

INDEX'S VICTORY

By John Blundelle Burton.

MY lord the earl of Severne sat in his great library in his fine new house in Golden square, and perhaps because he had the gout and his feet were swathed in bandages, he received more ferociously at the logs burning on the hearth than he would otherwise have done. Also, the lackey who mostly sat out in the passage all day long, except at the numerous times—about fifty in the day—when his lordship beat upon the silver gong by his side to call him in—was enduring tortures from my lord's temper and wishing that for once—only for once—he could summon up his courage to return his master's abuse and curses—with interest. But the poor wretch knew that this meant loss of place and of fine feeding below stairs, and good drinking, too—which would be doubled and trebled and quadrupled next week, to say nothing of valets and presents when Christmas came—and he reflected that all these, including love passages with the maids in not only this house but also others in the square, were better things than poverty and hunger—also at Christmas! Likewise, he recalled that his old bedridden mother had a musty proverb to the effect that "curses were like chickens and came home to roost," and another that "hard words break no bones," and still another that "fine words blunted no parasites," all of which pithy and indisputable saws, as well as many others, the old dame was in the habit of muttering in her bed day by day when the spirit moved her. Wherefore the fellow mumbled to himself, "Curse on an' your will," as he heard my lord roaring and grunting within, while, being a philosopher, though he did not know it, and, it may be, had never heard of such a thing as philosophy, he told himself that, if the words did not indeed better any parasites, neither did rough words do anybody any harm, and therefore lifted a bottle, which he kept under the chair, to his lips, and drank—well—salvation to his master within.

But, now, fresh roars came from out the library and the bell was struck upon, and "blessings" were belted out upon the variety's body and other portions of his frame, so that, slipping the bottle back into a convenient drawer beneath the seat of the chair, the man rose and entered the library with an attitude of extreme alertness.

"Fellow," the noble lord exclaimed, "what are you doing without? Sleeping or guzzling, or what? Don't dare answer, or I fags, I'll have ye whipped. Where is my Lady Millicent?"

"My lord, I do not know—"

"Not know! What in the name of the fend are you kept here for? Look out in the square and see if she is coming. Look, I say."

"My lord," the man said, fawningly, "in truth her ladyship is coming. Your lordship is a necromancer. The coach rounds the street corner, her ladyship is wrapped in her great fur cloak, and she descends."

But he did not tell his master that her ladyship had already descended from the coach nine houses off, at which spot she had been joined by a bravely appareled, handsome young man, who had kissed her hand, and, as the lackey thought, had looked much as though he would like to kiss her face. But—it was broad daylight—this he had not done.

"I do not hear the wheels," the irascible old peer said, after two or three minutes' pause.

"My lord will remember the ground is heavy with snow." "Bah! Has she come into the house?"

"She is coming, my lord," the servant replied, he having seen her ladyship tear her hand out of that of the handsome young man, walk swiftly towards her father's house, and, looking round once, wave that hand towards the admiring cavalier. This also he did not mention to his master.

could flourish outside the boards of fifth rate theaters, when wills could be destroyed with open scourgings and derisions by the powerful; when duels were fought in daylight in the park, and sometimes fought unfairly, too; when men were murdered by kinsmen for their wealth, and others kidnaped and sold to the plantations by relatives hungering for their inheritance, and women abducted and deceived into mock marriages; stealthy midnight murders done and either never known of or the murderers never discovered.

Now, in these days of good Queen Anne of which I tell, some of these things were still a-going. Lady Millicent Thame loved a man who, in solemn truth, was not, perhaps, her proper match, and said openly that she did so; and there were villains, thieves, highwaymen, housebreakers all about, and villains in high life, too; men were being hanged daily at Tyburn and Execution dock, and Kennington common, and other delectable spots for stealing shillings, and horses, and dogs; and the earl of Severne had recently had his house broken into, and his strong box robbed to the value of 30,000 guineas.

Yet the wonder was now it had been done. The box of iron, having in it a lock which required for its works the whole of the lid of the box—it had been made a hundred years before by Ventimil of Florence—stood in the cabinet, or dressing room, opening out of the bedroom of the noble earl. The door leading from the bedroom of his lordship to the cabinet stood open all night; the key to the lock reposed beneath the pillow of his august owner. Yet still, a week ago, the lackey, coming in one morning to pull the hangings of the bedroom windows, saw that the lid of the strong box was open, and that the box had been rifled of all its contents.

Let us pass over the earl's roars and terrible ejaculations—the gout was on him then—the awful hubbub in the house—the flying hither and thither and yon of the scared domestics who, hearing their master, thought a thunderbolt had struck the roof. Passions aused (but sorrowfully, since, indeed, it was rather a sight to dwell upon), a delicious vision of Lady Millicent, with golden hair all tumbled and disheveled by sleep, rushing into the room at the noise—it would have waked the dead! clad in some heavy, flowing gown, or robe de chambre of clinging material, which as she ran showed fair white arms in the loose sleeves, and little feet hastily thrust into gold thread, pearl embroidered mules.

"Ten thousand pounds in guineas," the earl was yelling as she entered. "Ten thousand in African Elephant guineas, bills on Sir Josiah Child and Matthew Decker, and many drafts! O, my heart and liver! All gone, and most of them as ready money in hand, with, too, your sainted mother's pearls! Ah! O! Stop my vitals! O! no one in the house ever, except ourselves and the domestics!"

"Excepting only Luke Rivers, who called so often to make inquiries after your pains—"

"Luke Rivers! A youth of parts, a godly man, a church-goer—"

"Bah! One who says he is, yet at church time is walking in the Mall with many a saucy queen. Church indeed!" while pretty Lady Millicent muttered to herself: "A fawning, caressing knave who pretends to be at church because his godly uncle hath much money to leave on."

"A righteous youth," the earl went on, "and therefore—"

"Whom you admire, and would have me wed. Yet never will I!"

"Minion!" the earl raved, "would you accuse him of robbing me? Him! And he never alone in the house by day or night, and sick, too, in his rooms, at the time! 'Twas more like your beggarly lover with his gambling, dissolute habits, and need of money than Luke."

To which Lady Millicent said nothing, but, tossing her pretty head mightily high, walked out of the room.

Now, whenever her ladyship walked out of the room—or, at least, when mostly she did so—she as often as not walked out of the house, too; the earl knowing nothing of her movements since no servant of his would tell him of what the girl did, they all loving her and being afraid of him. And when she walked out she went ever one way, which was down towards St. James' square and in to it, and towards the tamarisk tree which had been planted by Mrs. Davis, who was, in truth, that Moll Davis of whom no more was known than that King James, when duke of York, loved her and gave her a house in the square. And, beneath that tamarisk tree would ever be found awaiting Lady Millicent—perhaps by rendezvous, since lovers have ever done such things and ever will, it is to be supposed—that handsome young man in the scarlet coat whom we have heard spoken of as Bertie Warrgrave. And soft words would be whispered and hands clasped, and—if there was a fog or the night was high, or the watchman was asleep or drunk—their lips would meet, and murmurs pass between those lips. And so you who read do now know enough to understand, or at least as much as a poor scribe knows how to relate from what books and telltale lovers have revealed to him.

"My precious soul, my sweet, my love, my life!" Bertie said the day after the robbery, as he slipped his hand beneath my lady's long furred cloak, and put it in under her arm and held her hand after those things written above had had their happenings. "What is it?" And then he listened to his lady love's story.

"But, sweetheart," he said at last, "'tis passing strange. Luke Rivers is in bed at 'his time! He is in bed! he is, the only man who, prior to the robbery, had been admitted to your father's house!"

"Is't not so?" Lady Millicent asked, pausing in her walk.

"Ah, Bertie, fond love, what know you to the contrary? Tell me, tell me, what! while, hidden as much by the look in her eyes and the bloom on her cheeks, as by her words, Bertie went on:

"Last night," he said, "I sat in Luke Rivers' lodgings down by the river. And—and—he told me he must go forth that instant, only—he knew not how to compass it. He owed much money to his landlord who waited beneath to pounce on him if he attempted to do so, and waited with a Bow street man to serve a warrant on him. Yet still he said he would go on he could. He had a dicing debt to pay that night! O! if he could but go. Then, suddenly, he besought me a favor, if I would lend him my coat and cloak and hat and would call out 'good night' as he went down the stairs, the watchers below would think it was the visitor going forth and not he, and so he could go and would soon return and release me. Also, he said, if I would walk about the room now and again, then would the obdurate ones below think he was still in it, and so he could creep back in safety to his hole and I could go."

"And thou didst it! Risked thyself for that casting, hypocritical sewer rat!"

"I did it, heart of my heart. In truth I did. And he went forth clad in my clothes, which well became the roysterer, do you think he'd do well your revered father calls me, but not the sober, pious churchgoer, Luke Rivers. And a sweet fool he looked in them. Yet still he went. And, my lady fair, 'twas vastly cold when I was left alone with nought but a guttering rushlight to cheer me. Now," said Bertie to Lady Millicent, "listen to me, and—"

"Do I not ever listen to you, no matter what you speak upon? Am I not your slave—your loving slave, but still the same? Is there a thing you do or say that makes not summer in my heart—?"

"Sweetest," said Bertie, stopping the words from issuing out of her pomegranate lips by a process that, he who writes this narrative has been told, is effective on occasions, "listen to me. Walking about the gloomy den, holding the rushlight on high so that I might see, I did perceive upon his mantelpiece a key."

"A key! The dastard, treacherous knave! Go on—why do you stop and break off?"

"'Tis you who stopped me. Still, it matters not, Milly, that key was a strange one, cunningly wrought and devised. And—and—and—the key never leaves his room. That, too, he never on the high mantelshelf."

"Does he, thy father, never leave his room? Has he never done so, leaving Luke Rivers there alone one single moment; long enough to make a wax impression?"

"But, sweetheart, if he had gone to our house to rob the strong box, then would he not have left the key in his room?"

"It was a broken key. Doubtless one that had fallen and so was flung aside. Another, a second, or a third, sufficed better, and that he took. See'st thou?"

"O, Bertie, Bertie," Lady Millicent exclaimed, her blood on fire, "bring it home to him; let us bring it home to him. Get you father's goods back to him—he loves his possessions—and it will soon be Christmas; we will spend it together. A masterful, exacting man is my father; but I have a touch of his condition. I, too, am masterful. Had my lord not wanted to find his master she should never have bred me. Give him his money back and he shall give you your wife. Trust me. Now come. See, my precious love, the wintry night draws in—it is high dark—and, O, the watchman sleeps again. Dost thou see that, Bertie?"

"I see, and, seeing, understand. Thus and thus."

Christmas eve in London. A fine, clear night, with, nevertheless, fleas and flakes of snow blowing through the air as though driven forward by the cold north wind as avant couriers of what was on the way from that stormy north. Yet still fine and clear, with a half rusty moon hanging low in the heavens and lighting up the faces of the passers by; lighting up the faces of the mummies and the maskers dancing round his grace of Northumberland's house at Charing Cross, and singing of carols and scrambling for the silver shiver pieces thrown out to them by the duke's sumptuously clad menials. Lighting up, too, the faces of men and women passing along, many of whom had already anticipated the drinkings and feasting of the morrow, and the faces of debauched gentlemen—who leered into every young woman's face, and, as often as not, got the leer returned with interest.

Through this crowd went two young men, one tall, dark, handsome, covered up in a heavy roqueleur, and with his hooded hat pulled well down over his brows; one, who was leading, helping, guiding another, who surely was his younger brother. A stripling lad this, with eyes blue as the periwinkle and cheeks pink as the Bourbon rose, with fair curls tucked well up under his slouch felt hat; a youth at whom every woman's eye was directed with an approving glance. Leading, guiding this youth, whose sword got vastly in his way, the other went on, until at last, turning down a street leading to the river's edge, both paused beneath the stoop of one of the ancient houses.

"Put on thy vizard mask now, sweet one," the elder said. "He must be upstairs since the landlord would never let him come down. The door stands open, the stairs invite. Tread softly, or shall I carry thee up them?"

"Nay, let me walk, Bertie. Put down your feet heavily. I will plant mine lightly."

"You are not afraid?"

"Afraid! with you by my side! Nay, never. Not of the fend himself."

Up the stairs, therefore, the two went, while, since the landlord seemed to be carousing within with some friend—

perhaps the Bow street runner—he heard them not. Nor would it have mattered much had he done so, since he had some days before been paid his bill by Luke Rivers, who was now as free as air. "But this neither my lady nor her lover know as yet. They knew it soon, however, when, tapping gently on the door of Rivers' room, they learnt by the silence that was the only answer—for silence can answer as well as words sometimes—that the man they sought was not within."

"You understand?" Bertie Warrgrave whispered in her ladyship's ear. "He is out. Therefore he has paid his bill. 'Tis well. We know where he got the money from. Now to open the door. Thinking it most like he would do this, I have brought these."

Whereupon Bertie produced from his pocket a bunch of picklocks, and in five minutes they were in the rooms. High and low they hunted for half an hour by the aid of the rushlight they kindled after some trouble, and then, at last, they found that for which they sought, though found it only when they had begun to despair. Thrusting his hand up the large open mouthed grate, in which no fire had been kindled for many a long day, they found all. The bags of guineas—one being open, doubtless for the thief's needs—the drafts, the bonds, all.

"We have gotten them," Bertie said. "We are man and wife."

"Not yet," a voice exclaimed, while at the same moment the rushlight was knocked to the floor, my Lady Millicent was thrust aside, and a pair of sinewy hands seized Bertie by the throat, and, flinging him down on the bed, began to throttle the life out of him. "Not yet! You will have one bride tonight, and that is death! Afterwards this stripling, who is a woman, doubtless, can join you." And again Luke Rivers, who had returned from Rummer's coffee house for more money with which to gamble, pressed harder and harder on Bertie Warrgrave's throat. "And then," he added, "the river can have you both."

Yet, think not that the bold heart of Lord Severne's daughter had stood still. 'Twas not of such petty little this masterful brood was made. The candle was knocked out 'tis true, but the moon, whose rays streamed through the window into the room, illuminating it brightly, could not be served thus. And, through her rays, there flashed now something on which they sparkled and gleamed, something that, bright one instant, was gone the next. The small, lithe rapier the girl had carried at her side with much discomfort to herself, caused still greater discomfort to Luke Rivers as it hurtled against his ribs and, gliding in between two of them, caused him to utter one piercing yell, to quickly, in his agony, unchase his hands, and then fall senseless on the bed by the side of his expected victim, while the fast young slip of noblesse hissed, "Dog! Beasts! 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