll look after things. I'll send anything that's necessary to the *Thunderer*," she said.

He stared at her in astonishment.

"Oh, do let me! Please do! I want to show you the breadth of my mind."

Events were very dull, journalistically. And when a beautiful girl wants to show you the breadth of her mind it is not only dangerous to say "No," but wise to say "Yes," that is, if you are so much in love as he was. He finally consented and she radiated enthusiasm. "Just read the papers if you do send anything, and be guided by them," said he. "But don't—or—don't send me much, and nothing that isn't important." Then he went away to single combat with the contractor. She couldn't do him any harm. If what she sent was bad it wouldn't be printed. And his consent to the proposal would certainly do him infinite good in connection with another proposal. Thus he mused, in love, and in the train to Naples.

Now, it is doubtless fully understood by all adult persons that when an American girl desires to show the breadth of her mind she is destined to show it at all hazards. The responsibility of her position weighed heavily upon Miss Belmayne. She came down to

breakfast next morning with a far-away look in her eyes and two brown prisma-donna hair-curles still nesting in the soft silted hair above her forehead. Papa Belmayne at first assumed that this was a new style in breakfast toilets, and said nothing. He could never keep quite abreast of the fashions, and he had made mistakes before.

Then he conceived that it might possibly be an evidence of strong, disturbing emotion, and ventured to inquire. She gravely removed the hair-curles, and after striking her hair three skillful taps put them in her pocket. Then she cautiously whispered to him the news. She, SHE, was the Acting Rome Correspondent of the *Thunderer*! Papa was startled.

It flashed instantly upon his practical Chicago mind that with a wire like that something might be done in wheat. But, no—on second thought—that wouldn't do. Sell, he was proud, very proud, of his daughter. He proceeded to like Vincent amazingly.

"We'll give the old *Thunderer* a lift, my dear, if anything happens. I'll furnish the stationers and you look out for the spelling and punctuation," said he. Halladay he had never liked. That gentleman's family tree and its luxuriant foliage had been exhibited several times in his presence, and it annoyed him. Not having dealt largely in trees in his career, he didn't believe in them. So Vincent's stock rose clear above the hundred mark in the Belmayne family, and Halladays fell steadily to zero, with no offers.

Halladay knew this and fumed in secret. He also guessed at once from Miss Belmayne's words and questions the foolish thing that Vincent had done. He saw in it not only a clever move of his rival, but also an opportunity to spoil Vincent's chances and win Miss Belmayne with a single safe play.



"SHE WOULD READ THE RESPONSES."

He was devoted but thoughtful all that afternoon. Then he went away and meditated.

At ten that evening he entered the Belmayne drawing-room, sharp-pointed, immaculate, and smiling with a visible air of conscious triumph.

"Ha, ha, ha! Sorry for Vincent. Pity he's away," he said.

"Oh, what has happened? I've read all the evening papers," said the Acting Correspondent.

"Can't say, you know. Must keep a good thing to myself when I get it."

"Is it a very good thing?"

"Very."

"Is it a *big* thing?" This with fear and trembling.

"Biggest in months. May cause a rebellion in Italy. You know these Italians. Hair-trigger sort of people when anything happens that they don't quite like."

"Oh, Mr. Halladay, please tell me!"

He proceeded not to tell her, for the next half-hour, in the clearest way possible. He dangled the bait before her and cruelly enjoyed her attempts to seize it. He saw with concealed fury, however, that her anxiety was the tender anxiety that he most greatly feared. This armed him in his resolve, and having excited her curiosity till it was painful, he went downstairs.

"What is it, my dear?" said Belmayne.

Miss Belmayne was dumb with disappointment. She loved Vincent—she knew it in that moment—and he would be dreadfully beaten, without cease, and perhaps lose his position. Because of their compact he had even failed to notify the *Theodor* of his absence.

"I've missed the greatest news of the year," she said, sharply. "Do go down to the smoking-rooms. They're sure to be talking about it. Follow Halladay, and see to whom he speaks. We *must* get something about it."

Papa Belmayne was stout, vigorous, fifty-five, and came from Chicago. His hair was curly and showed only a few white lines.

Spurred by parental love and a desire for something to do that was slowly undermining his constitution, he followed Halladay like the species of hound which is called death. His eyes twinkled and his blood was up. He had always known that anybody can be a newspaper correspondent, and he enjoyed trying it. He quickly found Halladay in the smoking-room and kept his eye on him. Halladay observed this and was deeply glad. It was as he had hoped. Belmayne had fallen heels over head into his trap.

Halladay was in earnest, low-toned conversation with Sir George Parleybone, a tall, thin, white-haired, perfectly groomed baronet, of an age above sixty-five, the kind of lay figure met everywhere in the best hotels of the south of Europe during winter. Sir George was astonished. Papa Belmayne saw this plainly, and lay low like *Ber Rabbit*. Halladay finally went away. Papa then greeted Sir George carelessly and proposed a whisky - and - soda. Also cigars. Sir George said:

"Most extraordinary! Wouldn't have believed it. What'll these beggars do next?" Papa smiled with repressed eagerness. Then it all came out. He got it—every word of it—and chuckled at his own diplomacy.

Then he flew to the elevator.

"Now I know what I'm talking about, my dear," he said, when her burst of joy was over. "I understand these things and you don't. I haven't been a State senator two terms for nothing. You sit down and take your pen and I'll dictate."

Papa expanded like a balloon, walked the floor, and dictated. He measured every word by cubic measurement. He dictated the short despatch four times and half of another time in all. She wrote and scratched out and turned the dictionary pages feverishly, and thought how clearly Edward would see the breadth of her mind.

And neither Edward nor the *Theodor* knew the doom that was impending.

When the despatch was finally completed she knew that she could have expressed it much more elegantly, but papa was incombustible.



He'd tell the story in America, by jingo, and he wanted to read his own despatch in the *London Times*. So she copied it in a bold, round hand, signed Vincent's cipher, gave it to Vincent's commissionaire, who

columns were held to be as infallible as the multiplication table itself. This was the despatch:—

ITALY.

[From our own Correspondent.]

I saw Signor Crespi this evening, and learned from him that the new and important laws in the Budget, the new sources of revenue which have been granted and upon which great hopes have been based, will take the form of a national tax upon moustaches. In his Bill, which he will introduce in the Chamber to-morrow, it will be provided that every citizen of Italy wearing a moustache shall pay a compulsory tax thereupon of one lira yearly. In the ordinary course this tax will yield the twenty million lire per annum which are so greatly needed and whose source up to now it has been impossible to discover. Of course a certain amount of opposition from the Left is confidently to be expected. The tax on moustaches will undoubtedly afford an opportunity to the Socialists to champion individual rights and protest against interference therewith; but on the other hand, the Clerical wing are certain to view the innovation with favour. The popular acceptance of the measure is, however, difficult to forecast.

This was probably the most nonsensical despatch that has ever appeared in any newspaper, great or small. The editor had looked at it, incredulous. The

leader writer said, "H'm, it's neck or nothing with Crespi." Only Vincent's cipher and the condition of Italy made belief possible; but it was believed. This was the leader:—

The extraordinary course which has been adopted by the Prime Minister of Italy in order to replenish the national treasury is so radical an extension of the general principle of taxation that neither its wisdom nor its result can yet be declared with any degree of certainty. Statistics do not, unfortunately, furnish us with the number of Italian citizens who at the period of the last census were wearing moustaches. It is a well-known fact, however, that the custom of cultivating hair in an ornamental form upon the upper lip is, perhaps, more firmly established as a national habit in Italy than in any other country of the world at the present time. The first object of this proposed legislation is its certain indication of the extreme, if not hopeless, financial straits into which the monarchy has fallen. The second is the very doubtful character of the tax itself as a reliable source of revenue, when viewed from the standpoint of expediency and of successful enforcement. It will be necessary for legislation to establish with perfect clearness not only what a moustache legally is, but



"PAPA EXPANDED LIKE A BALLOON."

called a shaven, and both she and papa went to bed feeling very well indeed.

At ten o'clock the next morning—Roman time—the face of Europe wore a fearful geographical frown. Consternation, perplexity, and uncertainty ruled in five empires. From Downing Street the news went under the Channel to the Paris Elysée and overland to the winter palaces of Berlin, Vienna, and St. Petersburg. In her honest attempt to sway nations, the dear girl had succeeded. The Thames sent messengers to the Foreign Offices; the Foreign Offices wired the Ambassadors, and neither wire nor cable could work half fast enough to please the respective senders. When the Stock Exchanges opened, Italian Rentes fell six points, and their allies weakened in proportion. The smash had come. Italy was bankrupt and the Triple Alliance would fall to pieces. It all arose from a despatch and a leading article in the columns of the *London Times*, those

also at what age, both of the water and of the mountain itself, is becoming unstable; and in these two directions, to my noising of the popular acceptance or rejection of the measure, the visible difficulties are both many and great, etc., etc.

On that very afternoon a man in a yachting suit went over the side of a yacht at Naples and was rowed to the pier. He was happy and buoyant with the buoyant happiness of the man who loves and is loved. Upon reaching the pier he bought the second edition of the *Corriere di Napoli*, and glanced at the telegraph columns. The *Times* despatch had been cabled back to Naples, and under sensational headlines was the first to meet his eye.

His first thought was that he was losing his mind and inventing the telegram. Then something flashed upon him, and his heart seemed to stop beating. He staggered to the curb of the pier, sat down, and shut his eyes. He was never sure afterwards whether he fainted or not. For five minutes he knew only the silent whirl of agonized thoughts. He grasped at once what had happened. It was Halladay's work, and Halladay had ruined him. The *Times* despatch was the laughing-stock of Europe, and he, as the responsible sender of that despatch, was journalistic-ally done for. Ambition spoke first, and the pain was of the bitterest. Love spoke next, but with all his rage and despair he could not find the power to be harsh to Miss Belmayne. "The dear girl!" he said. "She did her best, and that scandal fooled her completely. Oh, oh, oh!" And he squeezed his head with his hands as if to shut out the thought of his position and the inevitable consequences that he must face.

A little knot of loungers had gathered, his evident pain exciting their sympathy. This recalled him to himself, and he took a cab and drove away. Little knots of men stood in front of all the cafes, excitedly discussing the new tax. Half of them were clean-shaven for the first time in their lives, and the rest were about to be. There was a run on every hairdresser's shop in Naples. The Italian is poor, the taxes are killing, and the art of dodging them is the first thing taught to children. Vincent still held the

paper, and now read its comments on the tax. They combined a scream of sarcastic laughter with a howl of furious rage. Italy had been touched on the spot that was tenderest. But—and here was a gleam of hope—the reputation of the *Times* despatch was so high that the despatch had been taken seriously. The "scandal" had not yet been exposed. If only Crespo would save him—but, no! Crespo's position, already imperilled by a crisis, was worse than his own. Crespo would want to shoot him on the spot.

He caught the 2.40 train and rode to Rome in a state of numbness. What he would do to Halladay he did not dare to think. He was a man in a rage, a hungry, thirsty rage, that threatened to overpower him. Nor did he dare to go to his apartment. There lay the telegram dismissing him in derision and contempt. In his sorrow his heart turned to love for consolation. Arrived at Rome he drove to the hotel, entered Miss Belmayne's dressing-room with a white, sad face, and sat in the shadow.

The Acting Correspondent came in radiant, beaming with pride and pleasure over her shrewdness and success.

"Have you seen it? It's in the Roman papers. You didn't get beaten. Oh, I was



"A LITTLE KNOT OF LOUINGERS HAD GATHERED."

as worried, and as happy when I knew you were safe!"

She stopped, mystified at his silence. Then she saw his pallor and his expression.

"Are you ill? What is it? What's the matter?"

He tried to spare her; tried to pass the matter over lightly. But the moment she knew that the despatch had caused his trouble all subterfuges were useless. Her face, too, grew white, and she kept on asking him question after question, till she fully understood the effect of what she had done. His ruin was certain, but his replies were gentle, quiet, and full of sympathy. Then the society girl known as Miss Belmayne disappeared, and the woman in her came out. His career was ended, and through his love for her. The big, beautiful girl stood up, tried to say she was sorry, but couldn't. Her lips only quivered and wouldn't work. Then she sat down, bolt upright on the sofa, and the tears came first creeping and then tumbling down from her eye-lashes as she cried, broken-hearted, without a word or a handkerchief. He tried to soothe her, to say it was nothing. "Oh, Edward!" was all she said.

In spite of his grief he observed the word "Edward."

Upon this interesting and unconventional social tableau bustled in Papa Belmayne, of Chicago, millionaire and newspaper correspondent. He saw a white young man, and a young person bathed in tears.

"Who—what's the matter?" said he, starting and peering over his eye-glasses.

"I'm done for, but it's all my own fault," said the young man.

Papa inquired and was told. He sat down suddenly in a state of collapse.

"If that creek comes here again, I'll cowhide him," he said, exploding. "I'll thrash him anyhow. Anyhow!" he roared, with the rage of an honest man who has been beaten at his own game.

Then several minutes of sad, solemn silence ensued, each trying to find a ray of light in the gloom.

"Why don't you see Crespo? He's a friend of yours, isn't he?" said Belmayne.

"He has been."

"Then come on. Laura, you come with

us. We did it. We're responsible, and we'll take the blame. Crespo is the only man that can save you. Here! Order me a carriage!" he shouted to the maid.

The combative financier, who had faced and won a hundred battles that were real battles, was not to be daunted by a Prime Minister and a newspaper and a little thing like this. His courage, of course, infected his daughter. With father at the helm everything would, of course, be all right. It must be all right. So she hoped once more, and darted away for hat-pins. While waiting for her and the hat-pins at the elevator another thing occurred. Belmayne put his hand in a friendly way on Vincent's shoulder and said: "Young man, don't you worry. If you have to give up journalism, you may possibly do much better than that. I know you, and I like you." Vincent nodded quietly. The implied promise was well meant, but it did not appeal to him just then. They drove to the Quirinal Hill in silence. The Acting Correspondent merely asked her father if her hat was on straight. She secretly proposed to take the Prime Minister by storm.



"OH, EDWARD!" WAS ALL SHE SAID.

Now, during all these woful occurrences Charco, which, as everybody knows, is the prime minister of Providence, was playing tricks upon another Prime Minister, the temporary ruler of Italy. Signor Crespo was at his wit's end over the new tax measures. In order to pass them he had to yield to the demands of the Socialist-Anarchist wing of his party, and if he failed

to pass them he fell from power. One alternative was as distasteful as the other, and he was rapidly growing grey in his efforts to find a way out of the dilemma. When the *Zander* despatch was brought him he jumped to his feet in amazement. Then he scratched his head and said, "Ah!" Then he smiled a smile of joy. He *forgot* something.

Two minutes afterwards the double doors of his private room were burst open and a portly marquis, one of his enemies in the Cabinet, rushed in and said: "Crespo—for Heaven's sake——"

The Prime Minister said nothing.

Other high politicians of his party, rivals and enemies, rushed in and cried: "Crespo—for Heaven's sake——"

Signor Crespo said nothing.

The King sent a noble duke hot-footed to say: "Crespo—for Heaven's sake——"

The Prime Minister still said nothing, but in different words.

In half an hour they were all on their knees, all the opposing elements he had spent months in trying to combine. They accepted the tax on moustaches as a fact, and saw that, in revenge on them, he was going to ruin the party. They begged him not to propose it. He consented—on conditions. They agreed abjectly to his terms, told him to count on their votes, and, when the Chamber met, passed his Budget, which they had previously agreed to defeat, by a huge majority.

This is why the Prime Minister, who had made inquiries, was also eager to see the Acting Correspondent who had sent that despatch. Being a devout man, however, he looked upon the real sender as Providence.

The carriage party entered the Ministry. To Vincent it seemed to be wrapped in acoustical gloom. It was his farewell to the Prime Minister, both as friend and correspondent. Nevertheless, he wrote on his card: "With Mr. and Miss Belmayne to explain that despatch."

They were silently ushered in and stood in the great man's presence, three dejected figures, guilty and downcast. Belmayne was not happy. He was not used to cringing

before anybody. Laura's eyes were full of new tears. She would say no more rational, whatever the temptation. Vincent was pale and grove.

For some reason the Prime Minister began to laugh. He had not felt like laughing for three months, and he enjoyed the feeling. He laughed till the tears came into his eyes.

Vincent was angry.

"Does it strike you as comical?" said he.

"Comical? It's providential. See here," said Signor Crespo, pointing to a pile of at least a hundred telegrams. "All Europe wants information about your despatch. I mean Miss Belmayne's despatch," he said, bowing gracefully.

"Then you—you understand how it happened?"

"Yes."

"And, of course, you—you've exposed it?"

"Oh, no. They thought I meant it. It has saved the situation."

"What?" said Vincent, thunderstruck.

"And in return, my friend, I have saved you. The *Zander*, unable to get an answer from you, telegraphed me for indorsement. I sent this:—

"The *Zander*, London.

"In consequence of concessions from opposing elements I shall not present my proposed tax on moustaches."

"Genial."

"BY JOVE!" said Vincent.

"EDWARD!" screamed somebody.

"Hurrah!" said Belmayne.

And Edward's arms were filled with sudden military, and two hearts were filled with deepest joy.

Two events of different kinds succeeded.

Halladay was abused by the *National* for missing the most important news of the year. When he gave a true explanation of the matter he was scoffed at. It was visibly false. He then proceeded to turn to a pale but not unbecoming green colour. The doctors said liver; the cause was unrequited love.

The other event was a social function of a happy, even hilarious, character, at the Grand Hotel. This is not of importance, however, in a country where orange-blossoms are indigenous.