

CHAPTER XXVII--A TWOSOME

I believe it was about the fifth day, and I know at least that James was in one of his fits of gloom, when I received three letters. The first was from Alan, offering to visit me in Leyden; the other two were out of Scotland and prompted by the same affair, which was the death of my uncle and my own complete accession to my rights. Rankeillor's was, of course, wholly in the business view; Miss Grant's was like herself, a little more witty than wise, full of blame to me for not having written (though how was I to write with such intelligence?) and of rallying talk about Catriona, which it cut me to the quick to read in her very presence.

For it was of course in my own rooms that I found them, when I came

to dinner, so that I was surprised out of my news in the very first moment of reading it. This made a welcome diversion for all three of us, nor could any have foreseen the ill consequences that ensued. It was accident that brought the three letters the same day, and that gave them into my hand in the same room with James More; and of all the events that flowed from that accident, and which I might have prevented if I had held my tongue, the truth is that they were preordained before Agricola came into Scotland or Abraham set out upon his travels.

The first that I opened was naturally Alan's; and what more natural than that I should comment on his design to visit me? but I observed James to sit up with an air of immediate attention.

"Is that not Alan Breck that was suspected of the Appin accident?"

he inquired.

I told him, "Ay," it was the same; and he withheld me some time from my other letters, asking of our acquaintance, of Alan's manner of life in France, of which I knew very little, and further of his visit as now proposed.

"All we forfeited folk hang a little together," he explained, "and besides I know the gentleman: and though his descent is not the thing, and indeed he has no true right to use the name of Stewart, he was very much admired in the day of Drumrossie. He did there like a soldier; if some that need not be named had done as well, the upshot need not have been so melancholy to remember. There

were two that did their best that day, and it makes a bond between
the pair of us," says he.

I could scarce refrain from shooting out my tongue at him, and
could almost have wished that Alan had been there to have inquired
a little further into that mention of his birth. Though, they tell
me, the same was indeed not wholly regular.

Meanwhile, I had opened Miss Grant's, and could not withhold an
exclamation.

"Catriona," I cried, forgetting, the first time since her father
was arrived, to address her by a handle, "I am come into my kingdom
fairly, I am the laird of Shaws indeed--my uncle is dead at last."

She clapped her hands together leaping from her seat. The next moment it must have come over both of us at once what little cause of joy was left to either, and we stood opposite, staring on each other sadly.

But James showed himself a ready hypocrite. "My daughter," says he, "is this how my cousin learned you to behave? Mr. David has lost a new friend, and we should first condole with him on his bereavement."

"Troth, sir," said I, turning to him in a kind of anger, "I can make no such great faces. His death is as blithe news as ever I got."

"It's a good soldier's philosophy," says James. "'Tis the way of flesh, we must all go, all go. And if the gentleman was so far from your favour, why, very well! But we may at least congratulate you on your accession to your estates."

"Nor can I say that either," I replied, with the same heat. "It is a good estate; what matters that to a lone man that has enough already? I had a good revenue before in my frugality; and but for the man's death--which gratifies me, shame to me that must confess it!--I see not how anyone is to be bettered by this change."

"Come, come," said he, "you are more affected than you let on, or you would never make yourself out so lonely. Here are three

letters; that means three that wish you well; and I could name two more, here in this very chamber. I have known you not so very long, but Catriona, when we are alone, is never done with the singing of your praises."

She looked up at him, a little wild at that; and he slid off at once into another matter, the extent of my estate, which (during the most of the dinner time) he continued to dwell upon with interest. But it was to no purpose he dissembled; he had touched the matter with too gross a hand: and I knew what to expect.

Dinner was scarce ate when he plainly discovered his designs. He reminded Catriona of an errand, and bid her attend to it. "I do not see you should be one beyond the hour," he added, "and friend David will be good enough to bear me company till you return." She

made haste to obey him without words. I do not know if she understood, I believe not; but I was completely satisfied, and sat strengthening my mind for what should follow.

The door had scarce closed behind her departure, when the man leaned back in his chair and addressed me with a good affectation of easiness. Only the one thing betrayed him, and that was his face; which suddenly shone all over with fine points of sweat.

"I am rather glad to have a word alone with you," says he, "because in our first interview there were some expressions you misapprehended and I have long meant to set you right upon. My daughter stands beyond doubt. So do you, and I would make that good with my sword against all gainsayers. But, my dear David,

this world is a censorious place--as who should know it better than myself, who have lived ever since the days of my late departed father, God sain him! in a perfect spate of calumnies? We have to face to that; you and me have to consider of that; we have to consider of that." And he wagged his head like a minister in a pulpit.

"To what effect, Mr. Drummond?" said I. "I would be obliged to you if you would approach your point."

"Ay, ay," said he, laughing, "like your character, indeed! and what I most admire in it. But the point, my worthy fellow, is sometimes in a kittle bit." He filled a glass of wine. "Though between you and me, that are such fast friends, it need not bother us long.

The point, I need scarcely tell you, is my daughter. And the first thing is that I have no thought in my mind of blaming you. In the unfortunate circumstances, what could you do else? 'Deed, and I cannot tell."

"I thank you for that," said I, pretty close upon my guard.

"I have besides studied your character," he went on; "your talents are fair; you seem to have a moderate competence, which does no harm; and one thing with another, I am very happy to have to announce to you that I have decided on the latter of the two ways open."

"I am afraid I am dull," said I. "What ways are these?"

He bent his brows upon me formidably and uncrossed his legs. "Why, sir," says he, "I think I need scarce describe them to a gentleman of your condition; either that I should cut your throat or that you should marry my daughter."

"You are pleased to be quite plain at last," said I.

"And I believe I have been plain from the beginning!" cries he robustiously. "I am a careful parent, Mr. Balfour; but I thank God, a patient and delectable man. There is many a father, sir, that would have hirsled you at once either to the altar or the field. My esteem for your character--"

"Mr. Drummond," I interrupted, "if you have any esteem for me at all, I will beg of you to moderate your voice. It is quite needless to rowt at a gentleman in the same chamber with yourself and lending you his best attention."

"Why, very true," says he, with an immediate change. "And you must excuse the agitations of a parent."

"I understand you then," I continued--"for I will take no note of your other alternative, which perhaps it was a pity you let fall--I understand you rather to offer me encouragement in case I should desire to apply for your daughter's hand?"

"It is not possible to express my meaning better," said he, "and I

see we shall do well together."

"That remains to be yet seen," said I. "But so much I need make no secret of, that I bear the lady you refer to the most tender affection, and I could not fancy, even in a dream, a better fortune than to get her."

"I was sure of it, I felt certain of you, David," he cried, and reached out his hand to me.

I put it by. "You go too fast, Mr. Drummond," said I. "There are conditions to be made; and there is a difficulty in the path, which I see not entirely how we shall come over. I have told you that, upon my side, there is no objection to the marriage, but I have

good reason to believe there will be much on the young lady's."

"This is all beside the mark," says he. "I will engage for her

acceptance."

"I think you forget, Mr. Drummond," said I, "that, even in dealing

with myself, you have been betrayed into two-three unpalatable

expressions. I will have none such employed to the young lady. I

am here to speak and think for the two of us; and I give you to

understand that I would no more let a wife be forced upon myself,

than what I would let a husband be forced on the young lady."

He sat and glowered at me like one in doubt and a good deal of

temper.

"So that is to be the way of it," I concluded. "I will marry Miss Drummond, and that blithely, if she is entirely willing. But if there be the least unwillingness, as I have reason to fear--marry her will I never."

"Well well," said he, "this is a small affair. As soon as she returns I will sound her a bit, and hope to reassure you--"

But I cut in again. "Not a finger of you, Mr. Drummond, or I cry off, and you can seek a husband to your daughter somewhere else," said I. "It is I that am to be the only dealer and the only judge. I shall satisfy myself exactly; and none else shall anyways meddle--you the least of all."

"Upon my word, sir!" he exclaimed, "and who are you to be the judge?"

"The bridegroom, I believe," said I.

"This is to quibble," he cried. "You turn your back upon the fact.

The girl, my daughter, has no choice left to exercise. Her character is gone."

"And I ask your pardon," said I, "but while this matter lies between her and you and me, that is not so."

"What security have I!" he cried. "Am I to let my daughter's

reputation depend upon a chance?"

"You should have thought of all this long ago," said I, "before you were so misguided as to lose her; and not afterwards when it is quite too late. I refuse to regard myself as any way accountable for your neglect, and I will be browbeat by no man living. My mind is quite made up, and come what may, I will not depart from it a hair's breadth. You and me are to sit here in company till her return: upon which, without either word or look from you, she and I are to go forth again to hold our talk. If she can satisfy me that she is willing to this step, I will then make it; and if she cannot, I will not."

He leaped out of his chair like a man stung. "I can spy your

manoeuvre," he cried; "you would work upon her to refuse!"

"Maybe ay, and maybe no," said I. "That is the way it is to be, whatever."

"And if I refuse?" cries he.

"Then, Mr. Drummond, it will have to come to the throat-cutting," said I.

What with the size of the man, his great length of arm in which he came near rivalling his father, and his reputed skill at weapons, I did not use this word without trepidation, to say nothing at all of the circumstance that he was Catriona's father. But I might have

spared myself alarms. From the poorness of my lodging--he does not seem to have remarked his daughter's dresses, which were indeed all equally new to him--and from the fact that I had shown myself averse to lend, he had embraced a strong idea of my poverty. The sudden news of my estate convinced him of his error, and he had made but the one bound of it on this fresh venture, to which he was now so wedded, that I believe he would have suffered anything rather than fall to the alternative of fighting.

A little while longer he continued to dispute with me, until I hit upon a word that silenced him.

"If I find you so averse to let me see the lady by herself," said

I, "I must suppose you have very good grounds to think me in the

right about her unwillingness."

He gabbled some kind of an excuse.

"But all this is very exhausting to both of our tempers," I added,

"and I think we would do better to preserve a judicious silence."

The which we did until the girl returned, and I must suppose would

have cut a very ridiculous figure had there been any there to view

us.