

CHAPTER XVI--THE MISSING WITNESS

On the seventeenth, the day I was trusted with the Writer, I had much rebellion against fate. The thought of him waiting in the King's Arms, and of what he would think, and what he would say when next we met, tormented and oppressed me. The truth was unbelievable, so much I had to grant, and it seemed cruel hard I should be posted as a liar and a coward, and have never consciously omitted what it was possible that I should do. I repeated this form of words with a kind of bitter relish, and re-examined in that light the steps of my behaviour. It seemed I had behaved to James Stewart as a brother might; all the past was a picture that I could be proud of, and there was only the present to consider. I could not swim the sea, nor yet fly in the air, but there was always Andie. I had done him a service, he liked me; I had a lever there

to work on; if it were just for decency, I must try once more with

Andie.

It was late afternoon; there was no sound in all the Bass but the

lap and bubble of a very quiet sea; and my four companions were all

crept apart, the three Macgregors higher on the rock, and Andie

with his Bible to a sunny place among the ruins; there I found him

in deep sleep, and, as soon as he was awake, appealed to him with

some fervour of manner and a good show of argument.

"If I thought it was to do guid to ye, Shaws!" said he, staring at

me over his spectacles.

"It's to save another," said I, "and to redeem my word. What would

be more good than that? Do ye no mind the scripture, Andie? And

you with the Book upon your lap! WHAT SHALL IT PROFIT A MAN IF HE

GAIN THE WHOLE WORLD?"

"Ay," said he, "that's grand for you. But where do I come in! I

have my word to redeem the same's yoursel'. And what are ye asking

me to do, but just to sell it ye for siller?"

"Andie! have I named the name of siller?" cried I.

"Ou, the name's naething", said he; "the thing is there, whatever.

It just comes to this; if I am to service ye the way that you

propose, I'll lose my livelihood. Then it's clear ye'll have to

make it up to me, and a pickle mair, for your ain credit like. And

what's that but just a bribe? And if even I was certain of the
bribe! But by a' that I can learn, it's far frae that; and if YOU
were to hang, where would I be? Na: the thing's no possible.
And just awa' wi' ye like a bonny lad! and let Andie read his
chapter."

I remember I was at bottom a good deal gratified with this result;
and the next humour I fell into was one (I had near said) of
gratitude to Prestongrange, who had saved me, in this violent,
illegal manner, out of the midst of my dangers, temptations, and
perplexities. But this was both too flimsy and too cowardly to
last me long, and the remembrance of James began to succeed to the
possession of my spirits. The 21st, the day set for the trial, I
passed in such misery of mind as I can scarce recall to have

endured, save perhaps upon Isle Earraid only. Much of the time I lay on a brae-side betwixt sleep and waking, my body motionless, my mind full of violent thoughts. Sometimes I slept indeed; but the court-house of Inverary and the prisoner glancing on all sides to find his missing witness, followed me in slumber; and I would wake again with a start to darkness of spirit and distress of body. I thought Andie seemed to observe me, but I paid him little heed. Verily, my bread was bitter to me, and my days a burthen.

Early the next morning (Friday, 22nd) a boat came with provisions, and Andie placed a packet in my hand. The cover was without address but sealed with a Government seal. It enclosed two notes.

"Mr. Balfour can now see for himself it is too late to meddle. His conduct will be observed and his discretion rewarded." So ran the

first, which seemed to be laboriously writ with the left hand.

There was certainly nothing in these expressions to compromise the writer, even if that person could be found; the seal, which formidably served instead of signature, was affixed to a separate sheet on which there was no scratch of writing; and I had to confess that (so far) my adversaries knew what they were doing, and to digest as well as I was able the threat that peeped under the promise.

But the second enclosure was by far the more surprising. It was in a lady's hand of writ. "MAISTER DAUVIT BALFOUR IS INFORMED A FRIEND WAS SPEIRING FOR HIM AND HER EYES WERE OF THE GREY," it ran - and seemed so extraordinary a piece to come to my hands at such a moment and under cover of a Government seal, that I stood stupid.

Catriona's grey eyes shone in my remembrance. I thought, with a bound of pleasure, she must be the friend. But who should the writer be, to have her billet thus enclosed with Prestongrange's? And of all wonders, why was it thought needful to give me this pleasing but most inconsequent intelligence upon the Bass? For the writer, I could hit upon none possible except Miss Grant. Her family, I remembered, had remarked on Catriona's eyes and even named her for their colour; and she herself had been much in the habit to address me with a broad pronunciation, by way of a sniff, I supposed, at my rusticity. No doubt, besides, but she lived in the same house as this letter came from. So there remained but one step to be accounted for; and that was how Prestongrange should have permitted her at all in an affair so secret, or let her daft-like billet go in the same cover with his own. But even here I had

a glimmering. For, first of all, there was something rather alarming about the young lady, and papa might be more under her domination than I knew. And, second, there was the man's continual policy to be remembered, how his conduct had been continually mingled with caresses, and he had scarce ever, in the midst of so much contention, laid aside a mask of friendship. He must conceive that my imprisonment had incensed me. Perhaps this little jesting, friendly message was intended to disarm my rancour?

I will be honest--and I think it did. I felt a sudden warmth towards that beautiful Miss Grant, that she should stoop to so much interest in my affairs. The summoning up of Catriona moved me of itself to milder and more cowardly counsels. If the Advocate knew of her and our acquaintance--if I should please him by some of that

"discretion" at which his letter pointed--to what might not this

lead! IN VAIN IS THE NET PREPARED IN THE SIGHT OF ANY FOWL, the

Scripture says. Well, fowls must be wiser than folk! For I

thought I perceived the policy, and yet fell in with it.

I was in this frame, my heart beating, the grey eyes plain before

me like two stars, when Andie broke in upon my musing.

"I see ye has gotten guid news," said he.

I found him looking curiously in my face; with that there came

before me like a vision of James Stewart and the court of Inverary;

and my mind turned at once like a door upon its hinges. Trials, I

reflected, sometimes draw out longer than is looked for. Even if I

came to Inverary just too late, something might yet be attempted in the interests of James--and in those of my own character, the best would be accomplished. In a moment, it seemed without thought, I had a plan devised.

"Andie," said I, "is it still to be to-morrow?"

He told me nothing was changed.

"Was anything said about the hour?" I asked.

He told me it was to be two o'clock afternoon.

"And about the place?" I pursued.

"Whatten place?" says Andie.

"The place I am to be landed at?" said I.

He owned there was nothing as to that.

"Very well, then," I said, "this shall be mine to arrange. The

wind is in the east, my road lies westward: keep your boat, I hire

it; let us work up the Forth all day; and land me at two o'clock

to-morrow at the westmost we'll can have reached."

"Ye daft callant!" he cried; "ye would try for Inverary after a!"

"Just that, Andie," says I.

"Weel, ye're ill to beat!" says he. "And I was a kind o' sorry for ye a' day yesterday," he added. "Ye see, I was never entirely sure till then, which way of it ye really wantit."

Here was a spur to a lame horse!

"A word in your ear, Andie," said I. "This plan of mine has another advantage yet. We can leave these Hielandman behind us on the rock, and one of your boats from the Castleton can bring them off to-morrow. Yon Neil has a queer eye when he regards you; maybe, if I was once out of the gate there might be knives again; these red-shanks are unco grudgeful. And if there should come to

be any question, here is your excuse. Our lives were in danger by these savages; being answerable for my safety, you chose the part to bring me from their neighbourhood and detain me the rest of the time on board your boat: and do you know, Andie?" says I, with a smile, "I think it was very wisely chosen,"

"The truth is I have nae goo for Neil," says Andie, "nor he for me, I'm thinking; and I would like ill to come to my hands wi' the man. Tam Anster will make a better hand of it with the cattle onyway."

(For this man, Anster, came from Fife, where the Gaelic is still spoken.) "Ay, ay!" says Andie, "Tam'll can deal with them the best. And troth! the mair I think of it, the less I see we would be required. The place--ay, feggs! they had forgot the place. Eh, Shaws, ye're a lang-heided chield when ye like! Forby that I'm

awing ye my life," he added, with more solemnity, and offered me

his hand upon the bargain.

Whereupon, with scarce more words, we stepped suddenly on board the

boat, cast off, and set the lug. The Gregara were then busy upon

breakfast, for the cookery was their usual part; but, one of them

stepping to the battlements, our flight was observed before we were

twenty fathoms from the rock; and the three of them ran about the

ruins and the landing-shelf, for all the world like ants about a

broken nest, hailing and crying on us to return. We were still in

both the lee and the shadow of the rock, which last lay broad upon

the waters, but presently came forth in almost the same moment into

the wind and sunshine; the sail filled, the boat heeled to the

gunwale, and we swept immediately beyond sound of the men's voices.

To what terrors they endured upon the rock, where they were now deserted without the countenance of any civilised person or so much as the protection of a Bible, no limit can be set; nor had they any brandy left to be their consolation, for even in the haste and secrecy of our departure Andie had managed to remove it.

It was our first care to set Anster ashore in a cove by the Glenteithy Rocks, so that the deliverance of our maroons might be duly seen to the next day. Thence we kept away up Firth. The breeze, which was then so spirited, swiftly declined, but never wholly failed us. All day we kept moving, though often not much more; and it was after dark ere we were up with the Queensferry.

To keep the letter of Andie's engagement (or what was left of it) I must remain on board, but I thought no harm to communicate with the

shore in writing. On Prestongrange's cover, where the Government seal must have a good deal surprised my correspondent, I writ, by the boat's lantern, a few necessary words, aboard and Andie carried them to Rankeillor. In about an hour he came again, with a purse of money and the assurance that a good horse should be standing saddled for me by two to-morrow at Clackmannan Pool. This done, and the boat riding by her stone anchor, we lay down to sleep under the sail.

We were in the Pool the next day long ere two; and there was nothing left for me but to sit and wait. I felt little alacrity upon my errand. I would have been glad of any passable excuse to lay it down; but none being to be found, my uneasiness was no less great than if I had been running to some desired pleasure. By

shortly after one the horse was at the waterside, and I could see a man walking it to and fro till I should land, which vastly swelled my impatience. Andie ran the moment of my liberation very fine, showing himself a man of his bare word, but scarce serving his employers with a heaped measure; and by about fifty seconds after two I was in the saddle and on the full stretch for Stirling. In a little more than an hour I had passed that town, and was already mounting Alan Water side, when the weather broke in a small tempest. The rain blinded me, the wind had nearly beat me from the saddle, and the first darkness of the night surprised me in a wilderness still some way east of Balwhidder, not very sure of my direction and mounted on a horse that began already to be weary.

In the press of my hurry, and to be spared the delay and annoyance

of a guide, I had followed (so far as it was possible for any
horseman) the line of my journey with Alan. This I did with open
eyes, foreseeing a great risk in it, which the tempest had now
brought to a reality. The last that I knew of where I was, I think
it must have been about Uam Var; the hour perhaps six at night. I
must still think it great good fortune that I got about eleven to
my destination, the house of Duncan Dhu. Where I had wandered in
the interval perhaps the horse could tell. I know we were twice
down, and once over the saddle and for a moment carried away in a
roaring burn. Steed and rider were bemired up to the eyes.

From Duncan I had news of the trial. It was followed in all these
Highland regions with religious interest; news of it spread from
Inverary as swift as men could travel; and I was rejoiced to learn

that, up to a late hour that Saturday it was not yet concluded; and all men began to suppose it must spread over the Monday. Under the spur of this intelligence I would not sit to eat; but, Duncan having agreed to be my guide, took the road again on foot, with the piece in my hand and munching as I went. Duncan brought with him a flask of usquebaugh and a hand-lantern; which last enlightened us just so long as we could find houses where to rekindle it, for the thing leaked outrageously and blew out with every gust. The more part of the night we walked blindfold among sheets of rain, and day found us aimless on the mountains. Hard by we struck a hut on a burn-side, where we got bite and a direction; and, a little before the end of the sermon, came to the kirk doors of Inverary.

The rain had somewhat washed the upper parts of me, but I was still

bogged as high as to the knees; I streamed water; I was so weary I could hardly limp, and my face was like a ghost's. I stood certainly more in need of a change of raiment and a bed to lie on, than of all the benefits in Christianity. For all which (being persuaded the chief point for me was to make myself immediately public) I set the door of the church with the dirty Duncan at my tails, and finding a vacant place sat down.

"Thirteenthly, my brethren, and in parenthesis, the law itself must be regarded as a means of grace," the minister was saying, in the voice of one delighting to pursue an argument.

The sermon was in English on account of the assize. The judges were present with their armed attendants, the halberts glittered in

a corner by the door, and the seats were thronged beyond custom with the array of lawyers. The text was in Romans 5th and 13th-- the minister a skilled hand; and the whole of that able churchful-- from Argyle, and my Lords Elchies and Kilkerran, down to the halbertmen that came in their attendance--was sunk with gathered brows in a profound critical attention. The minister himself and a sprinkling of those about the door observed our entrance at the moment and immediately forgot the same; the rest either did not hear or would not hear or would not be heard; and I sat amongst my friends and enemies unremarked.

The first that I singled out was Prestongrange. He sat well forward, like an eager horseman in the saddle, his lips moving with relish, his eyes glued on the minister; the doctrine was clearly to

his mind. Charles Stewart, on the other hand, was half asleep, and looked harassed and pale. As for Simon Fraser, he appeared like a blot, and almost a scandal, in the midst of that attentive congregation, digging his hands in his pockets, shifting his legs, clearing his throat, and rolling up his bald eyebrows and shooting out his eyes to right and left, now with a yawn, now with a secret smile. At times, too, he would take the Bible in front of him, run it through, seem to read a bit, run it through again, and stop and yawn prodigiously: the whole as if for exercise.

In the course of this restlessness his eye alighted on myself. He sat a second stupefied, then tore a half-leaf out of the Bible, scrawled upon it with a pencil, and passed it with a whispered word to his next neighbour. The note came to Prestongrange, who gave me

but the one look; thence it voyaged to the hands of Mr. Erskine;

thence again to Argyle, where he sat between the other two lords of

session, and his Grace turned and fixed me with an arrogant eye.

The last of those interested in my presence was Charlie Stewart,

and he too began to pencil and hand about dispatches, none of which

I was able to trace to their destination in the crowd.

But the passage of these notes had aroused notice; all who were in

the secret (or supposed themselves to be so) were whispering

information--the rest questions; and the minister himself seemed

quite discountenanced by the flutter in the church and sudden stir

and whispering. His voice changed, he plainly faltered, nor did he

again recover the easy conviction and full tones of his delivery.

It would be a puzzle to him till his dying day, why a sermon that

had gone with triumph through four parts, should this miscarry in
the fifth.

As for me, I continued to sit there, very wet and weary, and a good
deal anxious as to what should happen next, but greatly exulting in
my success.