THE MIDGE

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BY

H. C. BUNNER,

AUTHOR OF "AIRS FROM ARCADY AND ELSEWHERE."

NEW YORK
CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS
1887

TO

A. L. B.

THE MIDGE.

CHAPTER I.

IT was quiet in the Brasserie Pigault. It was a snowy night, for one thing, the air full of a damp, heavy fall of broad white flakes. And then there had been a bad fire down in Grand Street, and the frivolous and pleasure-seeking portion of the quarter's population had gone down to see the wounded people taken out of the ruins.

So business was dull at the Brasserie Pigault. Undeservedly dull, for the only stains on the dim walls were the stains of time: the table-tops shone like century-polished mahogany, the lusty, friendly fire glowed through the red eyes of the great stove, the sand on the floor was crystal-bright, and bright were Madame Pigault's black eyes, as she sat knitting behind the desk, and looked toward the window, where a fantail of

gas-jets lit up alluringly the legend which, when you once got inside, read:

It was only a beer-saloon, of course; but there was a comfort and cleanliness about it that were almost homelike. And, just for this dull hour, the room was filled with the charm of that sacred yet sociable quiet which the male animal of our species loves to establish in whatever serves him for club-room.

There were little noises, but they were of a gentle sort. From time to time there was the joggle of falling coal in the big stove; and then Louis, the waiter, set it right with a subdued rattling. Sometimes a gas-jet flared and wheezed and whistled until madame's knitting-needles clicked on the counter, and Louis flew across the room just as the vicious spurt of flame made up its mind to subside. More often than this, a glass clinked against the shining brass faucet of the

keg, and there was a "whish!" of beer, quickly drowned in its own bubbling overflow. And almost regularly every ten minutes, the crash of shuffling dominos came from where Mr. Martin and M. Ovide Marié, the curly-haired music-teacher from Amity Street, were playing.

Just across the room from Mr. Martin and M. Marié, at the table under the corresponding gas-light, sat the Doctor. His overcoat, with its military-looking cape, was thrown back over his shoulders, his elbows were planted on the table, and his head was propped up between the closed fists. A good American face it was, too, that looked at you over those lean, sinewy, nervous American knuckles. A hatchet-face, if you will, but a pleasant face for all that—strong and fine, with the lines of good stock in it, with force in the clear gray eye and humor in the curl of the mouth. A gentle face—babies pawed the air to get at it as soon as they saw it—and yet, looking at it, you could quite understand that this was the same Captain Peters who, in 1863, carried despatches straight through Quantrell's lines to that interesting arm of the U. S. forces which at that time was fighting fire with fire, up and down Missouri.

Nobody ever called him Captain nowadays, though. Between Broadway and the North River, from Washington Square nearly to Canal Street, old residents hailed him as "Doctor," and with

the sensitive modesty of the genuine soldier, he accepted the civilian title, and said nothing about his captaincy or his record. Besides, it was Fate, he thought, that he should be a doctor after some fashion. All the Evert Peterses for five generations back (and there the count stopped) had been doctors. This last Evert Peters had had no liking for a physician's life; but no choice had been given him. When he was old enough to go to medical college, to medical college he went, and there he stayed until six weeks before final examination, when his father died. Then he gave his books and kit to his chum, went back to Oneida, buried his father, took himself to Troy, and set to work studying civil engineering. Then the war broke out, and he found what little he knew of medicine and civil-engineering coming handy in ways he never dreamed of. When he came home from the war, he sought out the quiet region where what is now the French quarter of New York merges into Greenwich Village, and there settled himself for a week or two, to look about him. And then Ovide Bocage, working in the planing-mill in Prince street, got his hand into the machinery, and would have lost three fingers if it had not been for the timely surgery of the young man just home from the war. And so the young man was gratefully called "the Doctor." The "week or two" had become fourteen years,

the pale brown hair of the "young man" had grown paler yet with streaks of gray, the great city had grown up and left their quarter far down town, but still the people thereabout called Evert Peters "the Doctor," and he occupied a well-established yet ill-defined place in the community, something between the physician and the priest, a sort of amateur ally and adjunct of two professions, accepted by both and recognized by neither; but very dearly loved by all with whom he had to do.

He knew what was wanted, sitting cozily that night in the Brasserie Pigault, when he heard Piero open the door, put his head in, and shout:

"Ohé, m'sieu' le docteur!"

Piero had the singsong of the sea in his cheery hail. He was a Franco-Italian, and the first voyage he ever made was his voyage to this country, in 1867, on the bark *Mariana III.* As the rest of the *Mariana's* burden consisted of Cette wines and Portuguese sailors, it must have been Piero's personal virtue that saved her from going down in an unregrettable shipwreck. Since his arrival, Piero had never left the French quarter; but, with the aid of a pair of rings in his ears and a roll in his walk, he contrived to give a maritime flavor to his life; and when he entered a room, as far as he possibly could he made you feel that he was just opening the door