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ALFRED OLLIVANT

BOB son of **Battle**



Introduction by Francis R. Gemme, COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

BOB SON OF BATTLE

ALFRED OLLIVANT



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CONTENTS

PART I

THE COMING OF THE TAILLESS TYKE

<i>Chapter</i>		<i>Page</i>
1	The Gray Dog	13
2	A Son of Hagar	21
3	Red Wull	32
4	First Blood	41

PART II

THE LITTLE MAN

5	A Man's Son	53
6	A Licking or a Lie	63
7	The White Winter	72
8	M'Adam and His Coat	83

PART III

THE SHEPHERDS' TROPHY

9	Rivals	95
10	Red Wull Wins	105
11	Oor Bob	116
12	How Red Wull Held the Bridge	122
13	The Face in the Frame	134

PART IV

THE BLACK KILLER

14	A Mad Man	145
15	Death on the Marches	153

Chapter

Page

16	The Black Killer	162
17	A Mad Dog	171
18	How the Killer Was Singed	178
19	Lad and Lass	189
20	The Snapping of the String	198
21	Horror of Darkness	210

PART V

OWD BOB O' KENMUIR

22	A Man and a Maid	221
23	Th' Owd Un	234
24	A Shot in the Night	242
25	The Shepherds' Trophy	252

PART VI

THE BLACK KILLER

26	Red-Handed	269
27	For the Defence	279
28	The Devil's Bowl	288
29	The Devil's Bowl	297
30	The Tailless Tyke at Bay	304

BOB SON OF BATTLE



ALFRED OLLIVANT

Introduction

Stories of dogs have been popular since antiquity. Yet it was not until the publication of Alfred Ollivant's *Bob, Son of Battle*, in 1898, that a novel with a dog as its hero was widely accepted, and it established a form of the novel which has been popular ever since. Ollivant's creation of "owd Bob" is often compared to Anna Sewell's *Black Beauty* (1877); what *Black Beauty* did for the image of the equestrian world *Bob, Son of Battle* did for man's best friend. Published under that title in America and under the title *Owd Bob* in England, the novel first became popular in America. It took a few years to exhaust the first edition, but suddenly the sales increased and the book sold steadily for a decade. Ollivant's fans banded together as a literary cult, and by 1908, the novel was heralded as a classic. The enthusiasm of the public is well-expressed by the sweeping opinion of one reviewer that *Bob, Son of Battle* was not only one of the best realistic stories of

animal life "but the only one." William Lyon Phelps called the novel, "the finest dog-story ever written."

The author of *Bob, Son of Battle* became a writer as the result of a spinal injury. Alfred Ollivant (1874-1927) seemed destined for a brilliant military career. The second son born to Colonel E. A. Ollivant and Catherine Blunt Ollivant, Alfred received his early education at Rugby and the Royal Military Academy at Woolwich. He graduated from the academy in 1893, winning prizes for his deportment, his scholarly achievements, and his ability at horsemanship. Commissioned an officer in the Royal Artillery at the age of nineteen, he was severely injured in a fall from his horse a short time later. The injury forced him to resign his commission. *Bob, Son of Battle* was written while he was lying flat on his back.

In the course of the next twenty-five years the officer-turned-writer produced more than a dozen novels, ranging from stories of dogs such as this book and *Danny* (1903) and stories of horses, *Bob and Boxer* and *Boy Woodburn* (1917), to historical romances such as *The Gentleman* (1908), a novel set in Napoleonic times and dealing with a plot to kidnap Lord Nelson just before Trafalgar. On the last page of that novel appears the line, "I will answer no questions about this book." While many authors avoid answering questions about their fictional works, the literary critics were quick to seize upon this line as an example of Alfred Ollivant's difficulty in adjusting to the public life of a writer. In November, 1908, a reviewer in the *Bookman* commented that the last line of *The Gentleman* "well illustrates [Ollivant's] independence, and unconventionality, not to say eccentricity."

While no one can deny these qualities in the author, little attempt has been made to show that they are the natural result of a man trained for the military who experienced a severe injury and comes to the world of letters where, after only a few years, he is compared with Rudyard Kipling. The transformation from the active life of a young officer to the contemplative life of an author was bound to produce some awkwardness on Ollivant's part. His brother, John, by the way, won military honors for the family and rose to the rank of brigadier-general. Alfred Ollivant exhibited his awkwardness and eccentricity in many ways. For several years, he refused to have his photograph taken; he joined no literary circle as was the custom of the age. He declined interviews and was overly sensitive to critical reviews of his work. When his second book, *Danny* (1903), was reviewed poorly, he recalled as many copies as was possible, paid his publishers a settlement and had all the copies destroyed. His third novel, *Redcoat Captain* (1907), is considered by some critics to be a rare work of genius. Its initial publication again points up Ollivant's eccentricity. When he sent the manuscript to the publisher he requested that they print only four copies: "One for you, one for me, one for [a friend who had read and praised the manuscript], and one for the public." Ollivant feared the public would not understand the book, but his publishers, in this instance, ignored the sensitive author and published the symbolic and allegorical novel. Called a juvenile, *Redcoat Captain* is thought by many of Ollivant's readers to be as cryptographic as Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and, like that work, as appealing to the uncluttered mind of a child as to the critically

furnished mind of a scholar. Ollivant married at the age of forty, and when he died on January 19, 1927, at the age of fifty-two, he was survived by his wife and one daughter.

Bob, Son of Battle is the story of "Owd Bob," the last of the Gray Dogs of Kenmuir, and his lifelong feud with Red Wullie, "the tailless tyke." The theme is the oldest in literature—good versus evil. The author adds another dimension to the story by making the dogs and their masters analogues to the theme. "Owd Bob" and his master, James Moore, are virtuous and heroic, patient and suffering; Red Wullie and his master, Adam M'Adam, on the other hand, are deceptive and unvirtuous. The story takes place in the codified society of English sheep country. Here the business of sheep dogs is a necessity of life. As the author reveals, the dogs are given a place in the family *Bible*:

On the top dresser to the right of the fireplace in the kitchen of Kenmuir lies the family Bible. At the end you will find a loose sheet—the pedigree of the Gray Dogs; at the beginning, pasted on the inside, an almost similar sheet, long since yellow with age—the family register of the Moores of Kenmuir.

Running your eye down the loose leaf, once, twice, and again, it will be caught by a small red cross beneath a name, and under the cross the one word "Cup." Lastly, opposite the name of Rex, son of Rally, are two of those proud, tell-tale marks. The cup referred to is the renowned Dale Cup—Champion Challenge Dale Cup, open to the world. Had Rex won it but once again the Shepherds'

Trophy, which many men have lived to win, and died still striving after, would have come to rest forever in the little gray house below the Pike.

It was not to be, however. Comparing the two sheets, you read beneath the dog's name a date and a pathetic legend; and on the other sheet, written in his son's boyish hand, beneath the name of Andrew Moore the same date and the same legend.

From that day James Moore, then but a boy, was master of Kenmuir.

So past Grip and Rex and Rally, and a hundred others until at the foot of the page you come to that last name—Bob, son of Battle.

This selection is a good example of Ollivant's clear prose style—characterized by simple vocabulary and short sentences and reflecting the author's eye for detail, empathy for the customs of shepherds and sheep dogs, and ability to elevate the ordinary events of the pastoral existence to a Homeric level. For here the genealogy of dogs is as important and as long as that of men, and while there is no Helen of Troy as such, the fierce pride, competition, and honor of the Champion Challenge Dale Cup, "open to the world," is no less intense than the passions of the Homeric heroes. It is to Ollivant's credit that at no point in the story do his human characters sink to the level of his dogs, nor do the dogs ever rise to the level of men. Realistically, both men and dogs are limited by the codes and peculiarities of their own worlds. They share, however, the aspirations and frustrations, trials and triumphs, weaknesses and strengths common to any proud man or animal.

"Red Wullie" and "Owd Bob" are both prize winners, exceptional sheep dogs, and lifelong competitors. The story builds to a climax after a series of sheep-killings. Both dogs are suspected, and the time of justice and retribution is as dramatic and realistic as the resolution of a similar conflict in real life. Alfred Ollivant's ability to present his men as men and his dogs as dogs, yet not lose sight of the larger world, the larger issues, and the unavailability of reality, makes *Bob, Son of Battle* rank as one of the best of modern dog stories.

FRANCIS R. GEMME

Northampton, Massachusetts
April, 1967

Part I

*The Coming of the
Tailless Tyke*



Chapter 1

THE GRAY DOG

The sun stared brazenly down on a gray farmhouse lying, long and low in the shadow of the Muir Pike; on the ruins of peel-tower and barmkyn, relics of the time of raids, it looked; on ranges of whitewashed outbuildings; on a goodly array of dark-thatched ricks.

In the stack-yard, behind the lengthy range of stables, two men were thatching. One lay sprawling on the crest of the rick, the other stood perched on a ladder at a lower level.

The latter, small, old, with shrewd nut-brown countenance, was Tammas Thornton, who had served the Moores of Kenmuir for more than half a century. The other, on top of the stack, wrapped apparently in gloomy meditation, was Sam'l-Todd. A solid Dalesman, he, with huge hands and hairy arms; about his face an uncomely aureole of stiff, red hair; and on his features, deep-seated, an expression of resolute melancholy.

"Ay, the Gray Dogs, bless 'em!" the old man was saying. "Yo' canna beat 'em not nohow. Known 'em any time this sixty year, I have, and niver knew a bad un yet. Not as I say, mind ye, as any on 'em cooms up to Rex son o' Rally. "Ah, he was a one, was Rex! We's never won Cup since his day."

"Nor niver shall agin, yo' may depend," said the other gloomily.

Tammas clucked irritably.

"G'long, Sam'l Todd!" he cried. "Yo' niver happy onless yo' making' yo'self miser'ble. I niver see sich a chap. Niver win agin? Why, oor young Bob he'll mak' a right un, I tell yo', and I should know. Not as what he'll touch Rex son o' Rally, mark ye! I'm niver saying' so, Sam'l Todd. Ah, he was a one, was Rex! I could tell yo' a tale or two o' Rex. I mind me hoo——"

The big man interposed hurriedly.

"I've heard it afore, Tammas, I welly 'ave," he said.

Tammas paused and looked angrily up.

"Yo've heard it afore, have yo', Sam'l Todd?" he asked sharply. "And what have yo' heard afore?"

"Yo' stories, owd lad—yo' stories o' Rex-son o' Rally."

"Which on' em?"

"All on 'em, Tammas, all on 'em—mony a time. I'm fair sick on 'em, Tammas, I welly am," he pleaded.

The old man gasped. He brought down his mallet with a vicious smack.

"I'll niver tell yo' a tale agin, Sam'l Todd, not if yo' was to go on yo' bended knees for't. Nay; it bain't no manner o' use talkin'. Niver agin, says I."

"I niver askt yo'," declared honest Sam'l.

"Nor it wouldna ha' bin no manner o' use if yo' had," said the other viciously. "I'll niver tell yo' a tale agin if I was to live to be a hunderd."

"Yo'll not live to be a hunderd. Tammas Thornton, nor near it," said Sam'l brutally.

"I'll live as long as some, I warrant," the old man replied with spirit. "I'll live to see Cup back i' Kenmuir, as I said afore."

"If yo' do," the other declared with emphasis, "Sam'l Todd niver spake a true word. Nay, nay, lad; yo're owd, yo're wambly, your time's near run or I'm the more mistook."

"For mussy's sake hold yo' tongue, Sam'l Todd! It's clack-clack all day——" The old man broke off suddenly, and buckled to his work with suspicious vigor. "Mak' a show yo' bin workin', lad," he whispered. "Here's Master and oor Bob."

As he spoke, a tall gaitered man with weather-beaten face, strong, lean, austere, and blue-gray eyes of the hill-country, came striding into the yard. And trotting soberly at his heels, with the gravest, saddest eyes ever you saw, a sheep-dog puppy.

A rare dark gray he was, his long coat, dashed here and there with lighter touches, like a stormy sea moonlit. Upon his chest an escutcheon of purest white, and the dome of his head showered, as it were, with a sprinkling of snow. Perfectly compact, utterly lithe, inimitably graceful with his airy-fairy action; a gentleman every inch, you could not help but stare at him—Owd Bob o' Kenmuir.

At the foot of the ladder the two stopped. And the young dog, placing his forepaws on a lower rung, looked up, slowly waving his silvery brush.

"A proper Gray Dog!" mused Tammas, gazing down into the dark face beneath him. "Small, yet big; light to get about on backs o' his sheep, yet not too light. Wi' a coat hard a-top to keep oot Daleland weather, soft as sealskin beneath. And wi' them

sorrerful eyes on him as niver goes but wi' a good un. Amaist he minds me o' Rex son o' Rally."

"Oh, dear! Oh, dear!" groaned Sam'l. But the old man heard him not.

"Did 'Enry Farewether tell yo' hoo he acted this mornin', Master?" he inquired, addressing the man at the foot of the ladder.

"Nay," said the other, his stern eyes lighting.

"Why, 'twas this way, it seems," Tammas continued. "Young bull gets 'isself loose somegate and marches oot into yard, o'erturns milkpail, and prods owd pigs i' ribs. And as he stands lookin' about un, thinking' what he shall be up to next, oor Bob sees un. 'An' what yo' doin' here, Mr. Bull?" he seems to say, cockin' his ears and trottin' up gaylike. Wi' that bull bloats fit to bust 'isself, lashes wi's tail, waggles his head, and gets agate o' chargin' 'im. But Bob leaps oot o' way, quick as lightnin' yet cool as butter, and when he's done his foolin drives un back agin."

"Who seed all this?" interposed Sam'l, sceptically.

"'Enry Farewether from the loft. So there, Fat-head!" Tammas replied, and continued his tale. "So they goes on; bull chargin' and Bob drivin' un back and back, hoppin' in and oot agin, quiet as a cucumber, yet determined. At last Mr. Bull sees it's no manner o' use that gate, so he turns, rares up, and tries to jump wall. Nary a bit. Young dog jumps in on un and nips him by tail. Wi' that, bull tumbles down in a hurry, turns wi' a kind o' groan, and marches back into stall, Bob after un. And then, dang me!"—the old man beat the ladder as he loosed off this last titbit,—“if he doesna sit' issell i' door like