

# The Confessions of Tom Bourke

By Thomas Crofton Croker

Tom Bourke lives in a low, long farmhouse, resembling in outward appearance a large barn, placed at the bottom of the hill, just where the new road strikes off from the old one, leading from the town of Kilworth to that of Lismore. He is of a class of persons who are a sort of black swans in Ireland: he is a wealthy farmer. Tom's father had, in the good old times, when a hundred pounds were no inconsiderable treasure, either to lend or spend, accommodated his landlord with that sum, at interest; and obtained as a return for his civility a long lease, about half-a-dozen times more valuable than the loan which procured it. The old man died worth several hundred pounds, the greater part of which, with his farm, he bequeathed to his son Tom. But besides all this, Tom received from his father, upon his death-bed, another gift, far more valuable than worldly riches, greatly as he prized and is still known to prize them. He was invested with the privilege, enjoyed by few of the sons of men, of communicating with those mysterious beings called 'the good people.'

Tom Bourke is a little, stout, healthy, active man, about fifty-five years of age. His hair is perfectly white, short and bushy behind, but rising in front erect and thick above his forehead, like a new clothes-brush. His eyes are of that kind which I have often observed with persons of a quick but limited intellect—they are small, gray, and lively. The large and projecting eyebrows under, or rather within, which they twinkle, give them an expression of shrewdness and intelligence, if not of cunning. And this is very much the character of the man. If you want to make a bargain with Tom Bourke you must act as if you were a general besieging a town, and make your advances a long time before you can hope to obtain possession. If you march up boldly, and tell him at once your object, you are for the most part sure to have the gates closed in your teeth. Tom does not wish to part with what you wish to obtain; or another person has been speaking to him for the whole of the last week. Or, it may be, your proposal seems to meet the most favourable reception. 'Very well, sir'; 'That's true, sir'; 'I'm very thankful to your honour,' and other expressions of kindness and confidence greet you in reply to every sentence; and you part from him wondering how he can have obtained the character which he universally bears, of being a man whom no one can make anything of in a bargain. But when you next meet him the illusion is dissolved; you find you are a great deal further from your object than you were when you thought you had almost succeeded; his eye and his tongue express a total forgetfulness of what the mind within never lost sight of for an instant; and you have to begin operations afresh, with the disadvantage of having put your adversary completely upon his guard.

Yet, although Tom Bourke is, whether from supernatural revealings, or (as many will think more probable) from the tell-truth experience, so distrustful of mankind, and so close in his dealings with them, he is no misanthrope. No man loves better the pleasures of the genial board. The love of money, indeed, which is with him (and who will blame him?) a very ruling propensity, and the gratification which it has received from habits of industry, sustained throughout a pretty long and successful life have taught him the value of sobriety, during those seasons, at least, when a man's business requires him to keep possession of his senses. He has, therefore, a general rule, never to get drunk but on Sundays. But in order that it should be a general one to all intents and purposes, he takes a method which, according to better logicians than he is, always proves the rule. He has many exceptions; among these, of course, are the

evenings of all the fair and market-days that happen in his neighbourhood; so also all the days in which funerals, marriages, and christenings take place among his friends within many miles of him. As to this last class of exceptions, it may appear at first very singular, that he is much more punctual in his attendance at the funerals than at the baptisms or weddings of his friends. This may be construed as an instance of disinterested affection for departed worth, very uncommon in this selfish world. But I am afraid that the motives which lead Tom Bourke to pay more court to the dead than the living are precisely those which lead to the opposite conduct in the generality of mankind—a hope of future benefit and a fear of future evil. For the good people, who are a race as powerful as they are capricious, have their favourites among those who inhabit this world; often show their affection by easing the objects of it from the load of this burdensome life; and frequently reward or punish the living according to the degree of reverence paid to the obsequies and the memory of the elected dead.

Some may attribute to the same cause the apparently humane and charitable actions which Tom, and indeed the other members of his family, are known frequently to perform. A beggar has seldom left their farmyard with an empty wallet, or without obtaining a night's lodging, if required, with a sufficiency of potatoes and milk to satisfy even an Irish beggar's appetite; in appeasing which, account must usually be taken of the auxiliary jaws of a hungry dog, and of two or three still more hungry children, who line themselves well within, to atone for their nakedness without. If one of the neighbouring poor be seized with a fever, Tom will often supply the sick wretch with some untenanted hut upon one of his two large farms (for he has added one to his patrimony), or will send his labourers to construct a shed at a hedge-side, and supply straw for a bed while the disorder continues. His wife, remarkable for the largeness of her dairy, and the goodness of everything it contains, will furnish milk for whey; and their good offices are frequently extended to the family of the patient, who are, perhaps, reduced to the extremity of wretchedness, by even the temporary suspension of a father's or a husband's labour.

If much of this arises from the hopes and fears to which I above alluded, I believe much of it flows from a mingled sense of compassion and of duty, which is sometimes seen to break from an Irish peasant's heart, even where it happens to be enveloped in a habitual covering of avarice and fraud; and which I once heard speak in terms not to be misunderstood: "When we get a deal, 'tis only fair we should give back a little of it."

It is not easy to prevail on Tom to speak on those good people, with whom he is said to hold frequent and intimate communications. To the faithful, who believe in their power, and their occasional delegation of it to him, he seldom refuses, if properly asked, to exercise his high prerogative when any unfortunate being is struck in his neighbourhood. Still he will not be won unsued: he is at first difficult of persuasion, and must be overcome by a little gentle violence. On these occasions he is unusually solemn and mysterious, and if one word of reward be mentioned he at once abandons the unhappy patient, such a proposition being a direct insult to his supernatural superiors. It is true that, as the labourer is worthy of his hire, most persons gifted as he is do not scruple to receive a token of gratitude from the patients or their friends after their recovery. It is recorded that a very handsome gratuity was once given to a female practitioner in this occult science, who deserves to be mentioned, not only because she was a neighbour and a rival of Tom's, but from the singularity of a mother deriving her name from her son. Her son's name was Owen, and she was always called Owen sa vauher (Owen's mother). This person was, on the occasion to which I have alluded, persuaded to give her assistance to a young girl who had lost the use of her right leg; Owen sa vauher found the cure a difficult one. A journey of about eighteen miles was essential for the purpose, probably to visit one of the good people who

resided at that distance; and this journey could only be performed by Owen sa vauher travelling upon the back of a white hen. The visit, however, was accomplished; and at a particular hour, according to the prediction of this extraordinary woman, when the hen and her rider were to reach their journey's end, the patient was seized with an irresistible desire to dance, which she gratified with the most perfect freedom of the diseased leg, much to the joy of her anxious family. The gratuity in this case was, as it surely ought to have been, unusually large, from the difficulty of procuring a hen willing to go so long a journey with such a rider.

To do Tom Bourke justice, he is on these occasions, as I have heard from many competent authorities, perfectly disinterested. Not many months since he recovered a young woman (the sister of a tradesman living near him), who had been struck speechless after returning from a funeral, and had continued so for several days. He steadfastly refused receiving any compensation, saying that even if he had not as much as would buy him his supper, he could take nothing in this case, because the girl had offended at the funeral of one of the good people belonging to his own family, and though he would do her a kindness, he could take none from her.

About the time this last remarkable affair took place, my friend Mr Martin, who is a neighbour of Tom's, had some business to transact with him, which it was exceedingly difficult to bring to a conclusion. At last Mr Martin, having tried all quiet means, had recourse to a legal process, which brought Tom to reason, and the matter was arranged to their mutual satisfaction, and with perfect good-humour between the parties. The accommodation took place after dinner at Mr Martin's house, and he invited Tom to walk into the parlour and take a glass of punch, made of some excellent potteen, which was on the table; he had long wished to draw out his highly endowed neighbour on the subject of his supernatural powers, and as Mrs Martin, who was in the room, was rather a favourite of Tom's, this seemed a good opportunity.

'Well, Tom,' said Mr Martin, 'that was a curious business of Molly Dwyer's, who recovered her speech so suddenly the other day.'

'You may say that, sir,' replied Tom Bourke; 'but I had to travel far for it: no matter for that now. Your health, ma'am,' said he, turning to Mrs Martin.

'Thank you, Tom. But I am told you had some trouble once in that way in your own family,' said Mrs Martin.

'So I had, ma'am; trouble enough: but you were only a child at that time.'

'Come, Tom,' said the hospitable Mr Martin, interrupting him, 'take another tumbler'; and he then added: 'I wish you would tell us something of the manner in which so many of your children died. I am told they dropped off, one after another, by the same disorder, and that your eldest son was cured in a most extraordinary way, when the physicians had given him over.'

'Tis true for you, sir,' returned Tom; 'your father, the doctor (God be good to him, I won't belie him in his grave), told me, when my fourth boy was a week sick, that himself and Dr Barry did all that man could do for him; but they could not keep him from going after the rest. No more they could, if the people that took away the rest wished to take him too. But they left him; and sorry to the heart I am I did not know before why they were taking my boys from me; if I did, I would not be left trusting to two of 'em now.'

'And how did you find it out, Tom?' inquired Mr Martin.

'Why, then, I'll tell you, sir,' said Bourke. 'When your father said what I told you, I did not know very well what to do. I walked down the little *bohween* you know, sir, that goes to the riverside near Dick Heafy's ground; for 'twas a lonesome place, and I wanted to think of myself. I was heavy, sir, and my heart got weak in me, when I thought I was to lose my little boy; and I

did not well know how to face his mother with the news, for she doted down upon him. Besides, she never got the better of all she cried at his brother's *berrin*<sup>1</sup> the week before. As I was going down the *bohereen* I met an old *bocough*, that used to come about the place once or twice a year, and used always to sleep in our barn while he stayed in the neighbourhood. So he asked me how I was. "Bad enough, Shamous," says I. "I'm sorry for your trouble," says he; "but you're a foolish man, Mr Bourke. Your son would be well enough if you would only do what you ought with him." "What more can I do with him, Shamous?" says I; "the doctors give him over." "The doctors know no more what ails him than they do what ails a cow when she stops her milk," says Shamous; "but go to such a one," telling me his name, "and try what he'll say to you."

'And who was that, Tom?' asked Mr Martin.

'I could not tell you that, sir,' said Bourke, with a mysterious look; 'however, you often saw him, and he does not live far from this. But I had a trial of him before; and if I went to him at first, may be I'd have now some of them that's gone, and so Shamous often told me. Well, sir, I went to this man, and he came with me to the house. By course, I did everything as he bid me. According to his order, I took the little boy out of the dwelling-house immediately, sick as he was, and made a bed for him and myself in the cow-house. Well, sir, I lay down by his side in the bed, between two of the cows, and he fell asleep. He got into a perspiration, saving your presence, as if he was drawn through the river, and breathed hard, with a great impression on his chest, and was very bad—very bad entirely through the night. I thought about twelve o'clock he was going at last, and I was just getting up to go call the man I told you of; but there was no occasion. My friends were getting the better of them that wanted to take him away from me. There was nobody in the cow-house but the child and myself. There was only one halfpenny candle lighting it, and that was stuck in the wall at the far end of the house. I had just enough of light where we were lying to see a person walking or standing near us: and there was no more noise than if it was a churchyard, except the cows chewing the fodder in the stalls.

'Just as I was thinking of getting up, as I told you—I won't belie my father, sir, he was a good father to me—I saw him standing at the bedside, holding out his right hand to me, and leaning his other on the stick he used to carry when he was alive, and looking pleasant and smiling at me, all as if he was telling me not to be afeard, for I would not lose the child. "Is that you, father?" says I. He said nothing. "If that's you," says I again, "for the love of them that's gone, let me catch your hand." And so he did, sir; and his hand was as soft as a child's. He stayed about as long as you'd be going from this to the gate below at the end of the avenue, and then went away. In less than a week the child was as well as if nothing ever ailed him; and there isn't to-night a healthier boy of nineteen, from this blessed house to the town of Ballyporeen, across the Kilworth mountains.'

'But I think, Tom,' said Mr Martin, 'it appears as if you are more indebted to your father than to the man recommended to you by Shamous; or do you suppose it was he who made favour with your enemies among the good people, and that then your father —'I beg your pardon, sir,' said Bourke, interrupting him; 'but don't call them my enemies. 'T would not be wishing to me for a good deal to sit by when they are called so. No offence to you, sir. Here's wishing you a good health and long life.'

'I assure you,' returned Mr Martin, 'I meant no offence, Tom; but was it not as I say?'

'I can't tell you that, sir,' said Bourke; 'I'm bound down, sir. Howsoever, you may be sure the man I spoke of and my father, and those they know, settled it between them.'

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<sup>1</sup> Burying.

There was a pause, of which Mrs Martin took advantage to inquire of Tom whether something remarkable had not happened about a goat and a pair of pigeons, at the time of his son's illness—circumstances often mysteriously hinted at by Tom.

'See that, now,' said he, turning to Mr Martin, 'how well she remembers it! True for you, ma'am. The goat I gave the mistress, your mother, when the doctors ordered her goats' whey?'

Mrs Martin nodded assent, and Tom Bourke continued, 'Why, then, I'll tell you how that was. The goat was as well as e'er goat ever was, for a month after she was sent to Killaan to your father's. The morning after the night I just told you of, before the child woke, his mother was standing at the gap leading out of the barnyard into the road, and she saw two pigeons flying from the town of Kilworth off the church down towards her. Well, they never stopped, you see, till they came to the house on the hill at the other side of the river, facing our farm. They pitched upon the chimney of that house, and after looking about them for a minute or two, they flew straight across the river, and stopped on the ridge of the cow-house where the child and I were lying. Do you think they came there for nothing, sir?'

'Certainly not, Tom,' returned Mr Martin.

'Well, the woman came in to me, frightened, and told me. She began to cry. "Whist, you fool?" says I; "'tis all for the better." 'Twas true for me. What do you think, ma'am; the goat that I gave your mother, that was seen feeding at sunrise that morning by Jack Cronin, as merry as a bee, dropped down dead without anybody knowing why, before Jack's face; and at that very moment he saw two pigeons fly from the top of the house out of the town, towards the Lismore road. 'Twas at the same time my woman saw them, as I just told you.'

''Twas very strange, indeed, Tom,' said Mr Martin; 'I wish you could give us some explanation of it.'

'I wish I could, sir,' was Tom Bourke's answer; 'but I'm bound down. I can tell but what I'm allowed to tell, any more than a sentry is let walk more than his rounds.'

'I think you said something of having had some former knowledge of the man that assisted in the cure of your son,' said Mr Martin.

'So I had, sir,' returned Bourke. 'I had a trial of that man. But that's neither here nor there. I can't tell you anything about that, sir. But would you like to know how he got his skill?'

'Oh! very much indeed,' said Mr Martin.

'But you can tell us his Christian name, that we may know him better through the story,' added Mrs Martin.

Tom Bourke paused for a minute to consider this proposition.

'Well, I believe that I may tell you that, anyhow; his name is Patrick. He was always a smart, 'cute<sup>2</sup> boy, and would be a great clerk if he stuck to it. The first time I knew him, sir, was at my mother's wake. I was in great trouble, for I did not know where to bury her. Her people and my father's people—I mean their friends, sir, among the good people, had the greatest battle that was known for many a year, at Dunmanwaycross, to see to whose churchyard she'd be taken. They fought for three nights, one after another, without being able to settle it. The neighbours wondered how long I was before I buried my mother; but I had my reasons, though I could not tell them at that time. Well, sir, to make my story short, Patrick came on the fourth morning and told me he settled the business, and that day we buried her in Kilcrumper churchyard, with my father's people.'

'He was a valuable friend, Tom,' said Mrs Martin, with difficulty suppressing a smile. 'But you were about to tell how he became so skilful.'

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<sup>2</sup> Acute.

‘So I will and welcome,’ replied Bourke. ‘Your health, ma’am. I’m drinking too much of this punch, sir; but, to tell the truth, I never tasted the like of it; it goes down one’s throat like sweet oil. But what was I going to say? Yes—well—yes—Patrick, many a long year ago, was coming home from a *berrin* late in the evening, and walking by the side of a river, opposite the big inch,<sup>3</sup> near Ballyhefaan ford. He had taken a drop, to be sure; but he was only a little merry, as you may say, and knew very well what he was doing. The moon was shining, for it was in the month of August, and the river was as smooth and as bright as a looking-glass, He heard nothing for a long time but the fall of the water at the mill weir about a mile down the river, and now and then the crying of the lambs on the other side of the river. All at once there was a noise of a great number of people laughing at if they’d break their hearts, and of a piper playing among them. It came from the inch at the other side of the ford saw, through the mist that hung over the river, a whole crowd of people dancing on the inch. Patrick was as fond of a dance as he was of a glass, and that’s saying enough for him; so he whipped off his shoes and stockings, and away with him across the ford. After putting on his shoes and stockings at the other side of the river he walked over to the crowd, and mixed with them for some time without being minded. He thought, sir, that he’d show them better dancing than any of themselves, for he was proud of his feet, sir, and a good right he had, for there was not a boy in the same parish could foot a double or treble with him. But pwah! his dancing was no more to theirs than mine would be to the mistress’ there. They did not seem as if they had a bone in their bodies, and they kept it up as if nothing could tire them. Patrick was ’shamed within himself, for he thought he had not his fellow in all the country round; and was going away, when a little old man, that was looking at the company bitterly, as if he did not like what was going on, came up to him. “Patrick,” says he. Patrick started, for he did not think anybody there knew him. “Patrick,” says he, “you’re discouraged, and no wonder for you. But you have a friend near you. I’m your friend, and your father’s friend, and I think worsset of your little finger than I do of all that are here, though they think no one is as good as themselves. Go into the ring and call for a lilt. Don’t be afeared. I tell you the best of them did not do it as well as you shall, if you will do as I bid you.” Patrick felt something within him as if he ought not to gainsay the old man. He went into the ring, and called the piper to play up the best double he had. And sure enough, all that the others were able for was nothing to him! He bounded like an eel, now here and now there, as light as a feather, although the people could hear the music answered by his steps, that beat time to every turn of it, like the left foot of the piper. He first danced a hornpipe on the ground. Then they got a table, and he danced a treble on it that drew down shouts from the whole company. At last he called for a trencher; and when they saw him, all as if he was spinning on it like a top, they did not know what to make of him. Some praised him for the best dancer that ever entered a ring; others hated him because he was better than themselves; although they had good right to think themselves better than him or any other man that ever went the long journey.’

‘And what was the cause of his great success?’ inquired Mr Martin.

‘He could not help it, sir,’ replied Tom Bourke. ‘They that could make him do more than that made him do it. Howsomever, when he had done, they wanted him to dance again, but he was tired, and they could not persuade him. At last he got angry, and swore a big oath, saving your presence, that he would not dance a step more, and the word was hardly out of his mouth when he found himself all alone, with nothing but a white cow grazing by his side.’

‘Did he ever discover why he was gifted with these extraordinary powers in the dance, Tom?’ said Mr Martin.

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<sup>3</sup> Low meadow ground near a river.

'I'll tell you that too, sir,' answered Bourke, 'when I come to it. When he went home, sir, he was taken with a shivering, and went to bed; and the next day they found he had got the fever, or something like it, for he raved like as if he was mad. But they couldn't make out what it was he was saying, though he talked constant. The doctors gave him over. But it's a little they knew what ailed him. When he was, as you may say, about ten days sick, and everybody thought he was going, one of the neighbours came in to him with a man, a friend of his, from Ballinlacken, that was keeping with him some time before. I can't tell you his name either, only it was Darby. The minute Darby saw Patrick he took a little bottle, with the juice of herbs in it, out of his pocket, and gave Patrick a drink of it. He did the same every day for three weeks, and then Patrick was able to walk about, as stout and as hearty as ever he was in his life. But he was a long time before he came to himself; and he used to walk the whole day sometimes by the ditch-side, talking to himself, like as there was some one along with him. And so there was, surely, or he wouldn't be the man he is today.'

'I suppose it was from some such companion he learned his skill,' said Mr Martin.

'You have it all now, sir,' replied Bourke. 'Darby told him his friends were satisfied with what he did the night of the dance; and though they couldn't hinder the fever, they'd bring him over it, an teach him more than many knew beside him. And so they did. For you see all the people he met on the inch. that night were friends of a different faction; only the old man that spoke to him, he was a friend of Patrick's family, and it went again his heart, you see, that the others were so light and active, and he was hitted in himself to hear 'em boasting how they'd dance with any set in the whole country round. So he gave Patrick the gift that night, and afterwards gave him the skill that makes him the wonder of all that know him. And to be sure it was only learning he was at that time when he was wandering in his mind after the fever.'

'I have heard many strange stories about that inch near Ballyhefaan ford,' said Mr Martin. 'Tis a great place for the good people, isn't it, Tom?'

'You may say that, sir,' returned Bourke. 'I could tell you a great deal about it. Many a time I sat for as good as two hours by moonlight, at th' other side of the river, looking at 'em playing goal as if they'd break their hearts over it; with their coats and waistcoats off, and white handkerchiefs on the heads of one party, and red ones on th' other, just as you'd see on a Sunday in Mr Simming's big field. I saw 'em one night play till the moon set, without one party being able to take the ball from th' other. I'm sure they were going to fight, only 'twas near morning. I'm told your grandfather, ma'am, used to see 'em there too,' said Bourke, turning to Mrs Martin.

'So I have been told, Tom,' replied Mrs Martin. 'But don't they say that the churchyard of Kilcrumper is just as favourite a place with the good people as Ballyhefaan inch?'

'Why, then, may be you never heard, ma'am, what happened to Davy Roche in that same churchyard,' said Bourke; and turning to Mr Martin, added: 'Twas a long time before he went into your service, sir. He was walking home, of an evening, from the fair of Kilcumber, a little merry, to be sure, after the day, and he came up with a berrin. So he walked along with it, and thought it very queer that he did not know a mother's soul in the crowd but one man, and he was sure that man was dead many years before. Howsomever, he went on with the *berrin* till they came to Kilcrumper churchyard; and, faith, he went in and stayed with the rest, to see the corpse buried. As soon as the grave was covered, what should they do but gather about a piper that come along with 'em, and fall to dancing as if it was a wedding. Davy longed to be among 'em (for he hadn't a bad foot of his own, that time, whatever he may now); but he was loth to begin, because they all seemed strange to him, only the man I told you that he thought was dead. Well,

at last this man saw what Davy wanted, and came up to him. "Davy," says he, "take out a partner, and show what you can do, but take care and don't offer to kiss her." "That I won't," says Davy, "although her lips were made of honey." And with that he made his bow to the purtiest girl in the ring, and he and she began to dance. 'Twas a jig they danced, and they did it to th' admiration, do you see, of all that were there. 'Twas all very well till the jig was over; but just as they had done, Davy, for he had a drop in, and was warm with the dancing, forgot himself, and kissed his partner, according to custom. The smack was no sooner off of his lips, you see, than he was left alone in the churchyard, without a creature near him, and all he could see was the tall tombstones. Davy said they seemed as if they were dancing too, but I suppose that was only the wonder that happened him, and he being a little in drink. Howsomever, he found it was a great many hours later than he thought it; 'twas near morning when he came home; but they couldn't get a word out of him till the next day, when he woke out of a dead sleep about twelve o'clock.'

When Tom had finished the account of Davy Roche and the *berrin*, it became quite evident that spirits, of some sort, were working too strong within him to admit of his telling many more tales of 'the good people.' Tom seemed conscious of this. He muttered for a few minutes broken sentences concerning churchyards, riversides, leprechans, and *dina magh*,<sup>4</sup> which were quite unintelligible, perhaps to himself, certainly to Mr Martin and his lady. At length he made a slight motion of the head upwards, as if he would say, 'I can talk no more'; stretched his arm on the table, upon which he placed the empty tumbler slowly, and with the most knowing and cautious air; and rising from his chair, walked, or rather rolled, to the parlour door. Here he turned around to face his host and hostess; but after various ineffectual attempts to bid them good-night, the words, as they rose, being always choked by a violent hiccup, while the door, which he held by the handle, swung to and fro, carrying his unyielding body along with it, he was obliged to depart in silence. The cowboy, sent by Tom's wife, who knew well what sort of allurements detained him, when he remained out after a certain hour, was in attendance to conduct his master home. I have no doubt that he returned without meeting any material injury, as I know that within the last month he was, to use his own words, 'as stout and hearty a man as any of his age in the county Cork'.

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<sup>4</sup> The good people.