

Rab and His Friends eBook

Rab and His Friends by John Brown (essayist)

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PREFACE.

Four years ago, my uncle, the Rev. Dr. Smith of Biggar, asked me to give a lecture in my native village, the shrewd little capital of the Upper Ward. I never lectured before; I have no turn for it; but Avunculus was urgent, and I had an odd sort of desire to say something to these strong-brained, primitive people of my youth, who were boys and girls when I left them. I could think of nothing to give them. At last I said to myself, "I'll tell them Ailie's story." I had often told it to myself; indeed, it came on me at intervals almost painfully, as if demanding to be told, as if I heard Rab whining at the door to get in or out,—

"Whispering how meek and gentle he could be,"—

or as if James was entreating me on his death-bed to tell all the world what his Ailie was. But it was easier said than done. I tried it over and over, in vain. At last, after a happy dinner at Hanley—why are the dinners always happy at Hanley?—and a drive home alone through

"The gleam, the shadow, and the peace supreme"

of a midsummer night, I sat down about twelve and rose at four, having finished it. I slunk off to bed, satisfied and cold. I don't think I made almost any changes in it. I read it to the Biggar folk in the school-house, very frightened, and felt I was reading it ill, and their honest faces intimated as much in their affectionate puzzled looks. I gave it on my return home to some friends, who liked the story; and the first idea was to print it, as now, with illustrations, on the principle of Rogers's joke, "that it would be dished except for the plates."

But I got afraid of the public, and paused. Meanwhile, some good friend said Rab might be thrown in among the other idle hours, and so he was; and it is a great pleasure to me to think how many new friends he got.

I was at Biggar the other day, and some of the good folks told me, with a grave smile peculiar to that region, that when Rab came to them in print he was so good that they wouldn't believe he was the same Rab I had delivered in the school-room,—a testimony to my vocal powers of impressing the multitude somewhat conclusive.

I need not add that this little story is, in all essentials, true, though, if I were Shakespeare, it might be curious to point out where Phantasy tried her hand, sometimes where least suspected.

It has been objected to it as a work of art that there is too much pain; and many have said to me, with some bitterness, "Why did you make me suffer so?" But I think of my father's answer when I told him this: "And why shouldn't they suffer? *She* suffered; it



will do them good; for pity, genuine pity, is, as old Aristotle says, 'of power to purge the mind.'" And though in all works of art there should be a plus of delectation, the ultimate overcoming of evil and sorrow by good and joy,—the end of all art being pleasure,—- whatsoever things are lovely first, and things that are true and of good report afterwards in their turn,—still there is a pleasure, one of the strangest and strongest in our nature, in imaginative suffering with and for others,—



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“In the soothing thoughts that spring
Out of human suffering;”

for sympathy is worth nothing, is, indeed, not itself, unless it has in it somewhat of personal pain. It is the hereafter that gives to

“the touch of a vanished hand,
And the sound of a voice that is still,”

its own infinite meaning. Our hearts and our understandings follow Ailie and her “ain man” into that world where there is no pain, where no one says, “I am sick.” What is all the philosophy of Cicero, the wailing of Catullus, and the gloomy playfulness of Horace’s variations on “Let us eat and drink,” with its terrific “for,” to the simple faith of the carrier and his wife in “I am the resurrection and the Life”?

I think I can hear from across the fields of sleep and other years Ailie’s sweet, dim, wandering voice trying to say,—

Our bonnie bairn’s there, John,
She was baith gude and fair, John,
And we grudged her sair, John,
 To the land o’ the leal.

But sorrow’s sel’ wears past, John,
The joys are comin’ fast, John,
The joys that aye shall last, John,
 In the land o’ the leal.

Edinburgh, 1861.

[Illustration: a cherub]

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS.

Portrait, Dr. John Brown Frontispiece.

Rab Hermann Simon

“He is muzzled!”. Hermann Simon

“He lifted down Ailie his wife” . . . Edmund H. Garrett



“One look at her quiets the students” . . Edmund H. Garrett

“Rab looked perplexed and dangerous” . . Hermann Simon

“—And passed away so gently” . . Edmund H. Garrett

“Down the hill through Auchindinny woods” Edmund H. Garrett

Rab and Jess Hermann Simon

RAB AND HIS FRIENDS.

Four-and-thirty years ago, Bob Ainslie and I were coming up Infirmary Street from the High School, our heads together, and our arms intertwined, as only lovers and boys know how, or why.

When we got to the top of the street, and turned north, we espied a crowd at the Tron Church. “A dog-fight!” shouted Bob, and was off; and so was I, both of us all but praying that it might not be over before we got up! And is not this boy-nature? and human nature too? and don't we all wish a house on fire not to be out before we see it? Dogs like fighting; old Isaac says they “delight” in it, and for the best of all reasons; and boys are not cruel because they like to see the fight. They see three of the great cardinal virtues of dog or man—courage, endurance, and skill—in intense action. This is very different from a love of making dogs fight, and enjoying, and aggravating, and making gain by their pluck. A boy,—be he ever so fond himself of fighting,—if he be a good boy, hates and despises all this, but he would have run off with Bob and me fast enough: it is a natural, and a not wicked interest, that all boys and men have in witnessing intense energy in action.



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Does any curious and finely-ignorant woman wish to know how Bob's eye at a glance announced a dog-fight to his brain? He did not, he could not, see the dogs fighting: it was a flash of an inference, a rapid induction. The crowd round a couple of dogs fighting is a crowd masculine mainly, with an occasional active, compassionate woman fluttering wildly round the outside and using her tongue and her hands freely upon the men, as so many "brutes;" it is a crowd annular, compact, and mobile; a crowd centripetal, having its eyes and its heads all bent downwards and inwards, to one common focus.

Well, Bob and I are up, and find it is not over: a small thoroughbred white bull terrier is busy throttling a large shepherd's dog, unaccustomed to war, but not to be trifled with. They are hard at it; the scientific little fellow doing his work in great style, his pastoral enemy fighting wildly, but with the sharpest of teeth and a great courage. Science and breeding, however, soon had their own; the Game Chicken, as the premature Bob called him, working his way up, took his final grip of poor Yarrow's throat,—and he lay gasping and done for. His master, a brown, handsome, big young shepherd from Tweedsmuir, would have liked to have knocked down any man, would "drink up Esil, or eat a crocodile," for that part, if he had a chance: it was no use kicking the little dog; that would only make him hold the closer. Many were the means shouted out in mouthfuls, of the best possible ways of ending it. "Water!" but there was none near, and many cried for it who might have got it from the well at Blackfriar's Wynd. "Bite the tail!" and a large, vague, benevolent, middle-aged man, more desirous than wise, with some struggle got the bushy end of Yarrow's tail into his ample mouth, and bit it with all his might. This was more than enough for the much-enduring, much-perspiring shepherd, who, with a gleam of joy over his broad visage, delivered a terrific facer upon our large, vague, benevolent, middle-aged friend,—who went down like a shot.

Still the Chicken holds; death not far off. "Snuff! a pinch of snuff!" observed a calm, highly-dressed young buck, with an eye-glass in his eye. "Snuff, indeed!" growled the angry crowd, affronted and glaring. "Snuff! a pinch of snuff!" again observes the buck, but with more urgency; whereon were produced several open boxes, and from a mull which may have been at Culloden he took a pinch, knelt down, and presented it to the nose of the Chicken. The laws of physiology and of snuff take their course; the Chicken sneezes, and Yarrow is free!

The young pastoral giant stalks off with Yarrow in his arms, comforting him.

But the Bull Terrier's blood is up, and his soul unsatisfied; he grips the first dog he meets, and discovering she is not a dog, in Homeric phrase, he makes a brief sort of amende, and is off. The boys, with Bob and me at their head, are after him: down Niddry Street he goes, bent on mischief; up the Cowgate like an arrow,—Bob and I, and our small men, panting behind.



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There, under the single arch of the South Bridge, is a huge mastiff, sauntering down the middle of the causeway, as if with his hands in his pockets: he is old, gray, brindled, as big as a little Highland bull, and has the Shakespearian dewlaps shaking as he goes.

The Chicken makes straight at him, and fastens on his throat. To our astonishment the great creature does nothing but stand still, hold himself up, and roar,—yes, roar; a long, serious, remonstrative roar. How is this? Bob and I are up to them. *He is muzzled!* The bailies had proclaimed a general muzzling, and his master, studying strength and economy mainly, had encompassed his huge jaws in a home-made apparatus constructed out of the leather of some ancient breechin. His mouth was open as far as it could; his lips curled up in rage,—a sort of terrible grin; his teeth gleaming, ready, from out the darkness; the strap across his mouth tense as a bow-string; his whole frame stiff with indignation and surprise; his roar asking us all around, “Did you ever see the like of this?” He looked a statue of anger and astonishment done in Aberdeen granite.

We soon had a crowd: the Chicken held on. “A knife!” cried Bob; and a cobbler gave him his knife: you know the kind of knife, worn away obliquely to a point, and always keen. I put its edge to the tense leather; it ran before it; and then!—one sudden jerk of that enormous head, a sort of dirty mist about his mouth, no noise,—and the bright and fierce little fellow is dropped, limp and dead. A solemn pause; this was more than any of us had bargained for. I turned the little fellow over, and saw he was quite dead; the mastiff had taken him by the small of the back like a rat, and broken it.

He looked down at his victim appeased, ashamed, and amazed, snuffed him all over, stared at him, and, taking a sudden thought, turned round and trotted off. Bob took the dead dog up, and said, “John, we’ll bury him after tea.” “Yes,” said I, and was off after the mastiff. He made up the Cowgate at a rapid swing; he had forgotten some engagement. He turned up the Candlemaker Row, and stopped at the Harrow Inn.

There was a carrier’s cart ready to start, and a keen, thin, impatient, black-a-vised little man, his hand at his gray horse’s head, looking about angrily for something. “Rab, ye thief!” said he, aiming a kick at my great friend, who drew cringing up, and, avoiding the heavy shoe with more agility than dignity, and watching his master’s eye, slunk dismayed under the cart, his ears down, and as much as he had of tail down too.

What a man this must be,—thought I,—to whom my tremendous hero turns tail! The carrier saw the muzzle hanging, cut and useless, from his neck, and I eagerly told him the story, which Bob and I always thought, and still think, Homer, or King David, or Sir Walter, alone were worthy to rehearse. The severe little man was mitigated, and condescended to say, “Rab, ma man, puir Rabbie!”—whereupon the stump of a tail rose up, the ears were cocked, the eyes filled, and were comforted; the two friends were reconciled. “Hupp!” and a stroke of the whip were given to Jess; and off went the three.



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Bob and I buried the Game Chicken that night (we had not much of a tea) in the back-green of his house, in Melville Street, No. 17, with considerable gravity and silence; and being at the time in the Iliad, and, like all boys, Trojans, we called him Hector, of course.

Six years have passed,—a long time for a boy and a dog: Bob Ainslie is off to the wars; I am a medical student, and clerk at Minto House Hospital. Rab I saw almost every week, on the Wednesday; and we had much pleasant intimacy. I found the way to his heart by frequent scratching of his huge head, and an occasional bone. When I did not notice him he would plant himself straight before me, and stand wagging that bud of a tail, and looking up, with his head a little to the one side. His master I occasionally saw; he used to call me “Maister John,” but was laconic as any Spartan.

One fine October afternoon, I was leaving the hospital, when I saw the large gate open, and in walked Rab, with that great and easy saunter of his. He looked as if taking general possession of the place; like the Duke of Wellington entering a subdued city, satiated with victory and peace. After him came Jess, now white from age, with her cart, and in it a woman carefully wrapped up,—the carrier leading the horse anxiously, and looking back. When he saw me, James (for his name was James Noble) made a curt and grotesque “boo,” and said, “Maister John, this is the mistress; she’s got a trouble in her breest,—some kind o’ an income, we’re thinkin’.”

By this time I saw the woman’s face; she was sitting on a sack filled with straw, her husband’s plaid round her, and his big-coat, with its large white metal buttons, over her feet.

I never saw a more unforgettable face,—pale, serious, *lonely*, [Footnote: It is not easy giving this look by one word: it was expressive of her being so much of her life alone.] delicate, sweet, without being at all what we call fine. She looked sixty, and had on a mutch, white as snow, with its black ribbon; her silvery, smooth hair setting off her dark-gray eyes,—eyes such as one sees only twice or thrice in a lifetime, full of suffering, full also of the overcoming of it; her eyebrows [Footnote:

“Black brows, they say,

Become some women best; so that there be not

Too much hair there, *but in A semicircle*

or A half-Moon made with A Pen.”—A WINTER’S tale.]

black and delicate, and her mouth firm, patient, and contented, which few mouths ever are.



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As I have said, I never saw a more beautiful countenance, or one more subdued to settled quiet. "Ailie," said James, "this is Maister John, the young doctor; Rab's freend, ye ken. We often speak about you, doctor." She smiled, and made a movement, but said nothing, and prepared to come down, putting her plaid aside and rising. Had Solomon, in all his glory, been handing down the Queen of Sheba at his palace gate, he could not have done it more daintily, more tenderly, more like a gentleman, than did James the Howgate carrier, when he lifted down Ailie his wife. The contrast of his small, swarthy, weather-beaten, keen, worldly face to hers—pale, subdued, and beautiful—was something wonderful. Rab looked on concerned and puzzled, but ready for anything that might turn up,—were it to strangle the nurse, the porter, or even me. Ailie and he seemed great friends.

"As I was sayin', she's got a kind o' trouble in her breest, doctor: wull ye tak' a look at it?" We walked into the consulting-room, all four, Rab grim and comic, willing to be happy and confidential if cause could be shown, willing also to be the reverse on the same terms. Ailie sat down, undid her open gown and her lawn handkerchief round her neck, and, without a word, showed me her right breast. I looked at and examined it carefully,—she and James watching me, and Rab eying all three. What could I say? There it was, that had once been so soft, so shapely, so white, so gracious and bountiful, so "full of all blessed conditions,"—hard as a stone, a centre of horrid pain, making that pale face, with its gray, lucid, reasonable eyes, and its sweet resolved mouth, express the full measure of suffering overcome. Why was that gentle, modest, sweet woman, clean and lovable, condemned by God to bear such a burden?

I got her away to bed. "May Rab and me bide?" said James. "*You* may; and Rab, if he will behave himself." "I'se warrant he's do that, doctor;" and in slunk the faithful beast. I wish you could have seen him. There are no such dogs now. He belonged to a lost tribe. As I have said, he was brindled, and gray like Rubislaw granite; his hair short, hard, and close, like a lion's; his body thick-set, like a little bull,—a sort of compressed Hercules of a dog. He must have been ninety pounds' weight, at the least; he had a large blunt head; his muzzle black as night, his mouth blacker than any night, a tooth or two—being all he had—gleaming out of his jaws of darkness. His head was scarred with the records of old wounds, a sort of series of fields of battle all over it; one eye out, one ear cropped as close as was Archbishop Leighton's father's; the remaining eye had the power of two; and above it, and in constant communication with it, was a tattered rag of an ear, which was forever unfurling itself, like an old flag; and then that bud of a tail, about one inch long, if it could in any sense be said to be long, being as broad as long,—the mobility, the instantaneousness of that bud were very funny and surprising, and its expressive twinklings and winkings, the intercommunications between the eye, the ear, and it, were of the oddest and swiftest.



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Rab had the dignity and simplicity of great size; and, having fought his way all along the road to absolute supremacy, he was as mighty in his own line as Julius Caesar or the Duke of Wellington, and had the gravity [Footnote: A Highland game-keeper, when asked why a certain terrier, of singular pluck, was so much more solemn than the other dogs, said, "Oh, sir, life's full o' sairiousness to him: he just never can get eneuch o' fechtin'."] of all great fighters.

You must have often observed the likeness of certain men to certain animals, and of certain dogs to men. Now, I never looked at Rab without thinking of the great Baptist preacher, Andrew Fuller. [Footnote: Fuller was in early life, when a farmer lad at Soham, famous as a boxer; not quarrelsome, but not without "the stern delight" a man of strength and courage feels in their exercise. Dr. Charles Stewart, of Dunearn, whose rare gifts and graces as a physician, a divine, a scholar, and a gentleman live only in the memory of those few who knew and survive him, liked to tell how Mr. Fuller used to say that when he was in the pulpit, and saw a buirdly man come along the passage, he would instinctively draw himself up, measure his imaginary antagonist, and forecast how he would deal with him, his hands meanwhile condensing into fists and tending to "square." He must have been a hard hitter if he boxed as he preached,—what "The Fancy" would call an "ugly customer."] The same large, heavy, menacing, combative, sombre, honest countenance, the same deep inevitable eye, the same look,—as of thunder asleep, but ready,—neither a dog nor a man to be trifled with.

Next day, my master, the surgeon, examined Ailie. There was no doubt it must kill her, and soon. It could be removed; it might never return; it would give her speedy relief: she should have it done. She courtesied, looked at James, and said, "When?" "Tomorrow," said the kind surgeon,—a man of few words. She and James and Rab and I retired. I noticed that he and she spoke little, but seemed to anticipate everything in each other.

The following day, at noon, the students came in, hurrying up the great stair. At the first landing-place, on a small well-known black board, was a bit of paper fastened by wafers, and many remains of old wafers beside it. On the paper were the words, "An operation to-day.—J.B., *Clerk*"

Up ran the youths, eager to secure good places: in they crowded, full of interest and talk. "What's the case?" "Which side is it?"

Don't think them heartless; they are neither better nor worse than you or I; they get over their professional horrors, and into their proper work; and in them pity, as an *emotion*, ending in itself or at best in tears and a long-drawn breath, lessens,—while pity, as a *motive*, is quickened, and gains power and purpose. It is well for poor human nature that it is so.



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The operating theatre is crowded; much talk and fun, and all the cordiality and stir of youth. The surgeon with his staff of assistants is there. In comes Ailie: one look at her quiets and abates the eager students. That beautiful old woman is too much for them; they sit down, and are dumb, and gaze at her. These rough boys feel the power of her presence. She walks in quickly, but without haste; dressed in her mutch, her neckerchief, her white dimity short-gown, her black bombazine petticoat, showing her white worsted stockings and her carpet shoes. Behind her was James with Rab. James sat down in the distance, and took that huge and noble head between his knees. Rab looked perplexed and dangerous; forever cocking his ear and dropping it as fast.

Ailie stepped up on a seat, and laid herself on the table, as her friend the surgeon told her; arranged herself, gave a rapid look at James, shut her eyes, rested herself on me, and took my hand. The operation was at once begun; it was necessarily slow; and chloroform—one of God's best gifts to his suffering children—was then unknown. The surgeon did his work. The pale face showed its pain, but was still and silent. Rab's soul was working within him; he saw that something strange was going on,—blood flowing from his mistress, and she suffering; his ragged ear was up, and importunate; he growled and gave now and then a sharp impatient yelp; he would have liked to have done something to that man. But James had him firm, and gave him a *glower* from time to time, and an intimation of a possible kick;—all the better for James, it kept his eye and his mind off Ailie.

It is over: she is dressed, steps gently and decently down from the table, looks for James; then, turning to the surgeon and the students, she courtesies, and in a low, clear voice begs their pardon if she has behaved ill. The students—all of us—wept like children; the surgeon happed her up carefully, and, resting on James and me, Ailie went to her room, Rab following. We put her to bed. James took off his heavy shoes, crammed with tackets, heel-capt and toe-capt, and put them carefully under the table, saying, "Maister John, I'm for nane o' yer stryngge nurse bodies for Ailie. I'll be her nurse, and I'll gang aboot on my stockin' soles as canny as pussy." And so he did; and handy and clever and swift and tender as any woman was that horny-handed, snell, peremptory little man. Everything she got he gave her: he seldom slept; and often I saw his small shrewd eyes out of the darkness, fixed on her. As before, they spoke little.

Rab behaved well, never moving, showing us how meek and gentle he could be, and occasionally, in his sleep, letting us know that he was demolishing some adversary. He took a walk with me every day, generally to the Candlemaker Row; but he was sombre and mild, declined doing battle, though some fit cases offered, and indeed submitted to sundry indignities, and was always very ready to turn, and came faster back, and trotted up the stair with much lightness, and went straight to that door.



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Jess, the mare, had been sent, with her weather-worn cart, to Howgate, and had doubtless her own dim and placid meditations and confusions on the absence of her master and Rab and her unnatural freedom from the road and her cart.

For some days Ailie did well. The wound healed “by the first intention;” for, as James said, “Oor Ailie’s skin’s ower clean to beil.” The students came in quiet and anxious, and surrounded her bed. She said she liked to see their young, honest faces. The surgeon dressed her, and spoke to her in his own short kind way, pitying her through his eyes, Rab and James outside the circle,—Rab being now reconciled, and even cordial, and having made up his mind that as yet nobody required worrying, but, as you may suppose, *semper paratus*.

So far well; but four days after the operation my patient had a sudden and long shivering, a “groosin’,” as she called it. I saw her soon after; her eyes were too bright, her cheek colored; she was restless, and ashamed of being so; the balance was lost; mischief had begun. On looking at the wound, a blush of red told the secret: her pulse was rapid, her breathing anxious and quick; she wasn’t herself, as she said, and was vexed at her restlessness. We tried what we could. James did everything, was everywhere; never in the way, never out of it; Rab subsided under the table into a dark place, and was motionless, all but his eye, which followed every one. Ailie got worse; began to wander in her mind, gently; was more demonstrative in her ways to James, rapid in her questions, and sharp at times. He was vexed, and said, “She was never that way afore,—no, never.” For a time she knew her head was wrong, and was always asking our pardon,—the dear, gentle old woman: then delirium set in strong, without pause. Her brain gave way, and then came that terrible spectacle,—

“The intellectual power, through words and things,
Went sounding on its dim and perilous way;”

she sang bits of old songs and Psalms, stopping suddenly, mingling the Psalms of David, and the diviner words of his Son and Lord, with homely odds and ends and scraps of ballads.

Nothing more touching, or in a sense more strangely beautiful, did I ever witness. Her tremulous, rapid, affectionate, eager, Scotch voice, the swift, aimless, bewildered mind, the baffled utterance, the bright and perilous eye, some wild words, some household cares, something for James, the names of the dead, Rab called rapidly and in a “fremyt” voice, and he starting up, surprised, and slinking off as if he were to blame somehow, or had been dreaming he heard. Many eager questions and beseechings which James and I could make nothing of, and on which she seemed to set her all and then sink back ununderstood. It was very sad, but better than many things that are not called sad. James hovered about, put out and miserable, but active and exact as ever; read to her, when there was a lull, short bits from the Psalms, prose and metre, chanting the latter in his own rude and serious way, showing great knowledge of the fit words, bearing up like

a man, and doting over her as his “ain Ailie.” “Ailie, ma woman!” “Ma ain bonnie wee dawtie!”



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The end was drawing on: the golden bowl was breaking; the silver cord was fast being loosed; that animula blandula, vagula, hospes, comesque, was about to flee. The body and the soul—companions for sixty years— were being sundered, and taking leave. She was walking, alone, through the valley of that shadow into which one day we must all enter; and yet she was not alone, for we know whose rod and staff were comforting her.

One night she had fallen quiet, and, as we hoped, asleep; her eyes were shut. We put down the gas, and sat watching her. Suddenly she sat up in bed, and, taking a bed-gown which was lying on it rolled up, she held it eagerly to her breast,—to the right side. We could see her eyes bright with a surprising tenderness and joy, bending over this bundle of clothes. She held it as a woman holds her sucking child; opening out her night-gown impatiently, and holding it close, and brooding over it, and murmuring foolish little words, as over one whom his mother comforteth, and who sucks and is satisfied. It was pitiful and strange to see her wasted dying look, keen and yet vague,—her immense love.

“Preserve me!” groaned James, giving way. And then she rocked backward and forward, as if to make it sleep, hushing it, and wasting on it her infinite fondness. “Wae’s me, doctor! I declare she’s thinkin’ it’s that bairn.” “What bairn?” “The only bairn we ever had; our wee Mysie, and she’s in the Kingdom forty years and mair.” It was plainly true: the pain in the breast, telling its urgent story to a bewildered, ruined brain, was misread and mistaken; it suggested to her the uneasiness of a breast full of milk, and then the child; and so again once more they were together, and she had her ain wee Mysie in her bosom.

This was the close. She sank rapidly: the delirium left her; but, as she whispered, she was “clean silly;” it was the lightening before the final darkness. After having for some time lain still, her eyes shut, she said, “James!” He came close to her, and, lifting up her calm, clear, beautiful eyes, she gave him a long look, turned to me kindly but shortly, looked for Rab but could not see him, then turned to her husband again, as if she would never leave off looking, shut her eyes and composed herself. She lay for some time breathing quick, and passed away so gently that, when we thought she was gone, James, in his old-fashioned way, held the mirror to her face. After a long pause, one small spot of dimness was breathed out; it vanished away, and never returned, leaving the blank clear darkness without a stain. “What is our life? it is even a vapor, which appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away.”

Rab all this time had been fully awake and motionless: he came forward beside us: Ailie’s hand, which James had held, was hanging down; it was soaked with his tears; Rab licked it all over carefully, looked at her, and returned to his place under the table.



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James and I sat, I don't know how long, but for some time, saying nothing: he started up abruptly, and with some noise went to the table, and, putting his right fore and middle fingers each into a shoe, pulled them out, and put them on, breaking one of the leather latches, and muttering in anger, "I never did the like o' that afore!"

I believe he never did; nor after either. "Rab!" he said, roughly, and pointing with his thumb to the bottom of the bed. Rab leaped up, and settled himself, his head and eye to the dead face. "Maister John, ye'll wait for me," said the carrier; and disappeared in the darkness, thundering downstairs in his heavy shoes. I ran to a front window; there he was, already round the house, and out at the gate, fleeing like a shadow.

I was afraid about him, and yet not afraid: so I sat down beside Rab, and, being wearied, fell asleep. I awoke from a sudden noise outside. It was November, and there had been a heavy fall of snow. Rab was in statu quo; he heard the noise too, and plainly knew it, but never moved. I looked out; and there, at the gate, in the dim morning,—for the sun was not up,—was Jess and the cart, a cloud of steam rising from the old mare. I did not see James; he was already at the door, and came up the stairs and met me. It was less than three hours since he left, and he must have posted out—who knows how?—to Howgate, full nine miles off, yoked Jess, and driven her astonished into town. He had an armful of blankets, and was streaming with perspiration. He nodded to me, spread out on the floor two pairs of clean old blankets having at their corners "A. G., 1794," in large letters in red worsted. These were the initials of Alison Graeme, and James may have looked in at her from without—himself unseen but not unthought of—when he was "wat, wat, and weary," and, after having walked many a mile over the hills, may have seen her sitting, while "a' the lave were sleepin'," and by the firelight working her name on the blankets for her ain James's bed.

He motioned Rab down, and, taking his wife in his arms, laid her in the blankets, and hopped her carefully and firmly up, leaving the face uncovered; and then, lifting her, he nodded again sharply to me, and, with a resolved but utterly miserable face, strode along the passage, and down-stairs, followed by Rab. I followed with a light; but he didn't need it. I went out, holding stupidly the candle in my hand in the calm frosty air; we were soon at the gate. I could have helped him, but I saw he was not to be meddled with, and he was strong and did not need it. He laid her down as tenderly, as safely, as he had lifted her out ten days before,—as tenderly as when he had her first in his arms when she was only "A. G.,"—sorted her, leaving that beautiful sealed face open to the heavens; and then, taking Jess by the head, he moved away. He did not notice me; neither did Rab, who presided behind the cart.

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I stood till they passed through the long shadow of the College and turned up Nicolson Street. I heard the solitary cart sound through the streets and die away and come again; and I returned, thinking of that company going up Libberton Brae, then along Roslin Muir, the morning light touching the Pentlands and making them like on-looking ghosts, then down the hill through Auchindinny woods, past “haunted Woodhouselee;” and as daybreak came sweeping up the bleak Lammermuirs, and fell on his own door, the company would stop, and James would take the key, and lift Ailie up again, laying her on her own bed, and, having put Jess up, would return with Rab and shut the door.

James buried his wife, with his neighbors mourning, Rab watching the proceedings from a distance. It was snow, and that black ragged hole would look strange in the midst of the swelling spotless cushion of white. James looked after everything; then rather suddenly fell ill, and took to bed; was insensible when the doctor came, and soon died. A sort of low fever was prevailing in the village, and his want of sleep, his exhaustion, and his misery made him apt to take it. The grave was not difficult to reopen. A fresh fall of snow had again made all things white and smooth; Rab once more looked on, and slunk home to the stable.

And what of Rab? I asked for him next week at the new carrier who got the good-will of James’s business and was now master of Jess and her cart. “How’s Rab?” He put me off, and said, rather rudely, “What’s *your* business wi’ the dowg?” I was not to be so put off. “Where’s Rab?” He, getting confused and red, and intermeddling with his hair, said, “Deed, sir, Rab’s deid.” “Dead! what did he die of?” “Weel, sir,” said he, getting redder, “he didna exactly dee; he was killed. I had to brain him wi’ a rackpin; there was nae doin’ wi’ him. He lay in the treviss wi’ the mear, and wadna come oot. I tempit him wi’ kail and meat, but he wad tak’ naething, and keepit me fra feedin’ the beast, and he was aye gur gurrin’, and grup gruppin’ me by the legs. I was laith to mak’ awa wi’ the auld dowg, his like wasna atween this and Thornhill,—but, ’deed, sir, I could do naething else.” I believed him. Fit end for Rab, quick and complete. His teeth and his friends gone, why should he keep the peace and be civil?

He was buried in the braeface, near the burn, the children of the village, his companions, who used to make very free with him and sit on his ample stomach as he lay half asleep at the door in the sun, watching the solemnity.

[Illustration of a grave]