

TOM BURKE OF "OURS."

CHAPTER XVII.—CONTINUED.

MR. BASSET'S DWELLING.

The sun was streaming in a rich flood of yellow light through a small sky-light, and playing its merry gambols on the floor when I awoke. The birds, too, were singing; and the hum of the street noises, mellowed by distance, broken not unpleasantly on the ear. It did not take me long to remember where I was, and why. The conversation of the evening before recurred at once to my mind, and hode, stronger than ever before I felt it, filled my heart. It was clear, Basset could place little value on such services as mine; and if I could only contrive to make it his interest to part with me, he would not hesitate about it. I resolved that whatever price he put upon my freedom, if in my power, I should pay it. My next plan was, to find out through some of the persons in correspondence with France the means of reaching that country, in whose military service I longed to enrol myself. Had I but the papers of my poor friend Charles de Meudon, there had been little difficulty in this; but, unfortunately, they were seized by Major Barton on the day of his death, and I had never seen them since.

While I revolved these thoughts within myself I heard the merry notes of a girl's voice, singing, apparently, in the very room with me. I started up and looked about me, and now perceived that what seemed so like a drop-curtain the night before, was nothing more or less than a very large patch-work quilt, suspended on a line across the entire attic, from the other side of which came the sounds in question. It was clear, both from the melody and the voice, that she could not be a servant; and somewhat curious to know more of my fair neighbour, I rose gently, and slipping on my clothes, approached the boundary of my territory with noiseless step.

A kind of whistling noise interrupted every now and then the lady's song, and an occasional outbreak of impatience would burst forth in the middle of the "Arrah, will you marry me, dear Alley Croker," by some malediction on a "black knot" or a broken string. I peeped over the "drop," and beheld the figure of a young, plump, and pretty girl, busily engaged in lacing her stays—an occupation which accounted equally for the noise of the rushing stay lace and the bit of peevishness I had heard. I quite forgot how inadvisable was the indulgence of my curiosity in my admiration of my fair neighbour, whose buxom figure, not the less attractive for the shortness of her drapery, showed itself to peculiar advantage as she bent to one side and the other in her efforts to fasten the impracticable bodice. A mass of rich brown hair, on which the sun was playing, fell over her neck and on her shoulders, and half concealed her round, well-turned arms as they plied their busy task.

"Well, ain't my heart broke with you entirely!" exclaimed she, as a stubborn knot stopped all further progress. At this moment the cord, on which through inadvertence I had leaned somewhat too heavily, gave way, and down came the curtain with a squash to the floor. She sprang back with a bound, and, while a slight but momentary blush flushed her cheek, stared at me half-angrily, and then cried out—"Well, I hope you like me."

"Yes, that I do," said I readily—"and who wouldn't that saw you?"

Whether it was the naïveté of my confession, or my youth, or both, I can't well say; but she laughed heartily at my speech, and threw herself into a chair to indulge her mirth.

"So we were neighbours, it seems," said I.

"And if we were," said she, roguishly, "I think it's a very unceremonious way you've opened the acquaintance."

"You forget, apparently, I haven't left my own territory."

"Well, I'm sure I wish you would, if you're any good at a black knot: my heart and my nails are both broke with one here."

I didn't wait for any more formal invitation, but stepped at once over the frontier—while she, rising from the chair, turned her back towards me, as with her fingers she directed me to the most chaotic assemblage of knots, twists, loops, and entanglements, I ever beheld.

"And you're Burke, I suppose," cried she, as I commenced my labours.

"Yes, I'm Burke."

"Well, I hope you're done with wildness by this time. Uncle Tony tells fine tales of your doings."

"Uncle Tony! So you're Mr Basset's niece—is that so?"

"You didn't take me for his wife, I hope," said she, again bursting out into laughter.

"In truth, I never thought so well of him as to suppose it."

"Well, well, I'm sure it's little I expected you to look so mild and so quiet; but you needn't pinch me for all that. Isn't your name Tom?"

"Yes, I hope you'll always call me so."

"Maybe I will. Isn't that done yet? and there's the milk bell. Uncle will be in a nice passion if I'm not down soon—cut it—cut it at once."

"Now do be patient for a minute or two—it's all right if you stay quiet. I'll try my teeth on it."

"Yes, but you needn't try your lips too," said she, tartly.

"Why, it's the only plan to get your fingers out of the way. I'm sure I never was so puzzled in all my life."

"Nothing like practice, my boy, nothing!" cried a merry voice from the door behind me, half choked with laughing, while a muttered anathema, in a deeper tone, followed. I looked back, and there stood Bubbleton, his face florid with laughter, endeavouring to hold back Mr. Basset, whose angry look and flashing eye there was no mistaking.

"Mr. Burke—Burke, I say—Nelly what does this mean? How came this young gentleman—"

"As to that," said I, interrupting him, and my blood somewhat chafed by his manner, "this piece of trumpetry tumbled down when I leaned my arm on it. I had no idea—"

"No, no; to be sure not," broke in Bubbleton, in an ecstasy. "The thing was delicious; such a bit of stage effect. She was there, as it might be, combing her hair, and all that sort of thing. Tom was here raving about absence, and eternal separation. You are an angry father, or uncle—all the same: and I'm Count Neitzachenitz, the old friend and brother-officer of Tom's father. Now let Miss Nelly—but where is she? why she's gone! Eh, and Basset, Basset—why he's gone! Come, Tom, don't you go too. I say, my boy, devilish well got up that. You ought to have had a white satin doublet and hose, slashed with pale cherry colour ribbons to match, small hat looped, aigrette and white plume. She was perfect—her leg and foot were three certain rounds of applause from the pit and gallery."

"What nonsense," said I angrily; "we weren't playing a comedy."

"Weren't you though? well, I'm deuced sorry for it, that's all; but it did look confoundedly like an undress rehearsal."

"Come, come, no foolery, I beg. I'm here in a very sad plight, and this piece of nonsense may not make matters any better. Listen to me, if you can, patiently for five minutes, and give me your advice."

I took him by the arm as I spoke, and leading him from the room, where I saw that every thing was only suggesting some piece of scenic effect, and in as few words as I could command, explained how I was circumstanced; omitting of course any detail of my political bias, and only stated so much of my desires as implied my wish to be free of my contract with Basset, and at liberty to dispose of myself as I liked in future.

"I see," cried Bubbleton, as I finished; "the old fox has this five hundred pounds of yours."

"No, I didn't say that; I only mean—"

"Well, well, it's all the same. If he hasn't you know, he ought."

"No; that's not essential either."

"No matter, he would if he could; it just comes to the same thing: and you only wish to get clear out of his hands at any cost. Isn't that it?"

"Exactly: you have it all perfectly."

"Bless your heart, boy, there's nothing easier. If I were in your place, I should arrange the affair in less than a week. I'd have fits—strong fits, and burn all the papers in the office during the paroxysm. I'd make a pile of deeds, leases, bonds, and settlements in the back-yard."

"I don't fancy your plan would be so successful as you flatter yourself," said a dry husky voice behind: "there's rather a stringent law for refractory apprentices, as Mr. Burke may learn." We turned round, and there stood Mr. Basset, with a grin of most diabolical malignity in his by no means pleasant features. "At the same time," continued he, "your suggestions are of infinite value, and shall be duly appreciated in the King's Bench."

"Eh—King's Bench! Lord bless you, don't speak of it. Mere trifles—I just threw them out as good hints. I had fifty far better to come. There's the young lady now—to be sure, he has started that notion himself, so I must not pretend it was mine; but Miss Nelly, I think, Tom—"

"Mr. Basset is well aware," interrupted I, "that I am only desirous to be free and untrammelled; that whatever little means I may derive from my family, I'm willing to surrender all, short of actual beggary, to attain this object—that I intend quitting Ireland at once. If then he consent to enter into an arrangement with me, let it be at

once, and on the spot. I have no desire, I have no power to force him by a threat, in case of refusal; but I hope he will make so much of amends to one, of whose present desolation and poverty he is not altogether innocent."

"There, there; that's devilish well said; the whole thing is all clear before me. So come along, Basset, you and I will settle all this. Have you got a private room where we can have five minutes' chat together? Tom, wait for me here."

Before either of us could consent or oppose his arrangement, he had taken Basset's arm, and led him down stairs, while I, in a flurry of opposing and conflicting resolves, sat down to think over my fortunes.

Tired at length with waiting, and half suspecting that my volatile friend had forgotten me and all my concerns, I descended to the parlour in hopes to hear something of the pending negotiation. At the head of a long narrow table sat my fair acquaintance, Miss Nelly, her hair braided very modestly at each side of her pretty face, which had now assumed an almost Quakerish propriety of expression. She was busily engaged in distributing tea to three pale, red-eyed, emaciated men, whose spongy-looking, thread-bare garments bespoke them to be attorney's clerks: a small imp, a kind of embryo practitioner, knelt before the fire in the act of toasting bread; but followed with his sharp piercing eyes every stir in the apartment, and seemed to watch with malicious pleasure the wry faces around, whenever any undue dilution of the bohea, or any curtailment of the blue milk, pressed heavily on the guests. These were not exactly the circumstances to renew my acquaintance with my fair neighbour, had I been so minded; so having declined her offer of breakfast, I leaned moodily on the chimney-piece, my anxiety to know my fate becoming each instant more painful. Meanwhile, not a word was spoken—a sad moody silence, unbroken save by the sounds of eating, pervaded all, when suddenly the door of the front parlour was flung open, and Bubbleton's pleasant voice was heard as he talked away unceasingly; in an instant he entered followed by Basset, over whose hard countenance a shade of better nature seemed to pass.

"In that case," cried the captain, "I'm your man. Not that I'm any thing of a performer at breakfast or dinner: supper's rather my forte—an odour of a broiled bone at three in the morning, a herring smeared with chetna, and grilled with brandy, two hundred of small oysters, a few hot ones to close with, a glass of Seltzer dashed with Hollands, for health, and then, any number you like of glasses of hot brandy and water afterwards for pleasure."

While Bubbleton ran on this fashion he had broken about half a dozen eggs into the slop basin, and seasoning the mess with pepper and vinegar, was busily engaged in illustrating the moderation of his morning appetite.

"Try a thing like this, Tom," cried he, not defining how it was to be effected under the circumstances, while he added in a whisper, "your affair's all right?"

These few words brought courage to my heart; and I ventured to begin the breakfast that had lain untasted before me.

"I think, Mr. Burke," said Basset, as soon as he recovered the surprise Bubbleton's mode of breakfasting had excited—"I think and trust that all has been arranged to your satisfaction:" then turning to the clerks, who eat away without even lifting their heads, "Mr. Muggridge, you will be late at the master's office; Jones, take that parcel to Hennett; Kit, carry my bag up to the courts."

Miss Nelly did not wait for the part destined for her; but with a demure face rose from the table and left the room, giving me, however, one sly glance as she passed my chair, that I remembered for many a day after.

"You'll excuse me, gentlemen, if I am pressed for time this morning—a very particular case comes on in the Common Pleas."

"Never speak of it, my dear fellow," said Bubbleton, who had just addressed himself to a round of spiced beef—"business has its calls, just as pleasure has—aye, and appetite too.—That would make an excellent bit of supper, with some mulled port, after a few rubbers of shorts."

Basset paid little attention to this speech; but turning to me, continued—

"You mentioned your intention of leaving Ireland, I think: might I ask where you have decided on—from where—it is possible that your brother—"

"My brother's anxieties on my account, Mr. Basset, can scarcely be very poignant, and deserve no particular respect or attention at my hands. I suppose that this morning has concluded all necessary intercourse between us; and if you have satisfied my friend Captain Bubbleton—"

"Perfectly, perfectly—another cup of tea, if you please—yes, nothing could be more gratifying than

Mr. Basset's conduct—you are merely to sign the receipt for the legacy, and he hands you over one hundred pounds; isn't that it?"

"Yes, quite correct; my bill for one hundred at three months."

"That's what I mean; but surely you're not done breakfast—why, Tom, you've eaten nothing—I have been picking away this half hour, just to encourage you a bit—well, well, I lunch in Stephen's-green at three, so here goes."

Mr. Basset now took from his pocket-book some papers, which, having glanced his eye over, he handed to me.

"This is a kind of acknowledgment, Mr. Burke, for the receipt of a legacy to which you could be only entitled on attaining your majority; here are your indentures to me, and this is my acceptance for one hundred pounds."

"I am content," said I, eagerly, as I seized the pen. The thought of my liberty alone filled my mind, and I cared little for the conditions, provided I secured that.

Basset proffered his hand; I was in no humour to reject any thing that even simulated cordiality; I shook it heartily. Bubbleton followed my example, and, having pledged himself to see more of his pleasant acquaintance, thrust his arm through mine, and bustled out, adding in a tone loud enough to be overheard—"Made a capital fight of it—told him you were a defender, a united Irishman, a peep-o'-day boy, and all that sort of thing—devilish glad to get rid of you even on Miss Nelly's account," and so he rattled away without ceasing until we found ourselves, at the George-street barracks, my pre-occupation of mind preventing my even having remarked what way we came.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE CAPTAIN'S QUARTERS.

I was not sorry to find that Miss Bubbleton did not respond to the noisy summons of the captain as he flourished about from one room to the other, making the quarters echo to the sweet name of "Anna Maria." "Saladin," "Grimes," "Peter," were also shrouded out unsuccessfully; and with a fierce menace against various grooms of the chambers, waiting-men, and lackeys, who happily were still unborn, Bubbleton flung himself into a seat, and began to conjecture what had become of the inhabitants.

"She's paying a morning call—gone to see the duchess—that's it, or perhaps she's looking over that suit of pearls I bought yesterday at Galloh's—pretty baubles, but dear at eight hundred pounds—never mind, what's money for—eh, Tom?"

As he looked at me for a reply I drew my chair closer towards him, and assuming as much of importance as my manner could command, I besought his attention for a moment. Hitherto, partly from my own indecision, partly from his flighty and volatile bearing, I never had an opportunity either to explain my real position or my political sentiments, much less intentions for the future. The moment had at length arrived, and I resolved to profit by it; and, in as few words as I was able, gave a brief narrative of my life from the hour of my father's death to the day in which I fell into his own hands in Dublin, only omitting such portions as might, by the mention of names, compromise others concerned.

Nothing could possibly be more attentive than he was, during the entire detail—he leaned his head on his hand, and listened with eager curiosity to all my scrapes and difficulties, occasionally nodding in assent, and now evincing by his exhaled air his desire to learn further; and when I at last wound up by avowing my long-cherished desire to enter the French service, he sat perfectly silent and seemed to reflect gravely on the whole.

"I say Tom," said he at length, as he stared me full in the face, and laid his hand impressively on my knee, "there's good stuff in that—excellent stuff! depend upon it!"

"Good stuff! what do you mean?" said I, in amazement.

"I mean," replied he, "there's bone in it, sinev in it, substance in it—there are some admirable situations too. How Fulham would come out in Tony Basset—brown shorts, white stockings, high shoes and buckles—his own very costume; and there's that little thing Miss Booth, for Nelly, give her a couple of songs—ballad airs take best; Williams should be Barton—a devilish fine villain in coarse parts, Williams. I think I see him stealing along by the flats with his soldiers to the attack. Then the second act should open—interior of hut—peasants round a table—eating always successful on the stage—nothing like seeing a fat fellow bolting hard eggs, and blustering out unpronounceable jokes over a flagon of coloured water—you by right should have your own part—splendid thing—devilish fine, your sensations when the cabin was on fire, and the fellows were prodding about with their bayonets to discover you."

"And who's to perform Captain Bubbleton?"

asked I, venturing for once to humour his absurdity.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

PLEASE NOTE

**THE FOLLOWING PAGE
HAS BEEN
INCORRECTLY
NUMBERED**