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Burke, The Color-Bearer.

Burke was about forty years of age when the Civil War began. He had a wife and four sons, aged from fifteen years down to a tot of three. He lived in a small, rickety little cottage on the outskirts of a town of three thousand inhabitants, and contributed a little to the support of his family by catching cat-fish in the river and peddling them about town. For the most part he spent what he could get for whiskey. He was drunk most of the time and in early 1861 had acquired the sobriquette of "The Town Drunk". He was tall, dark, strong; a splendid specimen of physical manhood. His dissipated habits had robbed him of all care for his personal appearance, if he ever had any. He had lived there some years; where he came from or what ~~was~~<sup>were</sup> his antecedences no one knew or seemed to care. He had fallen so low that he stalked, when sober, or staggered when drunk, along the street, haggared and unkept, his long hair and whiskers uncombed. He had no companions; he wanted none; he sought no one; his voice was low, his eye dark and steady; his manner quiet and self-contained.

A company of infantry had been formed to go to the war in which most of the best young men of the town and surrounding country had enlisted. Many of the privates were highly connected, well educated and cultured. The captain was a young lawyer of great promise and standing. It was a "crack" organization.

One morning, the day before this company was to leave for Virginia, Burke appeared, perfectly sober, at the tent of the young captain and announced that he had come to enlist. This proposition staggered the captain, because the most unexpected of things. He had known Burke since he was a boy and was



thoroughly posted on his habits and mode of life. He laughed at the proposition, and, tossing a small coin on the table towards Burke, said, "Burke, that is a good joke; take this and go get drunk again". Burke ignored the money, drew himself up, looked fixedly into the eyes of the captain for a minute and then in a low voice said, "Captain, you are justified by what I have done in saying that; but I love my country just as much as you do; I am needed at the front; you will not deny me the chance to go. Put my name down and let me go". By this time all the laughter was gone from the face of the young officer; but he knew the spirit of his men; he knew they would not be likely to take kindly to having Burke one of them. He did not want to hurt the feelings of the man at this first offer to do a manly thing. He told Burke as gently as he could the difficulty about taking him along. Burke still held him with his steady gaze and after a slight pause said quietly, "Ask them".

It was near the drill hour. The captain told Burke to go with him and in a few minutes they stood before the line; the captain looked at Burke; the latter said, "Ask them now". The captain raised his hand; then said to the line, "Boys, this man", pointing to Burke, "wants to go with us; you know him; I pass it up to you to decide; what do you say?". For a full minute there was silence in the ranks, then some began to laugh, some to cry out "No", some "Yes"; but the yesses were very few. The captain called out "Hear him, boys, and then decide". Burke drew his tall form to its utmost and stood towering over all of them, his calm eye gazing squarely into theirs. Then in a low voice he began, "Boys, you know how I have lived and I don't blame you if you



decide against me; I understand all this; no one better; that is a matter we will not discuss; I want to fight for my country as you do; it is my right; I have no means to get to Virginia and must be taken as a soldier if I get there. We are all needed there. Let me go with you." Those few words were all. Burke bowed and walked away towards the captain's tent. For a minute all was as still as if no one was within miles; then arose a murmur in the line, that grew and grew, then burst into a shout, "Let him go with us". When the drill was over Burke signed the roll and took the oath; and before the sun set he appeared cleaned up and with a new uniform on, as fine a looking soldier as ever bore a gun, and when the company left for the front, Burke carried the colors.

During the long months that followed, mid shot and shell, heat and cold, that little band went where ordered, many falling by sickness, more by the bullet, marching, fighting, struggling on as only men of iron can. With them ever was Burke. His tall form ever held aloft the colors, his face calm, sad-browed, the stalwart stern-eyed soldier; where he was told to carry the red cross of St. Stephen he carried it. Years passed and still Burke was there. Death had claimed most of those who stood in the line that spring morning in the old town, when they decided to let him go with them. The often-broken and thinned lines had from time to time been filled, to be again submitted to the process that was thinning it, still there was Burke. No man was more punctual in the performance of duty; none braver. Not a drop of intoxicants had passed his lips since he enlisted.

It was in the spring of 1864. That young captain now wore the stars of a General and the empty sleeve of a hero. Scarcely



a score of the original 128 that left home in the company were there. Some were at home on crutches, some in hospitals, many sleeping beneath the red soil of the Old Dominion. Burke still carried the colors, still stern-eyed and sad-faced, but the gray had crept into hair and whiskers. Suddenly in the front the big guns opened and thundered, and steadily the thin line swept down the slope towards them. Burke, with his battle-flag, torn, rusty and frayed and bullet-riddled, was with them and went down with the line into that vortex of war, and the smoke swept over them. Riding close behind the line was the young General; suddenly he saw a flag waver and go down. Riding closer he saw both bearer and flag down in the dust. Springing from his horse he bent over the prostrate form; it was Burke. The wounded soldier raised himself slightly on one elbow, looked up at his commander, smiled and said, "General, this is the end, they have got me", sank down, and passed from war to eternal peace. With a smile the sad-faced stern-eyed hero met eternity, as he had lived, calm and self-confident.

Seven hundred miles further South, back in the old town, six days later, that brave old color-bearer was laid to rest in the church-yard. His comrades as a special mark of respect had sent his body home for burial among his people. Old men---for there were none else then, as all able-bodied were at the front--the women and children, all of them, a vast throng, were there. His casket on a caison, followed by low-throbbing drums and all those people slowly made their way to the church-yard, and there with uncovered heads they stood while the last sad rites were performed. Their presence paid an eloquent tribute to the man

who had made good in the end, made good where men's souls were tried as with fire. Manhood had triumphed.

Now, where he rests stands a tall white shaft whose stony lips tell the story how those people honored the man, who, in a supreme hour, rose from his fall and again became a man. And to the stranger wandering there that shaft is still pointed out and his story told. Though ~~now~~ fifty years have come and gone, interest in the man and his sad life-story has not died out; it has not grown less; rather has it grown into the traditions of that people. While it lasts it will be a heritage, like sheaves of wheat rich in the harvest, for posterity, and when it is forgotten, if ever, then God help the old South-land.

James W. Oates.

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