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Bob, Son of Battle.

By ALFRED OLLIVANT.

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CHAPTER XXIII.

Th' Owd Un.

The Black Killer still cursed the land. Sometimes there would be a cessation in the crimes; then a shepherd, going his rounds, would notice his sheep herding together, packing in unaccustomed squares; a raven, gorged to the crop, would rise before him and flap wearily away, and he would come upon the murderer's latest victim.

The Dalesmen were in despair, so utterly futile had their efforts been. There was no proof; no hope, no apparent probability that the end was near. As for the Tailless Tyke, the only piece of evidence against him had flown with David, who, as it chanced, had divulged what he had seen to no man.

The £100 reward offered had brought no issue. The police had done nothing. The Special Commissioner had been equally successful. After the affair in the Scoop the Killer never ran a risk, yet never missed a chance.

Then, as a last resource, Jim Mason made his attempt. He took a holiday from his duties and disappeared into the wilderness. Three days and three nights no man saw him. On the morning of the fourth he reappeared, haggard, unkempt, a furtive look haunting his eyes, sullen for once, irritable, who had never been irritable before—to confess his failure. Cross-examined further, he answered with unaccustomed fierceness: "I seed nowt, I tell ye. Who's the liar as said I did?"

But that night his missus heard him in his sleep conning over something to himself in slow, fearful whisper, "Two on 'em; one ahint t'other. The first big-bull-like; t'ither—" At which point Mrs. Mason smote him a smashing blow in the ribs, and he woke in a sweat, crying terribly, "Who said I seed—"

The days were slipping away; the summer was hot upon the land, and with it the Black Killer was forgotten; David was forgotten; everything sank into oblivion before the all-absorbing interest of the coming Dale trials.

The long-anticipated battle for the Shepherds' Trophy was looming close; soon everything that hung upon the issue of that struggle would be decided finally. For ever the justice of Th' Owd Un's claim to his proud title would be settled. If he won, he won outright—a thing unprecedented in the annals of the Cup; if he won, the place of Owd Bob o' Kenmuir as first in his profession was assured for all time. Above all, it was the last event in the six years' struggle 'twixt Red and Gray. It was the last time those two great rivals would meet in battle. The supremacy of one would be decided once and for all. For win or lose, it was the last public appearance of the Gray Dog of Kenmuir.

And as every hour brought the great day nearer, nothing else was talked of in the country-side. The heat of the Dalesmen's enthusiasm was only intensified by the fever of their apprehension. Many a man would lose more than he cared to contemplate were Th' Owd Un beat. But he'd not be! Nay; owd, indeed, he was—two years older than his great rival; there were a hundred risks, a hundred chances; still—"What's the odds agin Owd Bob o' Kenmuir? I'm takin' 'em. Who'll lay agin Th' Owd Un?"

And with the air saturated with this perpetual talk of the old dog, these everlasting references to his certain victory; his ears drumming with the often boast that the gray dog was the best in the North, M'Adam became the silent, ill-designing man of six months since—more, brooding, suspicious, muttering of conspiracy, plotting revenge.

The scenes at the Sylvester Arms were replicas of those of previous years. Usually the little man sat isolated in a far corner, silent and glowering, with Red Wull at his feet. Now and then he burst into a paroxysm of insane giggling, slapping his thigh, and muttering, "Ay, it's likely they'll beat us, Wullie. Yet aibins there's a wee somethin'—a somethin' we ken and they dinna. Wullie,—eh! Wullie,

he! he!" And sometimes he would leap to his feet and address his pot-house audience, appealing to them passionately, satirically, tearfully, as the mood might be on him; and his theme was always the same: James Moore, Owd Bob, the Cup, and the plots agin him and his Wullie; and always he concluded with that hint of the surprise to come.

Meantime, there was no news of David; he had gone as utterly as a ship foundered in mid-Atlantic. Some said he'd "listed"; some, that he'd gone to sea. And "So he 'as," corroborated Sam'l, "floatin', 'eels upwards."

With no gleam of consolation, Maggie's misery was such as to rouse compassion in all hearts. She went no longer blithely singing about her work; and all the springiness had fled from her gait. The people of Kenmuir vied with one another in their attempts to console their young mistress.

Maggie was not the only one in whose life David's absence had created a void. Last as he would have been to own it, M'Adam felt acutely the boy's loss. It may have been he missed the ever-present butt; it may have been a nobler feeling. Alone with Red Wull, too late he felt his loneliness. Sometimes, sitting in the kitchen by himself, thinking of the past, he experienced sharp pangs of remorse; and this was all the more the case after Maggie's visit. Subsequent to that day the little man, to do him justice, was never known to hint by word or look an ill thing of his enemy's daughter. Once, indeed, when Melia Ross was drawing on a dirty imagination with Maggie for subject, M'Adam shut her up with: "Ye're a maist amazin' big liar, Melia Ross."

Yet, though for the daughter he had now no evil thought, his hatred for the father had never been so uncompromising.

He grew reckless in his assertions. His life was one long threat against James Moore's. Now he openly stated his conviction that, on the eventful night of the fight, James Moore, with object easily discernible, had egged David on to murder him.

"Then why don't yo' go and tell him so, yo' muckle liar?" roared Tammas at last, enraged to madness.

"I will!" said M'Adam. And he did.

It was on the day preceding the great summer sheep fair at Grammoach-town that he fulfilled his vow.

That is always a big field-day at Kenmuir; and on this occasion James Moore and Owd Bob had been up and working on the Pike from the rising of the sun. Throughout the straggling lands of Kenmuir the Master went with his untiring adjutant, rounding up, cutting out, drafting. It was already noon when the flock started from the yard.

On the gate by the stile, as the party came up, sat M'Adam.

"I've a word to say to you, James Moore," he announced, as the Master approached.

"Say it then, and quick. I've no time to stand gossipin' here, if yo' have," said the Master.

M'Adam strained forward till he nearly toppled off the gate.

"Queer thing, James Moore, you should be the only one to escape this Killer."

"Yo' forget yourself, M'Adam."

"Ay, there's me," acquiesced the little man. "But you—hoo d'yo' count for your luck?"

James Moore swung round and pointed proudly at the gray dog, now patrolling round the flock.

"There's my luck!" he said.

M'Adam laughed unpleasantly.

"So I thought," he said, "so I thought! And I s'pose ye're thinkin' that yer luck," nodding at the gray dog, "will win you the Cup for certain a month hence."

"I hope so!" said the Master.

"Strange if he should not after all," mused the little man.

James Moore eyes him suspiciously.

"What d'yo' mean?" he asked sternly. M'Adam shrugged his shoulders.

"There's mony a slip 'twixt Cup and lip, that's a'. I was only thinkin' some mischance might come to him."

The Master's eyes flashed dangerously. He recalled the many rumors he had heard, and the attempt on the old dog early in the year.

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