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MAGAZINE

DECEMBER 1960 50¢

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By H. B. Fyfe

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Cover by ESMH: SEASON'S GREETINGS TO OUR READERS

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REACTIONS

JUST about the safest bet you can make is that almost anything that has gone out of style will come back into style, that, at least on the political scene, friends will become enemies and enemies friends, and the like. Newton's Third Law of Motion, in other words. I have not now nor have I ever read Hegel and Marx, but I had, God wot, more than enough gab about "thesis, antithesis, synthesis" brayed at me as dialectics, when action, reaction and rest were meant.

You know what? I miss those verbal storm centers. I wouldn't if people were not playing things cool, no sweat, and other such terms for mental cyclone cellars. Right, left, middle and way the devil off in Cuckoo Land, the attackers, defenders and straddlers of the barricades in the living rooms cared. I would put "cared" in italics except that every reminiscer who has found his present lacking did so, clear back to Cato, and you know what *he* said.

Besides, that's not the point here; I admire many of George Jessel's ex-wives — oh, ten or twenty, not all, I want it clearly understood — and I have no ambition to fit the comment one of them made: "Georgie has been reminiscing since he was six years old." My anecdotage, to quote somebody else, is, or feels, a good way off.

My point is beards and I appear to be trying to make it the hard way.

Beards were the cat's whiskers in the 19th century, and yet no President, from Washington to Grant, stumped the country without a razor. Lincoln? It was not until he was elected and sending out change-of-address notices that he sprouted. A little girl named Grace Bedell of Westfield, N. Y., had written him that she thought he would look better with whiskers. So he tried it, and by the hair of the Prophet, she was right!

In the next half century, all but two Presidents were beavers

— Andrew Johnson (would he have come so close to impeachment if he'd been bearded?) and William McKinley (and did that figure in his assassination?) — and a skimpy three mustaches, Cleveland, Theodore Roosevelt and Taft. Since then, not even five o'clock shadow has darkened the faces of our Chief Executives.

Hair grew wild in those days. The assumption was that the male of the species, as with other critters, had to do his attracting with masculine appurtenances. (The females attracted right back, but this would be of note only if they either suddenly started or stopped.)

A man could just let his crop grow from the time he was a shaver, of course, with never a pruning, but such types were rare. In beardhood's full flowering, there were goatees, mutton chops, sideburns, and on and on and on, culminating, at least to my view, in the astonishing adornment worn by Horace Greeley, a fringe from lobe to lobe, not one whisker daring to raise its head above the jaw line. Now that was an age when a stylist could make other people's — and his own, more than likely — hair stand on end, or lie flat, or twist with wax, or any of the seemingly thousands of combinations with bristles below mouth and nose, and involv-

ing those items and eyes, ears and chin — a real landscaping job.

Now this is not an argument for or against beards. I am simply observing that the beard is returning; all countries have their Beat Generation, and the beard is the commonest denominator, so that Beardnik would perhaps be a closer-cropped term, instead of Beatnik and Teddy boys.

Like all first-generation growth, whether it be furze or forest or fuzz, today's beards are primeval. I know there are women who want to run their fingers through the things — wonderfully, there are women who want to run their fingers through anythingness or nothingness — but these are merely the shaggy forerunners of what may become a handsome and varied facial lawn, complete with hedges, windrows and terracings, and heaven knows what else, for styles in beards are sure to be as different and unpredictable as those in clothes and modes of transportation and anything else you might care to name.

Now we run into the seeming wall of attitude. Ignore it.

Attitude has never yet kept a style from happening or unhappening. To those men and women who would rather be caught dead than have or be married to a

beard, for reasons seldom expressed in twenty-five words or less, I offer the assurance that when everybody else has or is married to one, the lack thereof would overrule all present objections.

One genius, trying to determine the very bravest act in the whole history of mankind, decided it was the first swallow of the first oyster.

My compliments to the man for a thorough sifting of history, and my apologies for cock-hatting his notion. My money says it was a kid. Kids love to be the first on their block, a desire and aim coldly exploited by the purveyors of the dried bread crumbs known as breakfast cereal. Papa may not want to be caught dead with a beard. Mama may share the feeling, though this is questionable when beards are becoming the fashion. But neither is proof against Junior's urging, cajoling, and, when nothing else works, accusations that this shows they don't love him.

Status—along with relationship and basis—is a workhorse word that ought to be allowed to rest up, but yes, status was very much involved in a man's ability to grow a beard and have something fresh and appealing done with it, and it can be again if a trend to the beard leads to all

that was involved in every bearded era: male authority, the autocrat of the breakfast (and dinner) table the defender of honor, name and family. The sword and dueling pistol were the weapons of previous times; lawsuits and business ruin, public exposure to being outdone, all that sort of updated rivalry, make fine substitutes for antlers. But updated antlers can also be.

All this from non-conformist conformity in beard-growing? Except for the leaders, who always are a year or two ahead, non-conformity has been and is and can be expected to be conformity among the led. There lies the seed of the beard.

A number of reactions, heard round the world, strengthen the odds against beardlessness. Progressive education and permissive child-rearing are very heavily under fire, and female domination is also getting its lumps—more from women than men—and what, barring some unlovely exceptions, distinguishes the sexes more than the ability to grow a beard?

In other words, action has caused reaction. Like all reactions, it can be counted on to go too far. In what direction? Here's one educated guess — right from Barber's College.

—H. L. GOLD