**Bennachie 9**

**Treating a Kah Du-Kel**

With little thought of the consequences, Gurval, having collected his bag and louzen, moved quickly towards the source of the pain-ridden cries. Andrew, Shonagh and a group of the folk followed closely on his heels. All were eager to see what was making the noise that still sounded loudly and shrilly at regular intervals, although many were a little apprehensive about what exactly they might find down the dimly lit passageway.

They soon found the animal that was making the alarming plea for aid and, as Gurval had asserted, it was a Kah Du-Kel.

‘Careful, Gurval,’ cautioned one of the folk. He might just be trying to fool you. He might attack!’

Gurval ignored the warning, ‘No animal could sound like this unless it was in real pain. Besides that, the Kah Du-Kel hunt in packs. This is a solitary beast and there’s no doubt that he’s hurt.’

Gurval approached the beast, which lay on its side against the wall of the passageway, with quiet, deliberate caution, but he ensured he showed no fear. As he neared the stricken animal he murmured words of soothing comfort in an attempt to quieten the beast and to win its confidence.

The crowd stood back from the scene to give Gurval room to inspect the wound of the Kah Du-Kel. It quickly became obvious that the animal was the one which Andrew had struck with the rock because it was wounded in exactly the place where the rock had hit the cat.

‘Could somebody wipe some light for me?’ asked Gurval. ‘It’s gey dark here at the wall.’

A wet rag was fetched and water applied to the granite surface. Sure enough, once the mica in the granite was wet, the light grew brighter and Gurval knelt to inspect the wound, while still crooning soft words of comfort to the injured cat. It was as if the beast knew that Gurval was trying to help it, for it quietened its cries, and the high-pitched growls and screeches were replaced by a sonorous, if laboured and heavy, breathing.

Gurval poured some liquid into an earthenware bowl and managed to get the cat to drink some of it. After a few minutes the beast’s breathing eased and, although its eyes were open and shining a bright yellow, it was as if the cat was now asleep. Gurval inspected the wound more closely. Using a piece of rag dipped in another fluid, he gently cleaned the wound of blood and examined it carefully.

Seeing the wound on the Kah Du-Kel reminded Shonagh of the graze on her own arm and she felt for the dressing of tree bark that Gurval had put on to it. She discovered that the dressing had disappeared. She supposed she had lost it during the panic caused by the attack of the Kah Du-Kel, but she wasn’t very sure. She couldn’t remember losing it. She glanced at her arm, but saw no mark or scar! She looked more closely and could just make out the faintest of red marks where once there had been quite a considerable graze. Shonagh was astounded and mystified, but decided to ignore her findings until Gurval had finished treating the black cat.

Having cleaned the wound, Gurval was now applying some ointment which he rubbed slowly and gently into the injured area. His fingers seemed to work to a pattern and, all the time he was applying the salve, the once ferocious black cat lay quite still and watched with patient eyes. Once he was satisfied that the ointment was suitably rubbed in, Gurval applied a dressing. Shonagh watched closely, but could see nothing that resembled a sticking plaster, yet the dressing stayed in place.

Gurval gave the cat another drink then called on Enora to help him get the cat to its feet. Gently they eased their hands under the cat and carefully raised it on to its four feet. The cat, instead acting like the wild ferocious beast it had formerly been, behaved just like a well-trained household tabby and allowed itself to be stroked and petted on to its paws.

Gurval and Enora stood back and the Kah Du-Kel stood stock still for a few moments before taking a few hesitant steps forward. It stretched itself, like all cats like doing, gave a low, deep purr of apparent satisfaction, and took a long look at the gathering of folk who were assessing its progress. It took a few more tender steps and stopped once more. It took a long look a Gurval, raised its head and gave out a high piercing growl which could only be interpreted as a signal of thanks. It then lowered its head almost to the ground, as if in submission, and trotted off along the tunnel away from the crowd of folk.

As the Kah Du-Kel made its way gingerly, but painlessly, away from the gathering of folk, Gurval began to gather his ointments, potions and dressings and put them in his bag. As he did so it was obvious to all present that there was still something bothering the magerez. He appeared deep in thought and not even Enora cared to interrupt his musings.

As they began the short journey back to the ker he suddenly exclaimed, ‘Kabell-touseg! It’s kabell-touseg!’

Enora was as puzzled as everyone else. ‘What is it, Gurval? Why do you need kabell-touseg? What hae they to do with the Kah Du-Kel?’

‘I’ll explain when we get back to the ker. I should hae kent, noo I’m almost sure!’ he said mysteriously.

Enora’s impatience began to show through, ‘Gurval! You must tell us something! You can’t just say ‘kabell-touseg’ and leave it at that. We’d like to ken what’s gan on in your mind.’

Gurval grinned. ‘Och, I’ll tell you all soon enough, but first I’d hae to speak to Kozhiadez. She’ll ken if what I’m thinking is possible. Now come on, let’s get a move on and the sooner we’re back the sooner I’ll ken if I’m right!’

Andrew and Shonagh were as keen as Enora, and everyone else, to discover what had got Gurval excited, but first they had to find out what kabell-touseg were. They were quite sure they had not heard the word used before and Andrew asked Enora what kabell-touseg were.

‘You’d call them toadstools or fungus. You’ll hae seen them often enough in the woods and in fields. We use them a lot in oor louzen and we eat them as well; that’s them that can be eaten. Some are gey poisonous, though, or at least they can make you gey ill, so you hae to be very careful before you start picking and eating the kabell-touseg.’

‘What do you think, Andrew? What do you think made Gurval cry out about toadstools? Your father’s the biologist!’

‘I’ve no more idea than you, but whatever it was must hae been important because Gurval’s nae the kind that gets het up aboot nothing. You’ve seen him for yoursel, usually he’s as easy going and calm as can be. These kabell-touseg are important.’

The group continued towards the ker in that deliberate pace that continued to amaze Shonagh and Andrew. These were small people, none of them over a meter and a half, but yet they travelled their underground roads and tunnels at a very brisk pace. It was not long before they were back in the ker and Gurval was calling out for Kozhiadez.

Kozhiadez emerged from a mougev and Gurval approached followed by a group eager to learn what had got him so excited back in the tunnel after he had treated the Kah Du-Kel.

Kozhiadez, a kindly look on her face, held out her hands to greet Gurval and this caused him to pause and calm himself. Gurval smiled knowingly and gently rubbed palms with Kozhiadez. Having given Gurval time to gather his thoughts they could speak calmly about whatever was worrying him.

‘You need to talk to me, Gurval?’ began Kozhiadez, well aware that many of the folk were very anxious to hear what was worrying their magerez.

‘Kozhiadez, you ken many thing and hae seen many things. I’ve been treating a Kah Du-Kel. You’d agree that their behaviour has been gey strange this past wee while?’

‘We all ken that, Gurval. Do you think you've found the cause?’

‘That’s why I want to speak to you, Kozhiadez. When I was treating the Kah Du-Kel I gave it a drink o the birk bark ale to calm it doon’

Kozhiadez responded, ‘Aye, it’ll always calm beasts and folk doon’

‘Well, when it opened its mouth to drink I could swear I smelt something familiar on its breath and I’d like you to confirm what I think.’

Kozhiadez grinned widely, ‘Gurval, if you dinna hurry and tell me what you want you’ll hae half o the folk o the ker on top o you. You’d better get on with it.’

Gurval glanced round at the crowd that had gathered behind him and made his point, ‘I could smell kabell-touseg. I wisna sure at first what it was, but I kent it was familiar. It was only after the Kah Du-Kel had taken off that it came to me. Do you think it could be eating kabell-touseg that’s causing the Kah Du-Kel to be creating so much trouble? Could kabell-touseg do that?’

Kozhiadez was positive in her reply, ‘Aye, that may be it. We had a case a long time ago when some of the beasts were eating a weed that had come in frae the ootside and was growing in the ster. It fair made them daft and they got up to all sorts o antics before we discovered the cause. We got rid o the weed and they soon settled doon, but it was gey worrying at the time.

‘The only problem I hae with your idea is that I’ve never kent the Kah Du-Kel to eat kabell-touseg. Some o the beasts do eat them, oorsels included, but they all ken the ones they can eat and ones they canna. The Kah Du-Kel eat meat, any kind o meat frae logod to tarv, if it’s already dead, but they dinna eat kabell-touseg to my way o kenning’

‘I agree with you Kozhiadez, but could they be eating them and nae be aware o it? asked Gurval. ‘I’m sure what I could smell was kabell-touseg.’

Kozhiadez considered, ‘If you’re right, Gurval, we hae a serious situation on oor hands. Are you thinking the way I’m thinking? Do you think Beuneg is deliberately feeding some sort o poisonous keball-touseg to the Kah Du-Kel?’

Gurval nodded, ‘Well, my thoughts hadna got just that far, but I think that’s what’s making them act the way they are and after oor meeting with Beuneg, I’d put nothing past him at all. He could be giving them just enough o a poisonous kabell-touseg to upset the beasts, but nae enough to kill them or maybe he’s got some mixture that makes them want more and more o whatever he’s giving to them. But how would he get them to take it?’

‘Och, that’s easy enough,’ answered Kozhiadez, ‘he just puts it in some meats and the way the Kah Du-Kel gulp doon their meat they’d never notice what was in it. I think we’d better take this news to Enourabi, for it could hae serious consequences for the way we come to settle with Beuneg.’

They made their way to the mougev of Enourabi and explained to him what they believed to be the cause of the Kah Du-Kel’s strange behaviour. Enourabi listened carefully and nodded frequently as Kozhiadez and Gurval spoke. ‘That would seem to be the logical explanation,’ he said, ‘and it could make it all the more difficult for us to reach the mougev of Beuneg. If he has got the Kah Du-Kel dependent on him he might also have more control over them than we thought. There could be dangerous times ahead. The group planning the attack on Beuneg’s mougev must meet immediately. Would the rest o you leave us for the present, we must get some sort o plan worked oot and make sure we hae good defences here in the ker while the folk who are to settle with Beuneg are away.’

Andrew and Shonagh remained as most of the folk left and Enourabi addressed himself directly to them, ‘Shonagh and Andrew, you have proven your worth to the folk here in menez, but we canna ask you to take risks on oor behalf. Shonagh, you have given us an idea how we can scale the rocks up to the mougev and we thank you, but now we are fairly sure of how Beuneg controls the Kah Du-Kel, we canna ask you to take part in any attack. We dinna ken just how wild the beasts are, nor just how much they’d be willing to do for Beuneg. Folk might die in any action we take now!’

Shonagh answered for both of them, ‘Enourabi, we want to help. If you dinna get this business with Beuneg sorted oot we might never get back to the ootside world. He might control all the tunnels and roads. He can put Kah Du-Kel at all the main routes to block oor exit. Till this whole affair is sorted oot we’re stuck with you and you’re stuck with us. Let’s get on and do something aboot Beuneg!’

Gurval nodded happily, ‘They’ll be a great help Enourabi. They ken aboot scaling rocks and how to use the pitons. We can use their skills and Beuneg will nae be expecting them.’

‘Agreed,’ said Enourabi, ‘but I dinna want you to think we were forcing you to help us. We need help, for fighting is nae something we ken a lot aboot. Now, explain how we might use the pitons.’

Shonagh took the lead, ‘We’ll need help to do this, but I think it might work. Some o the group will hae to divert Beuneg’s attention by making an attempt to get up the cliff path to his mougev. It disna hae to be a very serious attempt, but they’ll need to make enough noise and cause enough bother to keep Beuneg and the Kah Du-Kel’s attention away frae the rest o us. We’ll cross the river and work our way up the side away from the path. We’ll knock in pitons and attach ropes and, hopefully, the noise o the attack will cover up oor activities long enough for us to get a few ropes in place and we can climb up to Beuneg’s level before he becomes aware o us.’

‘I could give them cover while they’re putting in the pitons,’ said Barban.

‘Aye,’ said Enourabi, ‘it’s a dangerous plan, but it looks as though it’s the only one we hae at the minute. Right! We must prepare. Gurval, I ask you to lead the group. I’m too old now for this kind of exercise and you ken Menez better than anybody else. If you hae to retreat you’ll ken a way to get everybody back and as a magerez you’ll be able to help them more than I will, if, Doue forbid, anybody gets hurt.

‘I’d be honoured to lead the folk Enourabi. With Shonagh and Andrew to help us I’m sure we’ll resolve it all quickly and withoot too much bother,’ said Gurval with more optimism than he felt. ‘We will need only a small group. Barban will you see to the weapons and chose seven or eight o the folk who you think will serve us best in a fight? As soon as you have gathered folk and supplies we will meet at the meeting place. Be as quick as you can for I feel we hae nae time to lose. I’ll see to the louzen and, Shonagh, could you go and see if Yehann has the pitons ready? Andrew, Pol and Garid live in the mougev to the right of the main passageway. They are weavers and rope-makers, could you go and see them, and get as many ropes as they can give you? We’ll need quite a few.’

Andrew and Shonagh set off on their allotted tasks, glad to be active because that helped take their minds off the very real dangers that were about to face them. Talking about dealing with Beuneg and making plans for attacking his mougev was pone thing, actually putting these schemes into action was a far more alarming proposition and it was very difficult to keep Enourabi’s warning, about folk dying in the forthcoming fighting, from one’s mind.