

CHAPTER VIII--THE BRAVO

The next day, August 29th, I kept my appointment at the Advocate's

in a coat that I had made to my own measure, and was but newly

ready,

"Aha," says Prestongrange, "you are very fine to-day; my misses are

to have a fine cavalier. Come, I take that kind of you. I take

that kind of you, Mr. David. O, we shall do very well yet, and I

believe your troubles are nearly at an end."

"You have news for me?" cried I.

"Beyond anticipation," he replied. "Your testimony is after all to

be received; and you may go, if you will, in my company to the trial, which is to be held at Inverary, Thursday, 21st proximo."

I was too much amazed to find words.

"In the meanwhile," he continued, "though I will not ask you to renew your pledge, I must caution you strictly to be reticent. Tomorrow your precognition must be taken; and outside of that, do you know, I think least said will be soonest mended."

"I shall try to go discreetly," said I. "I believe it is yourself that I must thank for this crowning mercy, and I do thank you gratefully. After yesterday, my lord, this is like the doors of Heaven. I cannot find it in my heart to get the thing believed."

"Ah, but you must try and manage, you must try and manage to believe it," says he, soothing-like, "and I am very glad to hear your acknowledgment of obligation, for I think you may be able to repay me very shortly"--he coughed--"or even now. The matter is much changed. Your testimony, which I shall not trouble you for to-day, will doubtless alter the complexion of the case for all concerned, and this makes it less delicate for me to enter with you on a side issue."

"My Lord," I interrupted, "excuse me for interrupting you, but how has this been brought about? The obstacles you told me of on Saturday appeared even to me to be quite insurmountable; how has it been contrived?"

"My dear Mr. David," said he, "it would never do for me to divulge (even to you, as you say) the councils of the Government; and you must content yourself, if you please, with the gross fact."

He smiled upon me like a father as he spoke, playing the while with a new pen; methought it was impossible there could be any shadow of deception in the man: yet when he drew to him a sheet of paper, dipped his pen among the ink, and began again to address me, I was somehow not so certain, and fell instinctively into an attitude of guard.

"There is a point I wish to touch upon," he began. "I purposely left it before upon one side, which need be now no longer

necessary. This is not, of course, a part of your examination,
which is to follow by another hand; this is a private interest of
my own. You say you encountered Alan Breck upon the hill?"

"I did, my lord," said I

"This was immediately after the murder?"

"It was."

"Did you speak to him?"

"I did."

"You had known him before, I think?" says my lord, carelessly.

"I cannot guess your reason for so thinking, my lord," I replied,

"but such in the fact."

"And when did you part with him again?" said he.

"I reserve my answer," said I. "The question will be put to me at
the assize."

"Mr. Balfour," said he, "will you not understand that all this is
without prejudice to yourself? I have promised you life and
honour; and, believe me, I can keep my word. You are therefore
clear of all anxiety. Alan, it appears, you suppose you can

protect; and you talk to me of your gratitude, which I think (if you push me) is not ill-deserved. There are a great many different considerations all pointing the same way; and I will never be persuaded that you could not help us (if you chose) to put salt on Alan's tail."

"My lord," said I, "I give you my word I do not so much as guess where Alan is."

He paused a breath. "Nor how he might be found?" he asked.

I sat before him like a log of wood.

"And so much for your gratitude, Mr. David!" he observed. Again

there was a piece of silence. "Well," said he, rising, "I am not fortunate, and we are a couple at cross purposes. Let us speak of it no more; you will receive notice when, where, and by whom, we are to take your precognition. And in the meantime, my misses must be waiting you. They will never forgive me if I detain their cavalier."

Into the hands of these Graces I was accordingly offered up, and found them dressed beyond what I had thought possible, and looking fair as a posy.

As we went forth from the doors a small circumstance occurred which came afterwards to look extremely big. I heard a whistle sound loud and brief like a signal, and looking all about, spied for one

moment the red head of Neil of the Tom, the son of Duncan. The next moment he was gone again, nor could I see so much as the skirt-tail of Catriona, upon whom I naturally supposed him to be then attending.

My three keepers led me out by Bristo and the Bruntsfield Links; whence a path carried us to Hope Park, a beautiful pleasance, laid with gravel-walks, furnished with seats and summer-sheds, and warded by a keeper. The way there was a little longsome; the two younger misses affected an air of genteel weariness that damped me cruelly, the eldest considered me with something that at times appeared like mirth; and though I thought I did myself more justice than the day before, it was not without some effort. Upon our reaching the park I was launched on a bevy of eight or ten young

gentlemen (some of them cockaded officers, the rest chiefly advocates) who crowded to attend upon these beauties; and though I was presented to all of them in very good words, it seemed I was by all immediately forgotten. Young folk in a company are like to savage animals: they fall upon or scorn a stranger without civility, or I may say, humanity; and I am sure, if I had been among baboons, they would have shown me quite as much of both. Some of the advocates set up to be wits, and some of the soldiers to be rattles; and I could not tell which of these extremes annoyed me most. All had a manner of handling their swords and coat-skirts, for the which (in mere black envy) I could have kicked them from the park. I daresay, upon their side, they grudged me extremely the fine company in which I had arrived; and altogether I had soon fallen behind, and stepped stiffly in the rear of all that

merriment with my own thoughts.

From these I was recalled by one of the officers, Lieutenant Hector

Duncansby, a gawky, leering Highland boy, asking if my name was not

"Palfour."

I told him it was, not very kindly, for his manner was scant civil.

"Ha, Palfour," says he, and then, repeating it, "Palfour, Palfour!"

"I am afraid you do not like my name, sir," says I, annoyed with

myself to be annoyed with such a rustical fellow.

"No," says he, "but I wass thinking."

"I would not advise you to make a practice of that, sir," says I.

"I feel sure you would not find it to agree with you."

"Tit you effer hear where Alan Grigor fand the tangs?" said he.

I asked him what he could possibly mean, and he answered, with a heckling laugh, that he thought I must have found the poker in the same place and swallowed it.

There could be no mistake about this, and my cheek burned.

"Before I went about to put affronts on gentlemen," said I, "I think I would learn the English language first."

He took me by the sleeve with a nod and a wink and led me quietly
outside Hope Park. But no sooner were we beyond the view of the
promenaders, than the fashion of his countenance changed. "You tam
lowland scoon'rel!" cries he, and hit me a buffet on the jaw with
his closed fist.

I paid him as good or better on the return; whereupon he stepped a
little back and took off his hat to me decorously.

"Enough plows I think," says he. "I will be the offended
shentleman, for who effer heard of such suffeeciency as tell a
shentlemans that is the king's officer he cannae speak Cot's
English? We have swords at our hurdles, and here is the King's

Park at hand. Will ye walk first, or let me show ye the way?"

I returned his bow, told him to go first, and followed him. As he went I heard him grumble to himself about COT'S ENGLISH and the KING'S COAT, so that I might have supposed him to be seriously offended. But his manner at the beginning of our interview was there to belie him. It was manifest he had come prepared to fasten a quarrel on me, right or wrong; manifest that I was taken in a fresh contrivance of my enemies; and to me (conscious as I was of my deficiencies) manifest enough that I should be the one to fall in our encounter.

As we came into that rough rocky desert of the King's Park I was tempted half-a-dozen times to take to my heels and run for it, so

loath was I to show my ignorance in fencing, and so much averse to die or even to be wounded. But I considered if their malice went as far as this, it would likely stick at nothing; and that to fall by the sword, however ungracefully, was still an improvement on the gallows. I considered besides that by the unguarded pertness of my words and the quickness of my blow I had put myself quite out of court; and that even if I ran, my adversary would probably pursue and catch me, which would add disgrace to my misfortune. So that, taking all in all, I continued marching behind him, much as a man follows the hangman, and certainly with no more hope.

We went about the end of the long craigs, and came into the Hunter's Bog. Here, on a piece of fair turf, my adversary drew.

There was nobody there to see us but some birds; and no resource

for me but to follow his example, and stand on guard with the best

face I could display. It seems it was not good enough for Mr.

Dancansby, who spied some flaw in my manoeuvres, paused, looked

upon me sharply, and came off and on, and menaced me with his blade

in the air. As I had seen no such proceedings from Alan, and was

besides a good deal affected with the proximity of death, I grew

quite bewildered, stood helpless, and could have longed to run

away.

"Fat deil ails her?" cries the lieutenant.

And suddenly engaging, he twitched the sword out of my grasp and

sent it flying far among the rushes.

Twice was this manoeuvre repeated; and the third time when I brought back my humiliated weapon, I found he had returned his own to the scabbard, and stood awaiting me with a face of some anger, and his hands clasped under his skirt.

"Pe tanned if I touch you!" he cried, and asked me bitterly what right I had to stand up before "shentlemans" when I did not know the back of a sword from the front of it.

I answered that was the fault of my upbringing; and would he do me the justice to say I had given him all the satisfaction it was unfortunately in my power to offer, and had stood up like a man?

"And that is the truth," said he. "I am fery prave myself, and

pold as a lions. But to stand up there--and you ken naething of
fence!--the way that you did, I declare it was peyond me. And I am
sorry for the plow; though I declare I pelief your own was the
elder brother, and my heid still sings with it. And I declare if I
had kent what way it wass, I would not put a hand to such a piece
of pusiness."

"That is handsomely said," I replied, "and I am sure you will not
stand up a second time to be the actor for my private enemies."

"Indeed, no, Palfour," said he; "and I think I was used extremely
suffeeciently myself to be set up to fecht with an auld wife, or
all the same as a bairn whateffer! And I will tell the Master so,
and fecht him, by Cot, himself!"

"And if you knew the nature of Mr. Simon's quarrel with me," said

I, "you would be yet the more affronted to be mingled up with such affairs."

He swore he could well believe it; that all the Lovats were made of

the same meal and the devil was the miller that ground that; then

suddenly shaking me by the hand, he vowed I was a pretty enough

fellow after all, that it was a thousand pities I had been

neglected, and that if he could find the time, he would give an eye

himself to have me educated.

"You can do me a better service than even what you propose," said

I; and when he had asked its nature--"Come with me to the house of

one of my enemies, and testify how I have carried myself this day,"

I told him. "That will be the true service. For though he has

sent me a gallant adversary for the first, the thought in Mr.

Simon's mind is merely murder. There will be a second and then a

third; and by what you have seen of my cleverness with the cold

steel, you can judge for yourself what is like to be the upshot."

"And I would not like it myself, if I was no more of a man than

what you wass!" he cried. "But I will do you right, Palfour. Lead

on!"

If I had walked slowly on the way into that accursed park my heels

were light enough on the way out. They kept time to a very good

old air, that is as ancient as the Bible, and the words of it are:

"SURELY THE BITTERNESS OF DEATH IS PASSED." I mind that I was extremely thirsty, and had a drink at Saint Margaret's well on the road down, and the sweetness of that water passed belief. We went through the sanctuary, up the Canongate, in by the Netherbow, and straight to Prestongrange's door, talking as we came and arranging the details of our affair. The footman owned his master was at home, but declared him engaged with other gentlemen on very private business, and his door forbidden.

"My business is but for three minutes, and it cannot wait," said I.

"You may say it is by no means private, and I shall be even glad to have some witnesses."

As the man departed unwillingly enough upon this errand, we made so

bold as to follow him to the ante-chamber, whence I could hear for a while the murmuring of several voices in the room within. The truth is, they were three at the one table--Prestongrange, Simon Fraser, and Mr. Erskine, Sheriff of Perth; and as they were met in consultation on the very business of the Appin murder, they were a little disturbed at my appearance, but decided to receive me.

"Well, well, Mr. Balfour, and what brings you here again? and who is this you bring with you?" says Prestongrange.

As for Fraser, he looked before him on the table.

"He is here to bear a little testimony in my favour, my lord, which

I think it very needful you should hear," said I, and turned to

Duncansby.

"I have only to say this," said the lieutenant, "that I stood up
this day with Palfour in the Hunter's Pog, which I am now fery
sorry for, and he behaved himself as pretty as a shentlemans could
ask it. And I have creat respects for Palfour," he added.

"I thank you for your honest expressions," said I.

Whereupon Duncansby made his bow to the company, and left the
chamber, as we had agreed upon before.

"What have I to do with this?" says Prestongrange.

"I will tell your lordship in two words," said I. "I have brought this gentleman, a King's officer, to do me so much justice. Now I think my character is covered, and until a certain date, which your lordship can very well supply, it will be quite in vain to despatch against me any more officers. I will not consent to fight my way through the garrison of the castle."

The veins swelled on Prestongrange's brow, and he regarded me with fury.

"I think the devil uncoupled this dog of a lad between my legs!" he cried; and then, turning fiercely on his neighbour, "This is some of your work, Simon," he said. "I spy your hand in the business, and, let me tell you, I resent it. It is disloyal, when we are

agreed upon one expedient, to follow another in the dark. You are disloyal to me. What! you let me send this lad to the place with my very daughters! And because I let drop a word to you..... Fy, sir, keep your dishonours to yourself!"

Simon was deadly pale. "I will be a kick-ball between you and the Duke no longer," he exclaimed. "Either come to an agreement, or come to a differ, and have it out among yourselves. But I will no longer fetch and carry, and get your contrary instructions, and be blamed by both. For if I were to tell you what I think of all your Hanover business it would make your head sing."

But Sheriff Erskine had preserved his temper, and now intervened smoothly. "And in the meantime," says he, "I think we should tell

Mr. Balfour that his character for valour is quite established. He may sleep in peace. Until the date he was so good as to refer to it shall be put to the proof no more."

His coolness brought the others to their prudence; and they made haste, with a somewhat distracted civility, to pack me from the house.