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ROB GRAHAM

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Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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ROB GRAHAM

**A TWEEDSIDE REMINISCENCE,
BY W. CHAMBERS, LL.D**

I propose giving one of my early recollections, which lately turned up in the memory of the past. It refers to an incident which occurred only a few years after the beginning of the present century, when I was a boy at the burgh school of Peebles, a small town on the Tweed. The school in its way had a somewhat superior reputation, and drew to it pupils from a distance of several miles around. Trudging in all weathers, the children of farmers and ploughmen came to be educated along with boys and girls belonging to the town. Whatever they were, all were treated

alike, and the intermingling of classes was never found to be in any respect disadvantageous; on the contrary, there sprung up agreeable acquaintanceships between the town and country boys that were mutually useful and agreeable.

Among the crowd of country lads who thronged in daily, there was one I have some cause to remember. His name was Rob Graham. I will try to give a picture of Rob. Imagine a sturdy boy of twelve years of age, well knit together, barelegged and barefooted in summer, with coarse red hair surmounting a brow so large that one would say there were good brains under it. Rob's face was placid like that of an old man, and I think was slightly marked with small-pox, as was then not at all unusual. His dress, of a simple kind, consisted of a pair of dingy corduroy trousers and waistcoat, and a short coat of that coarse fabric known as Galashiels blue, with two broad metal buttons staring out behind; which buttons, from their well-worn appearance, had probably embellished a succession of coats of Rob's father and grandfather; for in those days buttons were buttons, and went through a good deal of service before being dismissed. As the fastenings of the dress could with a rive of the hand be rapidly torn asunder, the wearer could at any moment throw off clothes and shirt and plunge into the river stark naked. As Rob's leather cap, stuck on the top of his shock of red hair, was worth very little, we should deal liberally in estimating his whole equipment at the value of twenty shillings.

What signifies, however, the outside of boys? Who cares a

farthing how they are dressed? The bodily physique and interior of the skull are the things really worth caring for. Rob's big square face and prominent brow shewed there was something in him. Poorly dressed as he appeared at school, he took the shine out of boys decked out with frills, shoes, and stockings. There was not a boy who shewed more dexterity at 'duck,' a game of pitching a heavy stone at a mark, or who ran with greater vigour at 'shinty,' on the school green. Rob was also a good fighter, and few boys, as the saying is, 'dared to take him up.' Yet Rob was a good-humoured and merry fellow, who did not want to quarrel with anybody. He even condescended to make himself agreeable to the girls in the school, by hopping on one leg in their game which they called 'the beds,' and in dexterously throwing up small shells to be caught on the back of the hand, and locally known as the 'chucks.' Then, he was so obliging. If he saw a poor woman carrying with difficulty a backful of clothes to be bleached on the banks of the mill-stream, he would offer to help her, and did so without any hope of reward. No wonder that this poor boy made friends, and was respected for his good conduct and gallantry. By birth a peasant. By nature a hero!

There in memory does Rob Graham stand before me. Miserably attired and educated, knowing nothing of the world outside the tranquil valley in which he was born, Rob had the dash and courage of a Crusader. Nor was he indebted to good feeding for his diligence and activity. In the morning before quitting home, his mother doubtless supplied him with a

breakfast of oatmeal porridge and milk. That, in a great measure kept him going for the day. To stay his hunger, however, a piece of pease-bannock about the size of your hand, and nearly an inch thick, which his mother had baked on the girdle, was stuffed into his right-hand pocket – the left one being occupied with his 'peerie' and 'bools'¹– and so he was provided with dinner; for beyond the lump of bannock and a drink of water, which he scooped with his hand from the Tweed, he tasted nothing till he was comforted with a repetition of porridge and milk for supper. So much for Rob's dress and mode of living.

By some unaccountable feeling, I felt interested in Rob. I saw him daily seated in the left-hand corner of the school as you go in, poring over his lesson, or playing some prank when the master's back was turned. On one occasion, I pointed out to him how to work out a question in arithmetic on his slate; and at another time afforded some little advice as to his style of penmanship in writing 'a piece' for the public Examination by ministers, magistrates, and other great people. As for his reading I did not interfere, for it would have been useless. Like other pupils, he read aloud with a coarse facility, lessons from Barrie's Collection, and repeated psalms by heart, with little regard to points or modulation, and so loudly, that if the windows were open, you might have heard him a hundred yards off – no one finding fault, not even old Barrie, in his duffle spencer and brown wig, who had come a long way in his gig to honour the

¹ Peg-top and marbles.

ceremonial, and dine afterwards according to use and wont with the magnates of the burgh.

The trifling intercourse I had with Rob led me to make inquiries about his origin and place of residence. It was a simple story. He was the son of a small farmer, or at least the occupant of a cottage and a few acres, known as Kailzie Park Foot. The place was a kind of offshoot of the park or pleasure-grounds connected with the mansion of Kailzie, and situated on the south bank of the Tweed, at the distance of about three miles eastward from Peebles. Possibly, Rob's father had a charge of the pleasure-grounds, or he looked after the hedges and ditches on the property, or did some other work for the laird, for which he was allowed the cottage, a cow's grass, and certain money perquisites; by all which a decent appearance was kept up. The family was not large.

Rob had a sister, Jenny, two years younger than himself, who got a little schooling, but only in summer, as she was unable to undergo the severity of winter travel to and fro. She was a pretty and interesting girl Jenny, with flaxen ringlets and bright intelligent eyes. Though meagrely dressed in a gingham frock, and barefooted, she had a certain lady-like appearance. And that is what may be occasionally seen among school-girls of a humble class. However poor be their dress, we see in their graceful figure, their gentle manner, their flowing hair, their sparkling intelligent eyes, that they are ladies by nature, and would, if polished up, do credit to any society in the kingdom. Such was Jenny Graham,

who, unconscious of her girlish beauty, was an object of general admiration. With good taste, as a bit of decoration, she often had a rose or a spink, or sprig of honeysuckle, stuck in the breast of her dress. The boys at the school called her 'The Flower of Kailzie.'

As children together, Rob and Jenny grew up with brotherly and sisterly affection. In autumn, Rob visited and climbed the gean-trees at Haystoun Burn, to bring home a capful of geans or wild-cherries for Jenny. Sometimes ascending the hills he would spend hours in seeking for and gathering 'craw-croups,' a kind of wild bilberries, from the lofty ridges which overlook the valley of The Glen – all to be a posie or offering to sister Jenny. Requiting these attentions, she accompanied him to the Torwood when he went to scale the tall pine-trees in quest of young rooks. And the two had often rambles along the river-bank from Cardrona to Kingsmeadows, on which occasions it was no unusual thing to see them seated on the green margin of a little peninsula which diagonally juts into the water. It is a pleasant spot, nearly opposite the ruins of Horsbrugh Castle, which picturesquely crown the height on the northern side of the river. Here, on the edge of the peninsula grew quantities of tall rushes, with which Rob cleverly plaited head ornaments and necklaces for Jenny, who, proud of her rustic decorations, scampered home with them in the glee of innocent childhood.

There was but one drawback in the pleasure derived by Jenny from these river-side rambles. She felt pretty safe as far as the

small peninsula. Beyond that, westward along the green haugh towards Scott's Mill, she apprehended danger. On the opposite bank was the farm of Eshiels, laid out in handsomely shaped fields, and environed with some young plantations. In one or other of these spacious fields there was ordinarily a herd of cows grazing, attended by a formidable bull, of which little Jenny Graham could not help being afraid. She had some reason to be so. One day, being sent by her mother on an errand to the family at Scott's Mill, she was tripping merrily along the green haugh, when to her dismay the Eshiely bull, as it was familiarly termed, left the herd and at a smart trot made for the river, as if to cross and attack her. The bull had possibly been roused by seeing a scarlet tippet on the neck of the young maiden. Be that as it may, the animal, bellowing with rage, plunged into the stream at a spot where it could be easily forded, and would inevitably have carried out its malicious intention of tossing and goring, perhaps killing, Jenny, but for her presence of mind. She got out of reach of the ferocious beast by hastily scrambling over a wall that bounded Kailzie Park, and taking refuge in the policy was safe from pursuit. Being for the time circumvented, the bull looked glaringly over the wall, and with a growl which sounded like a threat of taking its revenge some other day, it slowly retreated to its pastures on the other side of the Tweed. Jenny never forgot her fright on the occasion. As soon as her brother Rob came home from school in the afternoon, she told him of the affair, and that after this she did not dare to go with him in his rambles along the

river-bank, at least not so far as the ground opposite Eshiels. Rob heard his sister's story, and from that moment resolved to punish the Eshiely bull for running after and frightening Jenny. He had indeed for some time been pondering on a plan for quelling this torment of the neighbourhood.

'Keep yoursel' easy, Jenny, lass,' said Rob; 'I'll mak' the Eshiely bull pay for chasing you. He'll no try that again.'

'But, Rob,' replied his sister, 'what can you do to the bull? You're only a laddie, and you may get into trouble. He's an awfu' beast the Eshiely bull. Let him alane. Dinna gang near him, Rob; dinna gang near him!'

'I tell you to keep yoursel' easy about me, Jenny. I ken fine what to do. It will be capital fun, and I'll be as safe as if I were at hame.'

Jenny knew Rob's resolute character, and having also some confidence in his discretion, let the matter drop. Still she felt uneasy about what might prove a serious misadventure. It is not surprising that the affectionate girl was uneasy. Here was a poor lad unprovided with firearms or any lethal weapon by which he could inflict an injury on an animal so jealous of approach, so dangerous when threatened with attack, and yet he was confident that he would successfully, and with little or no hazard to himself, impose a heavy vengeance on the bull. He would not do it skulkingly or unfairly. He would go to work with the spirit of a sportsman. If the bull came to grief, it would have itself to blame. Brave lad! Like Harry Bluff, 'though rated a boy,

he'd the soul of a man!' In the depths of his consciousness, Rob had made up his mind what he should do, without consulting any one as to his extraordinary project.

It was necessary, however, in order to carry out the campaign, that Rob should have two or three confederates of his own age. These he was not long in securing, for the Eshiely bull was a public nuisance, and the youths all round about would gladly take part in any scheme that promised to give the monster a suitable chastisement for its audacity. The lads whom he enlisted in the adventure were three school companions who lived in the neighbourhood. They were Tam Jackson, son of a ploughman at Laverlaw; Willie Ramage, a son of the farmer at Whitehaugh; and Sandy Clapperton, son of the grieve at Cardrona Mains. All entered cordially into the proposed scheme. It was explained to them that they were to be mere helpers or onlookers. Rob was to take upon himself the heavy end of the business. The prospect opened out to them was perfectly charming. It would be the nicest thing they had ever had all their days.

Like the stage-manager of a theatre in superintending a morning rehearsal, Rob schooled the three boys in their several and collective duties. To speak in the language of the Spanish Bullring, they were to act as *chulos*, whose duty consists in waving flags and otherwise distracting the attention of the bull, while the *matador* has the responsibility of despatching the animal. Rob was to be the *matador*, only he had no intention of killing the bull. All he proposed to do was to inflict a punishment

that would teach him better behaviour. It was agreed that next Saturday, if the weather kept fair, the play should come off, and all were to be at their post under a tree at Scott's Mill at a specified hour. Meanwhile nothing on any account was to be whispered on the subject.

It was a well-devised drama. All depended on its proper performance. Rob was fortunately well acquainted with the scene of operations. Born and reared within a stone's throw of the Tweed, on its south bank, he knew every rapid and pool within a stretch of three or four miles. From Kailzie Park Foot for a certain distance westward, the water was comparatively shallow, and it was hereabouts that the Eshielly bull had forded the stream in pursuit of little Jenny Graham. Farther up, the water deepens until it becomes an unusually deep and broad pool, just where the river makes a sudden bend at Scott's Mill. Boy as he was, and with a miserable apparatus, Rob had fished every inch of the water with fly as well as worm bait, and had now and then brought home a few small trouts to his mother. One thing he was set upon. It was to try to catch a large lamprey, or 'ramper eel,' as the Peebles boys called it, which, considered to be a dangerous water-snake, was a terror to juveniles wading the river. The lamprey was known to lurk somewhere in the deep pool at Scott's Mill.

Rob considered it would be of no use trying to lure the dreaded creature with an ordinary line and bait. He constructed a round wicker-basket, with a hole in the side, in the manner of a mousetrap, which would allow the eel to get in, but not to

get out. Inclosing a bait of garbage and a stone to sink it, the wicker trap was tethered to the shore by a strong cord to a stake, and pitched into the middle of the river. Rob's foresight and skill were rewarded. Next morning, he had the satisfaction of hauling in the trap with the lamprey in a rampagious humour inside. It was, as I recollect – for I went to see it, stretched on the sward below Scott's Mill – a huge creature, four to five feet long, with seven holes or gills whereby to breathe on each side of its head, while it firmly sucks itself to any object with its mouth. Among all the youngsters of the district from Howford to Peebles, Rob rendered himself famous by having caught the ramper eel, and of having skinned it too. As a trophy, he came one morning to school with the skin of the eel wound round his ankle like a garter. We mention the circumstance as an instance of Rob's pluck, and that he was not unqualified to face the Eshielly bull.

Saturday, on which was to be the proposed diversion with the bull, at length arrived. It was a delightful day. The air serene, the fields and trees around in their best verdant array. Shielgreen Kips on the one hand, and the Lee Pen on the other, stood out as prominent peaks against the bright blue sky. A more charming scene is not found in Peeblesshire. The Eshiels herd of cows, with the bull a little apart, were composedly grazing in the field immediately adjoining the pool at the mill. There had been heavy rain up the country the previous day, which had swollen and deepened the river, which, without being greatly discoloured, flowed majestically between its green banks. Its increased depth

was favourable for Rob's purpose. The pool with a swirl here and there on its surface, was in capital order. All circumstances conspired to promise success for the intended exploit.

At the appointed hour, the three lads, Jackson, Ramage, and Clapperton, who were to act as assistants, were at their post. There they were seated on the grass under an old ash-tree, on the bank of the river at Scott's Mill. Rob also kept tryst, for his companions had hardly seated themselves when he appeared on the scene, carrying a short but very effective oak walking-stick. The stick was a kind of heirloom. It had belonged to Rob's grandfather, a stirring fellow in his time, and likely enough the stick had figured as a weapon in brawls at Beltane fair. The stick was a remarkable stick. At the upper end was a round knob fashionably carved, near which there was a hole for a cord, which could be wound round the hand or wrist. The lower end of the stick was shod with what looked like a pike, that would take a good grip of the frozen ground in winter, and be formidable in any defensive struggle. Rob had appropriated the stick for the day, and we shall immediately see the use he made of it.

Well, here were the four boys met. There were but few words spoken. The business of the three auxiliaries was to do all in their power to enrage the bull by shaking handkerchiefs of different colours they had brought with them; and particularly when Rob was engaged with the animal, they were to run hither and thither, and by derisive shouts draw it away in any required direction. This and other measures being understood, the play commenced.

There was a united shout, the handkerchiefs were wildly waved. Next, a provoking cry of 'Bull, bull, bull!' assailed the object of attack. It was like a trumpet summons to battle.

The bull being unacquainted with the programme, was apparently unable to comprehend the meaning of the sudden uproar. Lifting his head inquiringly, he viewed the force which invited his attention. 'Only four boys; I shall soon settle them.' If the Eshiely bull had any mind at all, that is what he probably thought of them. They were only worthy of his contempt. Still there came the provoking cry of 'Bull, bull, bull!' uttered with offensive reiteration. The challenge was to the last degree insulting. There was an impertinence in it that was unendurable. Coming to this conclusion, up went the bull's tail, as if shaking out a banner of defiance, and with a mighty roar he moved at a trot which gradually increased in speed.

He was a grand sight. There he came frenziedly on with his surly white face, his generally dun colour, his black muzzle, and short pointed horns. Well shaped, he would have taken a prize at Islington, even in these days of advanced culture. At a bound he cleared a low dike near the river, to which he went as direct as an arrow, with a view to attack the foe on their own ground. What did he care for the Tweed. He had forded it dozens of times. He had stood in it up to the middle in hot days with all the cows about him, cooling their legs and whisking their tails to keep off the flies. He would at once cross the river.

In his eagerness to get at the enemy, the Eshiely bull with

all his accomplishments failed to remember that at this point fording was impossible, and that he must inevitably take to swimming, which was not exactly within his experience. In his sober moments he might have thought of this. Now, his blood was up, and on he drove right into the pool.

Like a general at the head of an army, Rob steadily watched the motions of his antagonist as he came headlong on to the attack. His attitude was worthy of being pictured by an artist. With delight he saw the bull advance right onward, instead of making a circuit to a lower and shallower part of the river – in which case the game would have been up. When the monster, snorting and bellowing, with flashing eyes, and with his tail up, plunged into the pool, Rob's time was come. Now or never he must act.

It was a trying moment, but with teeth clenched, Rob never quailed. Like a good soldier going into action, he had but one feeling, and that was to do his duty. Now, then, for it. To throw off his clothes till he stood stark naked, was the work of an instant. Seizing the old oak stick and firmly attaching it by the cord to his wrist, he dashed down the bank into the water. He was a capital swimmer, could dive and turn with a sort of amphibious instinct, as most river-side boys can. Courageously he struck out, heading a little to get up stream and bear down on the enemy. About and about he swam, ever with the stick dangling from his wrist. The bull saw his approach, and with a fierce glare turned abruptly towards him. Rob eluded the encounter by diving out

of sight. This sudden and strange disappearance considerably disconcerted the bull. He could not imagine what had become of Rob, and in his perplexity determined to proceed towards the bank, on which the boys kept shouting and defying him; so onward he went, more enraged than ever, but somewhat confused in mind from the novelty of the proceedings.

During this by-play Rob had, underneath the water, got skilfully to the rear of the bull. This is what he had all along wanted. He now felt that the day was his own. Approaching the bull stealthily, he got hold of his tail, which was floating conveniently in the water, and with a degree of dexterity worthy of an acrobat, he leaped at a bound upon his back. It was a singularly well-managed feat. A terrible fix this for the Eshielly bull. He never expected to have been made the victim of such a trick. The superior brain of a schoolboy had out-manceuvred him. When Rob got fairly astride on the bull, and loosening the cord, flourished the stick in his hand, his boy-companions, in their mirth, set up a roar of laughter. It was a pity there was not a larger body of spectators. The scene would have brought down the house at Astley's. The bull was of course prodigiously annoyed, besides being enraged to madness at finding a boy seated on his back, as if he had been a riding-horse let out for hire. No bull in the universe had ever been treated with such atrocious indignity. Moved by these heart-rending considerations, he wriggled, in the hope of getting Rob off his back. As jockeys would say, Rob was firm in the saddle.

A horse may plunge and rear and throw his rider, but he does so by having good footing. The bull had no footing at all. He had no *point d'appui*. He was swimming for bare life, and had enough to do in keeping his head above water. He had no fins wherewith to propel himself in any required direction. No webbed feet. His cloven hoofs could make little way in the water. In short, do as he liked, he could not throw his rider. Rob had him at his mercy.

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