

***JOHN BELL
BOUTON***



***ROUND
THE BLOCK***

John Bell Bouton

Round the Block

An American Novel

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CHAPTER I.

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THE BLOCK.

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On the east side of the block were four brownstone houses, wide, tall, and roomy. Seen from the street, they had the appearance of not being inhabited. In the upper stories, all the curtains or blinds were closely drawn. In the lower story, the heavy lace that hung in carefully careless folds on each side of the window, seemed never to have been disturbed since it left the upholsterer's hands. Whatever life and motion there might have been in the basement, were sheltered from observation by conical firs or square-clipped box borders, set out on strictly geometrical principles in each of the four front yards. The doors were ponderous and tight fitting, as if they were never meant to be opened; and the vivid polish of their surfaces showed no trace of human handling. No marks of feet could be detected on the smooth, heavy flagstones which led up from the sidewalk, or on the great steps flanked by massive balustrades. The four mansions, in their new, lofty, and apparently tenantless state, looked, like the occasional residences of people for some purpose of ceremony, rather than the dear homes of the small, loving, domestic circles that really lived there.

Such was the outer view of the east side of the block, and it is the only view that the reader of this book will get;

for it is the author's intention profoundly to respect the select seclusion of the occupants.

Now, the west side of the block was in all respects, exactly opposite to the east side. The houses were built of bricks, dingy with the whirling dust of twenty years. Two of the three stories swarmed with women and children, always visible at all seasons; and the lower story was devoted to some kind of cheap trade. Wholesale business is gregarious in its ways; but it is the habit of retail business to scatter, so as to present, in the same neighborhood, no two people in exactly the same line. Thus it happened that, on the west side of the block, there was only one drygoods dealer, whose shop front and awning posts were festooned with calicoes and other fabrics, ticketed with ingeniously deformed figures, and bearing some attractive adjective, expressing the owners private and conscientious opinion of their excellence. There was one boot-maker, who strung up his products in long branches, like onions; and, although his business was not at all flourishing, solaced himself with the reflection that he had a monopoly of it on the block. There was one apothecary, between whose flashing red and yellow lights and those of his nearest rival there was a desirable distance. A solitary coffinmaker, a butcher, a baker, a newspaper vender, a barber, a confectioner, a hardware merchant, a hatter, and a tailor, each encroaching rather extensively on the sidewalk with the emblems of his trade, rejoiced in their exemption from a ruinous competition. The only people on the block whose interests appeared to clash, were the grocers, who flanked either corner, and made a large and delusive show of boxes, barrels, and tea chests;

and it was strongly suspected that they were identical in interests, under different names, and maintained a secret league to catch all the custom of the vicinity.

The south side was a gradation of buildings, from the two-story brick grocery on the west corner to the grandest of the stone mansions on the east. With the exception of two or three houses built in the early history of the block, and occupied by obstinate old proprietors, it presented such a regularly ascending line of roofs, that a giant could have walked up stairs from one end to the other. Although each house was built upon a plan peculiar to itself, and supposed to reflect the long-cherished views of the original owner, there were certain resemblances among them. This was sometimes the effect of a jealous rivalry; sometimes of imitation. In one dozen houses there was a costly struggle for supremacy in window curtains. In another dozen, the harmless contest pertained to Grecian urns crowned with flowers, or dry dolphins, tritons, or naiads, rising from the bosoms of little gravel beds in miniature front yards. In a third dozen, there was a perspective of broad iron balconies elegantly constructed for show, and sometimes put to hazardous use, on warm summer nights, by venturesome gentlemen with cigars, or ladies with fans.

About the middle of the block was a colony of doctors, who had increased, in five years, from two to ten. Their march was eastward, and it could be calculated to a nicety how long it would be before the small black, gilt-lettered signs of their profession would press hard upon the great house at the corner. Why they thus congregated together, unless with the friendly purpose of relieving each other's

patients in each other's absence, and so saving humanity from sudden suffering and death, was a mystery to everybody but themselves.

The north side lacked variety. One part of it, comprising twenty lots, had been built up on speculation by an enterprising landowner. The houses were precisely alike, from coal cellar to chimney top, with front railings of exactly the same pattern, crowned with iron pineapples from the same mould, encompassing little plots of ground laid out in walks similar to the fraction of a hair; the sole ornaments of which were four little spruce trees, planted at equal distances apart.

This row of houses was very distracting even to the occupants, with whom it was a feat of arithmetic to identify their homes in the daytime, and much more so at night, when the landmarks were shadowy and indistinguishable. Occasionally, well-meaning tenants found themselves pulling at wrong doorbells; and there was one man who got tipsy every Saturday night, and rang himself quite through the row before he tumbled in on his own hall carpet. It was in counting the spruce trees, he said, which had a perplexing way of doubling, that he invariably lost the track.

In nearly every house on this block there was a piano. The piano was the great equalizer of the block. And, though in the loftier houses the pianos might have been larger and costlier, and unquestionably noisier, it did not follow that they were better played or pleasanter to hear than the humbler instruments which served to swell the tumultuous chorus in hours of morning practice. With regard to these pianos, it may here be observed, that a gentleman with a

passion for statistics, who chanced to be well acquainted through the block, made the remarkable discovery that the players were usually unmarried ladies; and that, when they acquired husbands (as they occasionally did on that block), they put aside the piano as something quite incapable of contributing to their new-found happiness.



CHAPTER II.

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THREE BACHELOKS.

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Near the centre of the north side of the block stood a house in which three men, who have much to do in this story, were whiling away an hour before dinner, at the edge of evening, in the month of December, 185-. The house had strange stones let in over the windows and door, and was broad and sturdy, and was entered by steps slightly worn, and was shaded by a tall and old chestnut tree, and showed many signs of age. It was because of these evidences of antiquity, although the house was in good preservation and vastly comfortable, that it had been picked out and rented by the three men, two weeks previously.

Yet the three men exhibited no marks of age, past or coming, upon them. The oldest, Mr. Marcus Wilkeson, looked no more than thirty-two; but frankly owned to thirty-six. Being six feet and two inches high, having a slim figure, round face, smooth brow, gentle eyes, perfect teeth to the utmost extent of his laugh, and a head of hair free from the plague-spot of incipient baldness which haunts the young men of this generation, his appearance, now that he was confessedly a man, was very much like that of an overgrown boy. On the contrary, when he was really a boy, his extraordinary height (six feet at sixteen years) had given him the outward semblance of a premature man. Probably

his long legs and arms, which were exceedingly supple, and were always swinging about with a certain juvenile awkwardness, contributed much to the youthfulness of his appearance.

At the time of his introduction here, his legs were as quiet as in their nature they could be, having been elevated, for the greater comfort of the owner, to the top of a pianoforte, and presenting an inclination of forty-five degrees to Mr. Wilkeson's body, reposing calmly and smoking an antique pipe in his favorite chair below. One of his long arms was hanging listlessly by his side, and the other made a sharp projecting elbow, and terminated in the interior of his vest. This was the attitude which, of all possible adjustments of the human anatomy, Mr. Wilkeson preferred; and he always assumed it and his pipe the moment he had put on his dressing gown and Turkey slippers. He was well aware that popular treatises on the "Art of Behavior" and the "Code of Politeness" were extremely hard upon this disposition of the legs. His half-sister, Philomela Wilkeson, who was high authority, had often visited his legs with the severest censure, when, upon suddenly entering the room where he was seated, she found the offending members confronting her from the top of the piano, or the table, or a chair, or sometimes from the mantelpiece. While Marcus Wilkeson admitted the full force of her strictures as applied to legs in general, he claimed an exception for his legs, which were always in his own or other people's way when they rested on the floor, or were crossed after the many fashions popular with the short-legged part of mankind.

Marcus Wilkeson's heretical opinion concerning legs was part of a system of independent views which he entertained of life generally. He had given up a profitable broker's shop in Wall street, a year before, because he had made a fortune ten times larger than he would ever spend. Having fulfilled the object for which he started in business, and for which he had toiled like a slave ten years, he conceived that nothing could be more sensible than to retire from it, make room for other deserving men, and enjoy his ample earnings in the ways which pleased him most, before an old age of money getting had deadened his five senses, his intellect, and his heart.

Persons who knew Marcus Wilkeson well were aware that he was a shy, self-distrustful fellow, amiable, generous, and that the only faults which could possibly be alleged against him were an excessive fondness for old books, old cigars, and profitless meditations, and a catlike affection for quiet corners. And when his half-sister Philomela--who had no hypocritical concealment about her, thank heaven! and always told people what she thought of them--pronounced the first of those luxuries "trash," the second "disgusting," and the other two "idiotic," he met her candid criticisms with a pleasant laugh, and said that, at any rate, they hurt nobody but himself.

To which Philomela invariably retorted: "But suppose every strapping fellow, at your time of life, should take to novel-reading, and such fooleries, what would become of the world, I would like to know?"

And her brother, puffing out a long stream of smoke, would respond: "Suppose, my dear sister, every woman was

destined to be an old maid, as you are, what would become of the world, / would like to know?"

The conversation always terminated at this point, by Philomela declaring that coarse personality was the refuge of weak-minded people when they could not answer arguments, and that, for her part, she would never take the trouble to say another plain, straightforward word for his good; whereupon there would be a truce, lasting sometimes a whole day.

Fayette Overtop, the second of the three young men--the one looking out of the window, drumming idly on the glass, and continually tossing back his head to clear the long black hair from his brow, over which it hung in an incurable cowlick--was a short, compact, nervous person, twenty-five years old. Mr. Overtop had been educated for the law, but, finding the profession uncomfortably crowded when he came into it, had not yet achieved those brilliant triumphs which he once fondly imagined within his reach. For three years he had been in regular attendance at his office from nine A.M. to three P.M. (as per written card on the door), except in term time, when he was a patient frequenter of the courts. During these three years he had picked up something less than enough to pay his half of the rent of two small, dimly lighted, but expensive rooms on the fourth floor of a labyrinth in the lower part of the city.

Mr. Overtop, when asked to explain this state of things, about which he made no concealment, always attributed it to a "lack of clients."

If he had clients enough, and of the right kind, he felt confident that he could make a figure in the profession.

Having few clients, and those in insignificant cases only, of course he had no opportunities for distinction. He could not stand in the street and beg for clients, or drag men forcibly into his chambers and compel them to be clients; and he would not degrade the dignity of his calling by advertising for clients, or taking any means whatever to get them, except by establishing a reputation for professional learning and integrity. The only inducement which he ever put in the way of clients, was a series of signs, outside the street door, on the first flight of stairs, at the head of the first landing, on the second flight of stairs, at the head of the second landing, and so on to the fourth floor, where the firm name of "Overtop & Maltboy" confronted the panting climber for the eighth and last time, painted in large gold letters on black tin, nailed to the office door.

Mr. Overtop was willing to give clients every facility for finding him, when they had once started at the bottom of the building; and would, as it were, lead them gently on, by successive signs; but good luck and a good name, slowly but surely acquired, must do the rest.

A snug property, of which Mr. Overtop spent less than the income, fortunately enabled him to indulge in these novel views, and to regard clients, much as they were desired, as by no means indispensable to his existence. In his unprofessional hours, Mr. Overtop was everything but a lawyer. He was chiefly a philosopher, a discoverer, a searcher after truth, a turner-up of undeveloped beauties in every-day things, which, he said, were rich in instruction when intelligently examined. He could trace out lines of

beauty in a gridiron, and detect the subtle charm that lurks in the bootjack.

As not unfrequently happens, in partnerships of business and of other descriptions, Matthew Maltboy--the young man standing before the blazing coal fire, and critically surveying his own person--was quite the opposite of Fayette Overtop. Maltboy was fat and calm. Portraits were in existence showing Maltboy as a young lad in a jacket and turn-down collar, having a slim, graceful figure, a delicate face, and a sad but interesting promise of early decay upon him. Other portraits, of the same original, taken at later periods of the photographic art, represented a gradual squaring out of the shoulders, a progressive puffiness in the cheeks, lips, and hands, incipient folds in the chin, and a prevalent swollen appearance over all of Matthew Maltboy that the artist permitted the sun to copy.

Portraits of Maltboy for a series of years would have proved a valuable contribution to human knowledge, as showing the steady and remarkable changes through which a man who is doomed to be fat passes onward to his destiny. But Maltboy stopped sitting for portraits when he reached the age of twenty, deciding, as many another public character has done, to transmit only the earlier and more ethereal representations of himself to posterity.

By some compensating law of Nature, there were given to Maltboy a light and cheerful heart, a tendency to laugh on the smallest provocation, and a nice susceptibility to the beautiful. Not the beautiful in rivers, forests, skies, and other inanimate things, but the beautiful in woman. And as Overtop was gifted to discover charms in material objects

which were plain in other eyes, so Maltboy possessed the wonderful faculty of seeing beauty in female faces, where other people saw, perhaps, only a bad nose, dull eyes, and a pinched-up mouth. This mental endowment might have been a priceless gift to a portrait painter, who was desirous of gratifying his sitters; but it was for Matthew Maltboy a fatal possession. It had led him to love too many women too much at first sight, and to shift his admiration from one dear object to another with a suddenness and rapidity destructive to a well-ordered state of society.

Though these multiplied transfers of affection occasionally caused some disappointment among the victims of Mr. Maltboy's inconstancy, it was wisely ordained that he should be the principal sufferer--that every new passion should involve him in new difficulties, and subject him to a degree of mental distress which would have reduced the flesh of any man not hopelessly predisposed to fatness. As Mr. Matthew Maltboy stood by the fire, he was not taking the profitable retrospective view of his life which he should have taken, but was glancing with an expression of concern at the circumference of a showy vest pattern which cut off the view of his legs.

The apartment in which the three bachelors were keeping a meditative silence, was large, square, high, on the first floor back, commanding an ample prospect of neglected rear yards, and all the strange things that are usually huddled into those strictly private domains. The furniture of the room was rich and substantial, but not too good to be used. The chairs were none of those frail, slippery structures of horsehair and mahogany so

inhospitably cold to the touch; but they were oak, high backed, deep, long armed, softly but stoutly cushioned with leather, and yawned to receive nodding tenants and send them comfortably to sleep amid the fragrant clouds of the after-dinner pipe or cigar.

At one end of the room was Marcus Wilkeson's library, consisting of about five hundred volumes, of poems, novels, travels by land and sea, histories, and biographies, which the owner dogmatically held to be all the books in the world worth reading. The admission of a new book to this select company of standard worthies, Mr. Wilkeson was vain enough to regard as a high compliment to the author, and as a final settlement of any disputes which might have been abroad as to its merits.

On another side of the room was a grand piano, open, and covered with the latest music, and sometimes played on in a surprisingly graceful manner by the fat fingers of Matthew Maltboy. On the walls hung some pictures, that were not unpleasant to look at. There were two portraits of danseuses, with little gauzy wings, and wands tipped with magic stars; one large, full-faced likeness of a pet actress, taken in just the right attitude to show the rounding shoulders, the lightly poised head, and the heavy hair, to the best advantage; some charming French prints, among them "Niobe and her Daughters" and "Di Vernon;" and a half dozen pictures of the fine old English stage-coach days. Over the fireplace were suspended several pairs of boxing gloves, garnishing the picture of a tall fellow in fighting attitude, whose prodigious muscles were only a little smaller than those of all the saints and angels of all the accredited

masterpieces of ancient art. A pair of foils and masks, neatly arranged over each corner of the mantelpiece, completed the decorations of the room.

The three bachelors had gone into housekeeping by way of experiment, as a relief from the tedium and oppression of hotels and boarding houses, and as an escape from female society, which was beginning to pall even upon the huge appetite of Matthew Maltboy.

But two weeks of this self-imposed exile--with no female society but Miss Philomela Wilkeson, and Mash, the cook--proved rather too much for Matthew's fortitude. He yawned audibly.

"I understand you," said Marcus; "you are sick of this."

"Well--hum--it's a little prosy at times." Maltboy yawned again.

"Incorrigible monster!" cried Marcus. "What shall we do with him, Top?"

The person addressed swung back the rebellious cowlick from his forehead, as if to clear his thinking faculties from a load while he considered the grave question. "Do with him? Do with him? Oh! I'll tell you." Here the speaker's eyes flashed with the light of a great discovery. "Tether him like a horse, with a certain limited area to feed in. D'ye see? D'ye see?"

"A horse? Can't say that I do," returned Mr. Marcus Wilkeson.

"And I can't say that I do, either," added Mr. Matthew Maltboy. "A horse! Why not say a donkey? I should see it quite as well."

"As you please," resumed the impetuous Overtop. "A donkey, then. Perhaps the metaphor will be better. What I mean--what you two are so dull as not to see--is to put this unreliable Maltboy on a moderate allowance of flirtation; to keep him, for example, within the limits of this block. D'ye see? D'ye catch the idea?"

"It begins to dawn on me," said Wilkeson.

"And I catch a ray or two of it," added Maltboy. But--"

"Excuse me," interrupted Overtop, stepping between his two companions, and gesticulating wildly at each of them in turn, as if he would dart conviction into them like electricity from the tips of his fingers. "Here is a block full of people. Their houses are joined together, or nearly so, all the way round. The inhabitants hear each other's pianos playing and each other's babies squalling all day long. If a fire breaks out in the block, it may be all burned down together. If the measles makes its appearance on the block, it probably runs through it. Is there not, therefore, a community of dangers among us; and if of dangers, why not of pleasures? Why should not the inhabitants of a block be regarded as a distinct settlement, or tribe, whose members owe kindness and goodwill to each other before the rest of the world? Looking at it in the light of humanity, is it not our duty to know our neighbors?"

"And Matt would say, To love them too--that is, the young and pretty ones," observed Wilkeson.

"Precisely," said Maltboy.

"Excuse me," continued Overtop, deprecating further interruption with both hands. "That is the point I was just coming to. Since Maltboy *must* have female society, and

cannot be kept out of it by main force, why not give him the range of this block? Catch the idea, eh?--in its full force and bearings?"

"Wilkeson and Maltboy implied, by nods, that they caught it.

"And--ahem--I think I'll take the same range too," added Overtop. "Not because I care a pin about female society, but just to test my new theory."

Cries of "Oh! oh!" from Marcus Wilkeson.

Overtop laughed. "You'll be a convert to it yet, my good fellow."

"Never," said Marcus, inflexibly, "so long as books and tobacco hold out."

"We'll see," replied Overtop. "But let me think how we are to begin." He rubbed his nose with a forefinger, then tossed back the cowlick, and said, impetuously: "I have it--I have it! We know Quigg, the grocer, at the corner below, for we are customers of his. Of course, he has an immense number of customers on the block, and will make New Year's calls on all of them, in the way of business. Why can't he take us in tow? It's as plain as daylight."

"Plain enough, I admit," said Marcus Wilkeson; "but what will Quigg's customers say?"

"Poor fellow!" returned Overtop. "How feebly you hermits reason about society! If you had knocked round town on New Year's days, as Matt and I have often done, you would know that visitors are valued only because they swell the number of calls, and that it is entirely immaterial who they are, or who introduces them. The militia general, the banker, the judge, the D.D., the butcher, the drygoods clerk,

are units of equal value on that day, each adding one more to the score which is privately kept behind the door. We shall be welcome; never fear for that. You must come with us, and see for yourself."

"I thank you," said Marcus Wilkeson, laughing. "No such fooleries at my time of life."

"Very well," said Overtop. "Matt and I will try to represent the new firm of bachelor housekeepers creditably. Matt will look after the pretty girls, and I after the sensible ones--that is, if there happen to be any on this block."

"Agreed," observed Matthew Maltboy, catching a view of himself in a glass over the fireplace, and not wholly displeased with his appearance.

"Another thought strikes me," said Overtop, explosively. "It's nearly half an hour to sunset. I am impatient to begin my acquaintance with our fellow citizens--our future friends, if I may so call them. Let us look out of the windows, and see what the excellent people are doing. Perhaps it may interest even a recluse and bookworm like you."

"Nonsense," rejoined Marcus Wilkeson. "There's no curiosity in my composition."

And yet, when his two companions stood at the window of the little back parlor, pressing their noses against the glass, and looking out, he could not resist the temptation to join them, although he thought proper to punch them in the ribs, and call them a pair of inquisitive puppies, by way of showing how much he was superior to the great human infirmity.

CHAPTER III.

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PEEPS.

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The uniform row of houses on the other side of a dead waste of snow, to which the attention of the three friends was ardently directed, promised, at first sight, a poor return of instruction and entertainment. The rear view presented one dull stretch of bricks irregularly set even in those houses which displayed imposing fronts of brown stone. The blinds were of a faded green color, and broken. The stoops, the doors opening on them, and the steps leading down to the dirty, sodden snow, had a generic look of cheapness and frailty. "Whatever the censorious critic might say of the front, he could not charge the rear with false pretences; for there was apparent, all over it, an utter indifference to the opinions of mankind. Perhaps because the owners of the houses did not expect mankind to study their property from that point of view.

"Say!" was Mr. Fayette Overtop's first remark, after a moment's observation; "do not those rustic fences on the roofs remind you of the sweet, fresh country in summer time?" Mr. Overtop alluded to the barriers which are erected to keep people from getting into each other's houses, and which are scaled not without difficulty even by cats.

Neither of his friends answering this remark except by a quiet, incredulous smile, Overtop continued, a little

pettishly:

"And you really mean to tell me that that pastoral object, happily introduced on the roofs of houses, does not recall the green fields, daisies, babbling brooks, and cloudless skies of early boyhood? Humbug!" The speaker flattened his nose still more against the glass by way of emphasis.

"You look for beauties among the chimney pots, while I search for them in back-parlor windows," said Matthew Maltboy. "Observe where I throw my eye now."

Mr. Maltboy threw his eye toward a house near the middle of the block. His companions followed it, and saw a tall girl with prodigious skirts standing at a window, and looking, as they thought, at them. The view which she obtained was evidently not satisfactory, for with her handkerchief she wiped off the moisture from several of the panes; and, when the glass was clear to her liking, shook out the folds of her dress, and peered forth again, this time more decidedly, at the window occupied by the three friends. Her use of the handkerchief was not lost upon Maltboy, who straightway pulled out his extensive cambric, and polished up their window too. This improvement of the medium of vision on both sides, enabled the three friends to form some idea of the tall girl's personal charms. Her figure was straight; her hair was black; her eyes were brilliant; her complexion was healthy; she exhibited jewelry in her ears, on her neck, her bosom, her wrists, and her fingers; her dress gave her a great deal of trouble, as she leaned forward to look out.

"Charming, is she not?" said Maltboy.