

CHAPTER VI--UMQUILE THE MASTER OF LOVAT

There was a man waiting us in Prestongrange's study, whom I distasted at the first look, as we distaste a ferret or an earwig.

He was bitter ugly, but seemed very much of a gentleman; had still manners, but capable of sudden leaps and violences; and a small voice, which could ring out shrill and dangerous when he so desired.

The Advocate presented us in a familiar, friendly way.

"Here, Fraser," said he, "here is Mr. Balfour whom we talked about.

Mr. David, this is Mr. Simon Fraser, whom we used to call by

another title, but that is an old song. Mr. Fraser has an errand

to you."

With that he stepped aside to his book-shelves, and made believe to consult a quarto volume in the far end.

I was thus left (in a sense) alone with perhaps the last person in the world I had expected. There was no doubt upon the terms of introduction; this could be no other than the forfeited Master of Lovat and chief of the great clan Fraser. I knew he had led his men in the Rebellion; I knew his father's head--my old lord's, that grey fox of the mountains--to have fallen on the block for that offence, the lands of the family to have been seized, and their nobility attainted. I could not conceive what he should be doing in Grant's house; I could not conceive that he had been called to

the bar, had eaten all his principles, and was now currying favour with the Government even to the extent of acting Advocate-Depute in the Appin murder.

"Well, Mr. Balfour," said he, "what is all this I hear of ye?"

"It would not become me to prejudge," said I, "but if the Advocate was your authority he is fully possessed of my opinions."

"I may tell you I am engaged in the Appin case," he went on; "I am to appear under Prestongrange; and from my study of the precognitions I can assure you your opinions are erroneous. The guilt of Breck is manifest; and your testimony, in which you admit you saw him on the hill at the very moment, will certify his

hanging."

"It will be rather ill to hang him till you catch him," I observed.

"And for other matters I very willingly leave you to your own

impressions."

"The Duke has been informed," he went on. "I have just come from

his Grace, and he expressed himself before me with an honest

freedom like the great nobleman he is. He spoke of you by name,

Mr. Balfour, and declared his gratitude beforehand in case you

would be led by those who understand your own interests and those

of the country so much better than yourself. Gratitude is no empty

expression in that mouth: *experto-crede*. I daresay you know

something of my name and clan, and the damnable example and

lamented end of my late father, to say nothing of my own errata.

Well, I have made my peace with that good Duke; he has intervened for me with our friend Prestongrange; and here I am with my foot in the stirrup again and some of the responsibility shared into my hand of prosecuting King George's enemies and avenging the late daring and barefaced insult to his Majesty."

"Doubtless a proud position for your father's son," says I.

He wagged his bald eyebrows at me. "You are pleased to make experiments in the ironical, I think," said he. "But I am here upon duty, I am here to discharge my errand in good faith, it is in vain you think to divert me. And let me tell you, for a young fellow of spirit and ambition like yourself, a good shove in the

beginning will do more than ten years' drudgery. The shove is now
at your command; choose what you will to be advanced in, the Duke
will watch upon you with the affectionate disposition of a father."

"I am thinking that I lack the docility of the son," says I.

"And do you really suppose, sir, that the whole policy of this
country is to be suffered to trip up and tumble down for an ill-
mannered colt of a boy?" he cried. "This has been made a test
case, all who would prosper in the future must put a shoulder to
the wheel. Look at me! Do you suppose it is for my pleasure that
I put myself in the highly invidious position of persecuting a man
that I have drawn the sword alongside of? The choice is not left
me."

"But I think, sir, that you forfeited your choice when you mixed in with that unnatural rebellion," I remarked. "My case is happily otherwise; I am a true man, and can look either the Duke or King George in the face without concern."

"Is it so the wind sits?" says he. "I protest you are fallen in the worst sort of error. Prestongrange has been hitherto so civil (he tells me) as not to combat your allegations; but you must not think they are not looked upon with strong suspicion. You say you are innocent. My dear sir, the facts declare you guilty."

"I was waiting for you there," said I.

"The evidence of Mungo Campbell; your flight after the completion of the murder; your long course of secrecy--my good young man!" said Mr. Simon, "here is enough evidence to hang a bullock, let be a David Balfour! I shall be upon that trial; my voice shall be raised; I shall then speak much otherwise from what I do to-day, and far less to your gratification, little as you like it now! Ah, you look white!" cries he. "I have found the key of your impudent heart. You look pale, your eyes waver, Mr. David! You see the grave and the gallows nearer by than you had fancied."

"I own to a natural weakness," said I. "I think no shame for that.

Shame. . ." I was going on.

"Shame waits for you on the gibbet," he broke in.

"Where I shall but be even'd with my lord your father," said I.

"Aha, but not so!" he cried, "and you do not yet see to the bottom of this business. My father suffered in a great cause, and for dealing in the affairs of kings. You are to hang for a dirty murder about boddle-pieces. Your personal part in it, the treacherous one of holding the poor wretch in talk, your accomplices a pack of ragged Highland gillies. And it can be shown, my great Mr. Balfour--it can be shown, and it WILL be shown, trust ME that has a finger in the pie--it can be shown, and shall be shown, that you were paid to do it. I think I can see the looks go round the court when I adduce my evidence, and it shall appear that you, a young man of education, let yourself be corrupted to

this shocking act for a suit of cast clothes, a bottle of Highland spirits, and three-and-fivepence-halfpenny in copper money."

There was a touch of the truth in these words that knocked me like a blow: clothes, a bottle of usquebaugh, and three-and-fivepence-halfpenny in change made up, indeed, the most of what Alan and I had carried from Auchurn; and I saw that some of James's people had been blabbing in their dungeons.

"You see I know more than you fancied," he resumed in triumph.

"And as for giving it this turn, great Mr. David, you must not suppose the Government of Great Britain and Ireland will ever be stuck for want of evidence. We have men here in prison who will swear out their lives as we direct them; as I direct, if you prefer

the phrase. So now you are to guess your part of glory if you choose to die. On the one hand, life, wine, women, and a duke to be your handgun: on the other, a rope to your craig, and a gibbet to clatter your bones on, and the lousiest, lowest story to hand down to your namesakes in the future that was ever told about a hired assassin. And see here!" he cried, with a formidable shrill voice, "see this paper that I pull out of my pocket. Look at the name there: it is the name of the great David, I believe, the ink scarce dry yet. Can you guess its nature? It is the warrant for your arrest, which I have but to touch this bell beside me to have executed on the spot. Once in the Tolbooth upon this paper, may God help you, for the die is cast!"

I must never deny that I was greatly horrified by so much baseness,

and much unmanned by the immediacy and ugliness of my danger. Mr.

Simon had already gloried in the changes of my hue; I make no doubt

I was now no ruddier than my shirt; my speech besides trembled.

"There is a gentleman in this room," cried I. "I appeal to him. I

put my life and credit in his hands."

Prestongrange shut his book with a snap. "I told you so, Simon,"

said he; "you have played your hand for all it was worth, and you

have lost. Mr. David," he went on, "I wish you to believe it was

by no choice of mine you were subjected to this proof. I wish you

could understand how glad I am you should come forth from it with

so much credit. You may not quite see how, but it is a little of a

service to myself. For had our friend here been more successful

than I was last night, it might have appeared that he was a better judge of men than I; it might have appeared we were altogether in the wrong situations, Mr. Simon and myself. And I know our friend Simon to be ambitious," says he, striking lightly on Fraser's shoulder. "As for this stage play, it is over; my sentiments are very much engaged in your behalf; and whatever issue we can find to this unfortunate affair, I shall make it my business to see it is adopted with tenderness to you."

These were very good words, and I could see besides that there was little love, and perhaps a spice of genuine ill-will, between these two who were opposed to me. For all that, it was unmistakable this interview had been designed, perhaps rehearsed, with the consent of both; it was plain my adversaries were in earnest to try me by all

methods; and now (persuasion, flattery, and menaces having been tried in vain) I could not but wonder what would be their next expedient. My eyes besides were still troubled, and my knees loose under me, with the distress of the late ordeal; and I could do no more than stammer the same form of words: "I put my life and credit in your hands."

"Well, well," said he, "we must try to save them. And in the meanwhile let us return to gentler methods. You must not bear any grudge upon my friend, Mr. Simon, who did but speak by his brief. And even if you did conceive some malice against myself, who stood by and seemed rather to hold a candle, I must not let that extend to innocent members of my family. These are greatly engaged to see more of you, and I cannot consent to have my young womenfolk

disappointed. To-morrow they will be going to Hope Park, where I think it very proper you should make your bow. Call for me first, when I may possibly have something for your private hearing; then you shall be turned abroad again under the conduct of my misses; and until that time repeat to me your promise of secrecy."

I had done better to have instantly refused, but in truth I was beside the power of reasoning; did as I was bid; took my leave I know not how; and when I was forth again in the close, and the door had shut behind me, was glad to lean on a house wall and wipe my face. That horrid apparition (as I may call it) of Mr. Simon rang in my memory, as a sudden noise rings after it is over in the ear. Tales of the man's father, of his falseness, of his manifold perpetual treacheries, rose before me from all that I had heard and

read, and joined on with what I had just experienced of himself.

Each time it occurred to me, the ingenious foulness of that calumny

he had proposed to nail upon my character startled me afresh. The

case of the man upon the gibbet by Leith Walk appeared scarce

distinguishable from that I was now to consider as my own. To rob

a child of so little more than nothing was certainly a paltry

enterprise for two grown men; but my own tale, as it was to be

represented in a court by Simon Fraser, appeared a fair second in

every possible point of view of sordidness and cowardice.

The voices of two of Prestongrange's liveried men upon his doorstep

recalled me to myself.

"Ha'e," said the one, "this billet as fast as ye can link to the

captain."

"Is that for the cateran back again?" asked the other.

"It would seem sae," returned the first. "Him and Simon are seeking him."

"I think Prestongrange is gane gyte," says the second. "He'll have James More in bed with him next."

"Weel, it's neither your affair nor mine's," said the first.

And they parted, the one upon his errand, and the other back into the house.

This looked as ill as possible. I was scarce gone and they were sending already for James More, to whom I thought Mr. Simon must have pointed when he spoke of men in prison and ready to redeem their lives by all extremities. My scalp curdled among my hair, and the next moment the blood leaped in me to remember Catriona. Poor lass! her father stood to be hanged for pretty indefensible misconduct. What was yet more unpalatable, it now seemed he was prepared to save his four quarters by the worst of shame and the most foul of cowardly murders--murder by the false oath; and to complete our misfortunes, it seemed myself was picked out to be the victim.

I began to walk swiftly and at random, conscious only of a desire