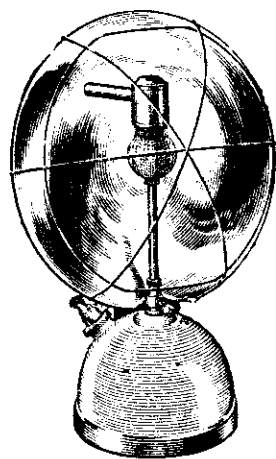


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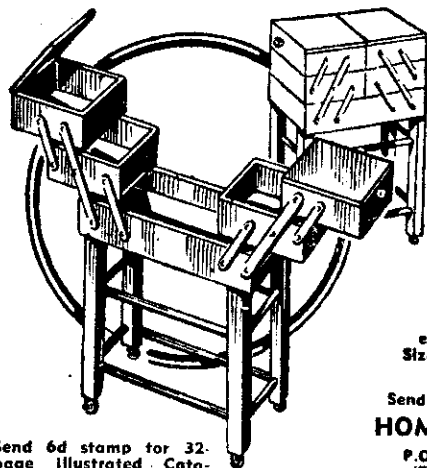
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The Beards of Monticello

FROM Monticello, New York, came recently one of those lighter cable messages which now and then take some of the grimness from the international scene. Two housewives were arrested for leading a parade of angry women. They were angry because their husbands, obeying an instruction from the mayor, were growing beards in readiness for a 150th anniversary celebration. About 525 beards are on the way, apparently with painful results. "The whole town looks like a goat herd," said one of the arrested women. "Those beards are the only way the men around here can show their masculinity." It is clear, from these fighting words, that the situation is getting out of hand. Women are bitter; the men are obdurate; the mayor has been locked out of his own home and is living at a hotel. And the big celebration does not take place until September.

A psychiatrist might suspect that the fuss is merely a symptom of some deeper conflict. Yet the mass production of beards could be a fearsome thing. There is something shocking in the thought of 525 male faces, hitherto known and cherished in their homes, re-treating simultaneously to the undergrowth. Moreover, not all men are suited by nature for this sort of decoration. To grow a beard, in a more or less clean-shaven age, is an enterprise to be undertaken carefully. Men should go away, to the hills or into the Navy, and return after a decent absence with a full and manly growth. If the chin is still smooth, nobody need know of the unsuccessful experiment: the failure of masculinity—as it might be called, mistakenly—is concealed. And here, perhaps, we have come upon a hint of the real reason for the anger of wives at Monticello.

The variety of beards is very wide. One man may have a shock of hair which juts aggressively, or sweeps grandly to the chest. An-

other may permit himself a neat and pointed growth, of the sort which was seen on disdainful chins in old Castile. All this is well enough; but there are other varieties: the beards that are as coarse and tangled as matagouri, and about as pleasant to brush against with unprotected cheek; the beard that seems to grow in several directions, aimlessly, and is undecided in colour; the sandy locks, lank and anaemic, that hang dispiritedly from the jaw; the grey stubble that speaks of a harvest long since over; the fluffy little outcrops from pendulous cheeks; the wisps of hair on large and craggy faces; and the magnificent whiskers that sprout perversely from the sort of face that nobody notices. These varieties, and many others, must now be appearing in the streets of Monticello.

We may suspect that not all the wives are objecting, since only about 25 were charged with "disturbing the peace and parading without a permit." Surely there was the sound of envy in that cry from the heart: "Those beards are the only way the men around here can show their masculinity." Could such a complaint have come from the wife of a man successfully bearded? The husbands, simple souls, have betrayed themselves. Some are not what they pretended to be, and their wives are quite chapfallen and cast down. Perhaps, too, there is more in this than emulation and competition. Delilah may still imagine that a man's strength is in his hair. As the rumour of these happenings goes abroad, we may expect to hear of men armed with notebooks, converging on the town. Here, surely, is an opportunity for research too obvious to be missed. The rest of us, curious in an unscientific way, will await the outcome. A good fight is always news, especially when it is between men and women; and kingdoms have been lost over matters less ticklish than a beard.

N.Z. LISTENER, MAY 28, 1954.