

Bob, Son of Battle.

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CHAPTER VIII.

M'Adam and His Coat.

To David M'Adam the loss of gentle Elizabeth Moore was as real a grief as to her children. Yet he manfully smothered his own aching heart and devoted himself to comforting the mourners at Kenmuir.

In the days succeeding Mrs. Moore's death the boy recklessly neglected his duties at the Grange. But little M'Adam forbore to rebuke him. At times, indeed, he essayed to be passively kind. David, however, was too deeply sunk in his great sorrow to note the change.

The day of the funeral came. The earth was throwing off its ice-fetters; and the Dale was lost in a mourning mist.

In the afternoon M'Adam was standing at the window of the kitchen, contemplating the infinite weariness of the scene, when the door of the house opened and shut noiselessly. Red Wull raised himself on to the sill and growled, and David hurried past the window making for Kenmuir. M'Adam watched the passing figure indifferently; then with an angry oath sprang to the window.

"Bring me back that coat, ye thief!" he cried, tapping fiercely on the pane. "Tak' it aff at onst, ye muckle gowk, or I'll come and tear it aff ye. D'ye see him, Wullie? the great coof has ma coat—ma black coat, new last Michaelmas, and it rainin' 'nough to melt it."

He threw the window up with a bang and leaned out.

"Bring it back, I tell ye, ondootiful, or I'll summons ye. Though ye've no respect for me, ye might have for me claithes. Ye're too big for yer ain boots, let alane me coat. D'ye think I had it cut for a elephant? It's burstin', I tell ye. Tak' it aff! Fetch it here, or I'll e'en send Wullie to bring it!"

David paid no heed except to begin running heavily down the hill. The coat was stretched in wrinkled agony across his back; his big, red wrists protruded like shank-bones from the sleeves; and the little tails flapped wearily in vain attempts to reach the wearer's legs.

M'Adam, bubbling over with indignation, scrambled half through the open window. Then, tickled at the amazing impudence of the thing, he paused, smiled, dropped to the ground again, and watched the uncouth, retreating figure with chuckling amusement.

"Did ye ever see the like o' that, Wullie?" he muttered. "Ma puir coat—puir wee coatie! it gars me greet to see her in her pain. A man's coat, Wullie, is aften unco sma' for his son's back; and David there is strainin' and stretchin' her nigh to brak'in', for a' the world as he does ma forbearance. And what's he care about the one or t'ither?—not a finger-flip."

As he stood watching the disappearing figure there began the slow tolling of the minute-bell in the little Dale church. Now near, now far, now loud, now low, its dull chant rang out through the mist like the slow-dropping tears of a mourning world.

M'Adam listened, almost reverently, as the bell tolled on, the only sound in the quiet Dale. Outside, a drizzling rain was falling; the snow dribbled down the hill in muddy tricklets; and trees and roofs and windows dripped.

And still the bell tolled on, calling up relentlessly sad memories of the long ago. It was on just such another dreary day, in just such another December, and not so many years gone by, that the light had gone forever out of his life.

The whole picture rose as instant to his eyes as if it had been but yesterday. That insistent bell brought the scene surging back to him: the dismal day; the drizzle; the few mourners; little David decked out in black, his fair hair contrasting with his gloomy clothes, his face swollen with weeping; the Dale hushed, it seemed, in death, save for the tolling of the bell; and his love had left him—and gone to the happy land the hymn-books talk of.

Red Wull, who had been watching him

uneasily, now came up and shoved his muzzle into his master's hand. The cold touch brought the little man back to

earth. He shook himself, turned wearily away from the window, and went to the door of the house.

He stood there, looking out; and all round him was the eternal drip, drip of the thaw. The wind lulled, and again the minute-bell tolled out clear and inexorable, resolute to recall what was and what had been.

With a choking gasp the little man turned into the house, and ran up the stairs and into his room. He dropped on his knees beside the great chest in the corner, and unlocked the bottom drawer, the key turning noisily in its socket.

In the drawer he searched with feverish fingers, and produced at length a little paper packet wrapped about with a stained yellow ribbon. It was the ribbon she had used to weave on Sundays into her soft hair.

Inside the packet was a cheap, heart-shaped frame, and in it a photograph.

Up there it was too dark to see. The little man ran down the stairs, Red Wull jostling him as he went, and hurried to the window in the kitchen.

It was a sweet, laughing face that looked up at him from the frame, demure yet arch, shy yet roguish—a face to look at and a face to love.

As he looked a wintry smile, wholly tender, half tearful, stole over the little man's face.

"Lassie," he whispered, and his voice was infinitely soft, "it's lang sin' I've daured look at ye. But it's no that ye're forgotten, dearie."

Then he covered his eyes with his hand as though he were blinded.

"Dinna look at me sae, lass!" he cried, and fell on his knees, kissing the picture, hugging it to him and sobbing passionately.

Red Wull came up and pushed his face compassionately into his master's; but the little man shoved him roughly away, and the dog retreated into a corner, abashed and reproachful.

Memories swarmed back on the little man.

It was more than a decade ago now, and yet he dared barely think of that last evening when she had lain so white and still in the little room above.

"Pit the bairn on the bed, Adam man," she had said in low tones. "I'll be gaein' in a wee while noo. It's the lang good-by to you—and him."

He had done her bidding and lifted David up. The tiny boy lay still a moment, looking at this white-faced mother whom he hardly recognized.

"Minnie!" he called piteously. Then, thrusting a small, dirty hand into his pocket, he pulled out a grubby sweet. "Minnie, ha' a sweetie—ain o' Davie's sweeties!" and he held it out anxiously in his warm, plump palm, thinking it a certain cure for any ill.

"Eat it for mither," she said, smiling tenderly; and then: "Davie, ma heart, I'm leavin' ye."

The boy ceased sucking the sweet, and looked at her, the corners of his mouth drooping pitifully.

"Ye're no gaein' awa', mither?" he asked, his face all working. "Ye'll no leave yer wee laddie?"

"Ay, laddie, awa'—reet awa'. He's callin' me." She tried to smile; but her mother's heart was near to bursting.

"Ye'll tak' yer wee Davie wi' ye, mither!" the child pleaded, crawling up toward her face.

The great tears rolled, unrestrained, down her wan cheeks, and M'Adam, at the head of the bed, was sobbing openly.

"Eh, ma bairn, ma bairn, I'm sair to leave ye!" she cried brokenly. "Lift him for me, Adam."

He placed the child in her arms; but she was too weak to hold him. So he laid him upon his mother's pillows; and the boy wreathed his soft arms about her neck and sobbed tempestuously.

And the two lay thus together. Just before she died, Flora turned her head and whispered:

"Adam, ma man, ye'll ha' to be mither and father baith to the lad noo;" and she looked at him with tender confidence in her dying eyes.

"I wull! afore God as I stan' here I wull!" he declared passionately. Then she died, and there was a look of ineffable peace upon her face.

"Mither and father baith!"

The little man rose to his feet and flung the photograph from him. Red

Wull pounced upon it; but M'Adam leapt at him as he mouthed it.

"Git awa', ye devil!" he screamed; and, picking it up, stroked it lovingly with trembling fingers.

"Mither and father baith!"

How had he fulfilled his love's last wish? How!

"O God!"—and he fell upon his knees at the table-side, hugging the picture, sobbing and praying.

Red Wull cowered in the far corner of the room, and then crept whining up to where his master knelt. But M'Adam heeded him not, and the great dog slunk away again.

There the little man knelt in the gloom of the winter's afternoon, a miserable penitent. His gray-flecked head was bowed upon his arms; his hands clutched the picture; and he prayed aloud in gasping, halting tones.

"Gie me grace, O God! 'Father and mither baith,' ye said, Flora—and I ha'na done it. But 'tis no too late—say it's no, lass. Tell me there's time yet, and say ye forgie me. I've tried to bear wi' him mony and mony a time. But he's vexed me, and set himself agin me, and stiffened my back, and ye ken hoo I was aye quick to tak' offence. But I'll mak' it up to him—mak' it up to him, and mair. I'll humble mase' afore him, and that'll be bitter enough. And I'll be father and mither baith to him. But there's bin none to help me; and it's bin sair wi'oot ye. And—but, eh, lassie, I'm wearyin' for ye!"

It was a dreary little procession that wound in the drizzle from Kenmuir to the little Dale church. At the head stalked James Moore, and close behind David in his meagre coat. While last of all, as if to guide the stragglers in the weary road, came Owd Bob.

There was a full congregation in the tiny church now. In the squire's pew were Cyril Gilbraith, Muriel Sylvester, and, most conspicuous, Lady Eleanour. Her slender figure was simply draped in gray, with gray fur about the neck and gray fur edging sleeves and jacket; her veil was lifted, and you could see the soft hair about her temples, like waves breaking on white cliffs, and her eyes big with tender sympathy as she glanced toward the pew upon her right.

For there were the mourners from Kenmuir: the Master, tall, grim, and gaunt; and beside him Maggie, striving to be calm, and little Andrew, the miniature of his father.

Alone, in the pew behind, David M'Adam in his father's coat.

The back of the church was packed with farmers from the whole March Mere Estate; friends from Silverdale and Grammoche-town; and nearly every soul in Wastrel-dale, come to show their sympathy for the living and reverence for the dead.

At last the end came in the wet dreariness of the little churchyard, and slowly the mourners departed, until at length were left only the parson, the Master, and Owd Bob.

The parson was speaking in rough, short accents, digging nervously at the wet ground. The other, tall and gaunt, his face drawn and half-averted, stood listening. By his side was Owd Bob, scanning his master's countenance, a wistful compassion deep in the sad gray eyes; while close by, one of the parson's terriers was nosing inquisitively in the wet grass.

Of a sudden, James Moore, his face still turned away, stretched out a hand. The parson broke off abruptly and grasped it. Then the two men strode away in opposite directions, the terrier hopping on three legs and shaking the rain off his hard coat.

David's steps sounded outside. M'Adam rose from his knees. The door of the house opened, and the boy's feet shuffled in the passage.

"David!" the little man called in a tremulous voice.

He stood in the half-light, one hand on the table, the other clasping the picture. His eyes were bleared, his thin hair all tossed, and he was shaking.

"David," he called again; "I've somethin' I wush to say to ye!"

The boy burst into the room. His face was stained with tears and rain; and the new black coat was wet and slimy all

down the front, and on the elbows were green-brown, muddy blots. For, on his way home, he had flung himself down in the Stony Bottom just as he was, heedless of the wet earth and his father's coat, and, lying on his face thinking of that second mother lost to him, had wept his heart out in a storm of passionate grief.

Now he stood defiantly, his hand upon the door.

"What d'yo' want?"

The little man looked from him to the picture in his hand.

"Help me, Flora—he'll no," he prayed. Then, raising his eyes, he began: "I'd like to say—I've bin thinkin'—I think I should tell ye—it's no an easy thing for a man to say—"

He broke off short. The self-imposed task was almost more than he could accomplish.

He looked appealingly at David. But there was no glimmer of understanding in that white, set countenance.

"O God, it's maist mair than I can do!" the little man muttered; and the perspiration stood upon his forehead. Again he began: "David, after I saw ye this afternoon steppin' doon the hill—"

Again he paused. His glance rested unconsciously upon the coat. David mistook the look; mistook the dimness in his father's eyes; mistook the tremor in his voice.

"Here 'tis! tak' yo' coat!" he cried passionately; and, tearing it off, flung it down at his father's feet. "Tak' it—and—and—curse ye!"

He banged out of the room and ran upstairs; and, locking himself in, threw himself on to his bed and sobbed.

Red Wull made a movement to fly at the retreating figure; then turned to his master, his stump-tail vibrating with pleasure.

But little M'Adam was looking at the wet coat now lying in a wet bundle at his feet.

"Curse ye," he repeated softly. "Curse ye—ye heard him, Wullie?"

A bitter smile crept across his face. He looked again at the picture now lying crushed in his hand.

"Ye canna say I didna try; ye canna ask me to agin," he muttered, and slipped it into his pocket. "Niver agin, Wullie; not if the Queen were to ask it."

Then he went out into the gloom and drizzle, still smiling the same bitter smile.

That night, when it came to closing-time at the Sylvester Arms, Jem Burton found a little gray-haired figure lying on the floor in the tap-room. At the little man's head lay a great dog.

"Yo' beast!" said the righteous publican, regarding the figure of his best customer with fine scorn. Then catching sight of a photograph in the little man's hand:

"Oh, ye're that sort, are ye, foxy?" he leered. "Gie us a look at 'er," and he tried to disengage the picture from the other's grasp. But at the attempt the great dog rose, bared his teeth, and assumed such a diabolical expression that the big landlord retreated hurriedly behind the bar.

"Two on ye!" he shouted viciously, rattling his heels; "beasts baith!"

PART III.

The Shepherd's Trophy.

CHAPTER IX.

Rivals.

M'Adam never forgave his son. After the scene on the evening of the funeral there could be no alternative but war for all time. The little man had attempted to humble himself, and been rejected; and the bitterness of defeat, when he had deserved victory, rankled like a poisoned barb in his bosom.

Yet the heat of his indignation was directed not against David, but against the Master of Kenmuir. To the influence and agency of James Moore he attributed his discomfiture, and bore himself accordingly. In public or in private, in tap-room or market, he never wearied of abusing his enemy.

"Feel the loss o' his wife, d'ye say?" he would cry. "Ay, as muckle as I feel the loss o' my hair. James Moore cam