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Kidnapped—Chapter 5: I Go To The Queen's Ferry

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For the Easter season, I am posting some rather different things on this channel, in addition to my regular output, as a little gift to my followers and supporters. This is the fourth book I am reading through: 'Kidnapped', by Robert Louis Stevenson. I hope that you all enjoy!

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Transcript

Chapter 5. I Go To The Queen's Ferry. Much rain fell in the night, and the next morning there blew a bitter wintry wind out of the northwest, driving scattered clouds. For all that, and before the sun began to peep or the last of the stars had vanished, I made my way to the side of the burn, and had a plunge in a deep whirling pool.

All aglow from my bath, I sat down once more beside the fire, which I replenished, and began gravely to consider my position. There was now no doubt about my uncle's enmity. There was no doubt I carried my life in my hand, and he would leave no stone unturned that he might compass my destruction.

But I was young and spirited, and like most lads that have been country-bred, I had a great opinion of my shrewdness. I had come to his door no better than a beggar and little more than a child. He had met me with treachery and violence.

It would be a fine consummation to take the upper hand and drive him like a herd of sheep. I sat there nursing my knee and smiling at the fire, and I saw myself in a fancy smell out his secrets one after another, and grow to be that man's king and ruler. The

warlock of Essendine, they say, had made a mirror in which men could read the future.

It must have been of other stuff than burning coal, for in all the shapes and pictures that I sat and gazed at, there was never a ship, never a seaman with a hairy cap, never a big bludgeon for my silly head, or the least sign of all those tribulations that were ripe to fall on me. Presently, all swollen with conceit, I went upstairs and gave my prisoner his liberty. He gave me good-morning civilly, and I gave the same to him, smiling down upon him from the heights of my sufficiency.

Soon we were set to breakfast, as it might have been the day before. "'Well, sir,' said I, with a jeering tone, "'have you nothing more to say to me?' And then, as he made no articulate reply, "'It will be time, I think, to understand each other,' I continued. "'You took me for a country Johnny Roar, with no more mother wit or courage than a porridge-stick.

I took you for a good man, or no worse than others at the least. It seems we were both wrong. What cause you have to fear me, to cheat me, and to attempt my life?' He murmured something about a jest, and that he liked a bit of fun, and then, seeing me smile, changed his tone, and assured me that he would make all clear as soon as we had breakfasted.

I saw by his face that he had no lie ready for me, though he was hard at work preparing one, and I think I was about to tell him so, when we were interrupted by a knocking at the door. Bidding my uncle sit where he was, I went to open it, and found on the doorstep a half-grown boy in sea-clothes. He had no sooner seen me than he began to dance some steps of the sea-hornpipe, which I had never before heard of, far less seen, snapping his fingers in the air and footing it right cleverly.

For all that he was blue with the cold, and there was something in his face, a look between tears and laughter, that was highly pathetic, and consisted ill with this gaiety of manner. "'What cheer, mate?' says he, with a cracked voice. I asked him soberly to name his pleasure.

"'Oh, pleasure!' says he, and then began to sing, for it's my delight of a shiny night in the season of the year. "'Well,' said I, "'if you have no business at all, I will even be so unmannerly as to shut you out.' "'Stay, brother!' he cried. "'Have you no fun about you? Or do you want me to get thrashed? I've brought a letter from old Heesy-Ozy to Mr. Bellflower.' He showed me a letter as he spoke.

"'And I say, mate,' he added, "'I'm mortal hungry.' "'Well,' said I, "'come into the house, and you shall have a bite if I go empty for it.' With that I brought him in and set him down to my own place, where he fell too greedily on the remains of breakfast, winking to me between wiles, and making many faces, which I think the poor soul considered manly. Meanwhile my uncle had read the letter and sat thinking. Then, suddenly, he got

to his feet with a great air of liveliness, and pulled me apart into the farthest corner of the room.

"Read that," said he, and put the letter in my hand. Here it is, lying before me as I write. The Hawes Inn, at the Queen's Ferry.

Sir, I lie here with my horser up and down, and send my cabin-boy to inform, if you have any further commands for overseas, today will be the last occasion, as the wind will serve us well out of the Firth. I will not seek to deny that I have crosses with your doer, Mr. Rankula, of which, if not speedily read up, you may look to see some losses follow. I have drawn a bill upon you, as per margin, and am, sir, your most obedient, humble servant, Elias Hoseason.

You see Davy,' resumed my uncle, as soon as he saw that I had done, I have a venture with this man Hoseason, the captain of a trading-brig, the Covenant of Dysart. Now if you and me was to walk over with you, lad, I could see the captain at the Hawes, or maybe on board the Covenant, if there was papers to be signed, and so far from a loss of time we can jog on to the lawyer, Mr. Rankula's. After all that's come and gone, you would be swier to believe me upon my naked word.

But you'll believe Rankula, he's factored to half the gentry in these parts, an old man, forby, highly respected, and he kenned your father. I stood a while, and thought. I was going to some place of shipping, which was doubtless populous, and where my uncle durst attempt no violence, and indeed even the society of the cabin-boy so far protected me.

Once there I believed I could force on the visit to the lawyer, even if my uncle were now insincere in proposing it, and perhaps, in the bottom of my heart, I wished a nearer view of the sea and ships. You are to remember I had lived all my life in the inland hills, and just two days before had my first sight of the Firth lying like a blue floor, and the sail-ships moving on the face of it, no bigger than toys. One thing with another I made up my mind.

Very well, says I, let us go to the ferry. My uncle got into his hat and coat, and buckled an old rusty cutlass on, and then we trod the fire out, locked the door, and set forth upon our walk. The wind, being in that cold quarter of the North-West, blew nearly in our faces as we went.

It was the month of June, the grass was all white with daisies, and the trees with blossom, but to judge by our blue nails and aching wrists, the time might have been winter, and the whiteness of December frost. Uncle Ebenezer trudged in the ditch, jogging from side to side like an old ploughman coming home from work. He never said a word the whole way, and I was thrown for talk on the cabin-boy.

He told me his name was Ransom, and that he had followed the sea since he was nine, but could not say how old he was, as he had lost his reckoning. He showed me tattoo marks, bearing his breast in the teeth of the wind, and in spite of my remonstrances, for I thought it was enough to kill him. He swore horribly whenever he remembered, but more like a silly schoolboy than a man, and boasted of many wild and bad things that he had done, stealthy thefts, false accusations, aye, and even murder, but all with such a dearth of likelihood in the details, and such a weak and crazy swagger in the delivery, as disposed me rather to pity than to believe him.

I asked him of the brig, which he declared was the finest ship that sailed, and of Captain Hoseason, in whose praises he was equally loud. Heasy-Ozy, for so he still named the skipper, was a man, by his account, that minded for nothing either in heaven or earth, one that, as people said, would crack on all sail into the day of judgment, rough, fierce, unscrupulous, and brutal, and all this my poor cabin-boy had taught himself to admire as something seaman-like and manly. He would only admit one flaw in his idol.

He ain't no seaman, he admitted. That's Mr. Sean that navigates the brig. He's the finest seaman in the trade, only for drink, and I'll tell you I believe it.

Why, look here, and turning down his stocking, he showed me a great raw red wound that made my blood run cold. He done that, Mr. Sean done that, he said, with an air of pride. What, I cried, do you take such savage usage at his hands? Why, you are no slave to be so handled.

No, said the poor moon-calf, changing his tune at once, and so he'll find. See here, and he showed me a great case-knife, which he told me was stolen. Oh, says he, let me see him try, I'll dare him to.

I'll do for him. Oh, he ain't the first, and he confirmed it with a poor silly ugly oath. I have never felt such pity for anyone in this wide world as I felt for that half-witted creature, and it began to come over me that the brig-covenant, for all her pious name, was little better than a hell upon the seas.

Have you no friends? said I. He said he had a father in some English seaport, I forget which. He was a fine man too, he said, but he's dead. In heaven's name, cried I, can you find no reputable life on shore? Oh no, says he, winking and looking very sly, they would put me to a trade.

I know a trick worth two of that, I do. I asked him what trade could be so dreadful as the one he followed, where he ran the continual peril of his life, not alone from wind and sea, but by the horrid cruelty of those who were his masters. He said it was very true, and then began to praise the life, and tell me what a pleasure it was to get on shore with money in his pocket, and spend it like a man, and buy apples, and swagger, and surprise what he calls stick-in-the-mud boys.

And then it's not all as bad as that, says he. There's worse off than me, there's the twenty pounders, oh laws, you should see them taking on. Why, I've seen a man as old as you, I dare say.

To him I seemed old. Ah, and he had a beard too. Well, and as soon as we cleared out of the river, and he had the drug out of his head, my, how he cried and carried on.

I made a fine fool of him, I tell you. And then there's little uns too, oh little by me. I tell you, I keep them in order.

When we carry little uns, I have a rope's end of my own to wallop them. And so he ran on, until it came in on me what he meant by twenty pounders, were those unhappy criminals who were sent overseas to slavery in North America, or the still more unhappy innocents who were kidnapped and trepanned, as the word went, for private interest or vengeance. Just then we came to the top of the hill, and looked down on the ferry and the hope.

The Firth of Forth, as is very well known, narrows at this point to the width of a good-sized river, which makes a convenient ferry going north, and turns the upper reach into a landlocked haven for all manner of ships. Right in the midst of the narrows lies an islet, with some ruins. On the south shore they had built a pier for the service of the ferry, and at the end of the pier, on the other side of the road, and backed against a pretty garden of holly trees and hawthorns, I could see the building which they called the Hawes Inn.

The town of Queensferry lies farther west, and the neighbourhood of the inn looked pretty lonely at that time of day, for the boat had just gone north with passengers. A skiff, however, lay beside the pier, with some seamen sleeping on the thwarts. This, as Ransom told me, was the brig's boat waiting for the captain, and about a half-mile off, and all alone in the anchorage, he showed me the covenant herself.

There was a sea-going bustle on board, yards were swinging into place, and as the wind blew from that quarter I could hear the song of the sailors as they pulled upon the ropes. After all I had listened to upon the way, I looked at that ship with an extreme abhorrence, and from the bottom of my heart I pitied all poor souls that were condemned to sail in her. We had all three pulled up on the brow of the hill, and now I marched across the road and addressed my uncle.

I think it right to tell you, sir, says I, that nothing will bring me on board that covenant. He seemed to waken from a dream. Eh? he said.

What's that? I told him over again. Well, well, he said. We'll have to please you, I suppose.

But what are we standing here for? It's perishing cold, and if I'm no mistaken they're busking the covenant for sea.

