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Kidnapped—Chapter 10: The Siege Of The Round-House

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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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<https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/alastairs-adversaria/id1416351035?mt=2>.

Transcript

Chapter 10 The Siege Of The Round-House But now our time of truce was come to an end. Those on deck had waited for my coming till they grew impatient, and scarce had Alan spoken when the captain showed face in the open door. Stand, cried Alan, and pointed his sword at him.

The captain stood, indeed, but he neither winced nor drew back a foot. A naked sword, says he. This is a strange return for hospitality.

Do ye see me? said Alan. I am come of kings, I bear a king's name. My badge is the oak.

Do ye see my sword? It has slashed the heads off mere wiggermores than you have toes upon your feet. Call up your vermin to your backs, sir, and fall on. The sooner the clash begins, the sooner ye'll taste this steel through your vittles.

The captain said nothing to Alan, but he looked over at me with an ugly look. David, says he, I'll mind this. And the sound of his voice went through me with a jar.

Next moment he was gone. And now, said Alan, let your hand keep your head, for the grip is coming. Alan drew a dirk which he held in his left hand in case they should run in under his sword.

I, on my part, clambered up into the berth with an armful of pistols and something of a heavy heart, and set open the window where I was to watch. It was a small part of the deck that I could overlook, but enough for our purpose. The sea had gone down, and the wind was steady and kept the sails quiet, so that there was a great stillness in the ship, in which I made sure I heard the sound of muttering voices.

A little after, and there came a clash of steel upon the deck, by which I knew they were dealing out the cutlasses, and one had been let fall, and after that silence again. I do not know if I was what you call afraid, but my heart beat like a bird's, both quick and little, and there was a dimness came before my eyes which I continually rubbed away, and which continually returned. As for hope, I had none, but only a darkness of despair and a sort of anger against all the world that made me long to sell my life as dear as I was able.

I tried to pray, I remember, but that same hurry of my mind, like a man running, would not suffer me to think upon the words, and my chief wish was to have the thing begin and be done with it. It came all of a sudden when it did, with a rush of feet and a roar, and then a shout from Allen, and a sound of blows, and someone crying out as if hurt. I looked back over my shoulder, and saw Mr. Shewan in the doorway, crossing blades with Allen.

That's him that killed the boy, I said. Look to your window, said Allen, and as I turned back to my place I saw him pass his sword through the mate's body. It was none too soon for me to look back to my own part, for my head was scarce back at the window, before five men, carrying a spare yard for a battering-ram, ran past me, and took post to drive the door in.

I had never fired with a pistol in my life, and not often with a gun, far less against a fellow creature, but it was now or never, and just as they swang the yard I cried out, Take that! and shot into their midst. I must have hit one of them, but he sang out and gave back a step, and the rest stopped as if a little disconcerted. Before they had time to recover I sent another ball over their heads, and at my third shot, which went as wide as the second, the whole party threw down the yard and ran for it.

Then I looked round again into the deck-house. The whole place was full of the smoke of my own firing, just as my ears seemed to be burst with the noise of the shots. But there was Allen, standing as before, only now his sword was running blood to the hilt, and himself so swelled with triumph and fallen into so fine an attitude that he looked to be invincible.

Right before him on the floor was Mr. Shewan. On his hands and knees the blood was pouring from his mouth, and he was sinking slowly lower with a terrible white face, and just as I looked some of those from behind caught hold of him by the heels and dragged him bodily out of the round-house. I believe he died as they were doing it.

There's one of your wigs for ye, cried Allen, and then turning to me he asked if I had done much execution. I told him I had winged one, and thought it was the captain, and I've settled to, says he. No, there's not enough blood yet.

They'll be back again. To your watch, David. This was but a dram before meet.

I settled back to my place, recharging the three pistols I had fired, and keeping watch with both eye and ear. Our enemies were disputing not far off upon the deck, and that so loudly that I could hear a word or two above the washing of the seas. It was Shewan bourgeoised it, I heard one say, and another answered him with, Weeshed man, he's paid the piper.

After that the voices fell again into the same muttering as before. Only now one person spoke most of the time as though laying down a plan, and first one and then another answered him briefly, like men taking orders. By this I made sure they were coming on again, and told Allen.

It's what we have to pray for, said he, unless we can give them a good distaste of us, and done with it, there'll be nay sleep for either you or me, but this time, mind, they'll be in earnest. By this my pistols were ready, and there was nothing to do but listen and wait. While the brush lasted, I had not the time to think if I was frightened, but now when all was still again, my mind ran upon nothing else.

The thought of the sharp swords and the cold steel was strong in me, and presently, when I began to hear stealthy steps and a brushing of men's clothes against the roundhouse wall, and knew they were taking their places in the dark, I could have found it in my mind to cry out aloud. All this was upon Allen's side, and I had begun to think my share of the fight was at an end, when I heard someone drop softly on the roof above me. Then there came a single call on the sea-pipe, and that was the signal.

A knot of them made one rush of it, cutlass in hand against the door, and at the same moment the glass of the skylight was dashed in a thousand pieces, and a man leaped through and landed on the floor. Before he got his feet I had clapped a pistol to his back, and might have shot him too, only at the touch of him, and him alive, my whole flesh misgave me, and I could no more pull the trigger than I could have flown. He had dropped his cutlass as he jumped, and when he felt the pistol whip straight round and laid hold of me, roaring out an oath, and at that either my courage came again, or I grew so much afraid as came to the same thing, for I gave a shriek and shot him in the midst of the body.

He gave the most horrible ugly groan, and fell to the floor. The foot of a second fellow, whose legs were dangling through the skylight, struck me at the same time upon the head, and at that I snatched another pistol and shot this one through the thigh, so that he slipped through and tumbled in a lump on his companion's body. There was no talk of missing, any more than there was time to aim.

I clapped the muzzle to the very place and fired. I might have stood and stared at them for long, but I heard Alan shout as if for help, and that brought me to my senses. He had kept the door so long, but one of the seamen, while he was engaged with others, had run in under his guard and caught him about the body.

Alan was derking him with his left hand, but the fellow clung like a leech. Another had broken in and had his cutlass raised. The door was thronged with their faces.

I thought we were lost, and catching up my cutlass fell on them in flank. But I had not time to be of help. The wrestler dropped at last, and Alan, leaping back to get his distance, ran upon the others like a bull, roaring as he went.

They broke before him like water, turning and running, and falling one against another in their haste. The sword in his hands flashed like quicksilver into the huddle of our fleeing enemies, and at every flash there came the scream of a man hurt. I was still thinking we were lost, when, lo! They were all gone, and Alan was driving them along the deck as a sheepdog chases sheep.

Yet he was no sooner out than he was back again, being as cautious as he was brave, and meanwhile the seamen continued running and crying out as if he were still behind them, and we heard them tumble one upon another into the foc'sle, and clap to the hatch upon the top. The roundhouse was like a shambles. Three were dead inside, another lay in his death agony across the threshold, and there were Alan and I victorious and unhurt.

He came up to me with open arms. Come to my arms, he cried, and embraced and kissed me hard upon both cheeks. David, said he, I love you like a brother, and O man, he cried in a kind of ecstasy, am I no a bonny fighter? Thereupon he turned to the four enemies, passed his sword clean through each of them, and tumbled them out of doors one after the other.

As he did so he kept humming and singing and whistling to himself, like a man trying to recall an air, only what he was trying was to make one. All the while the flush was in his face, and his eyes were as bright as a five-year-old child's with a new toy, and presently he sat down upon the table, sword in hand, the air that he was making all the time began to run a little clearer, and then clearer still, and then out he burst with a great voice into a Gaelic song. I have translated it here, not in verse, of which I have no skill, but at least in the King's English.

He sang it often afterwards, and the thing became popular, so that I have heard it, and had it explained to me many's the time. This is the song of the sword of Alan. The smith made it, the fire set it, now it shines in the hand of Alan Breck.

Their eyes were many and bright, swift were they to behold, many the hands they guided, the sword was alone. The dim deer troop over the hill, they are many, the hill is one, the done deer vanish, the hill remains. Come to me from the hills of heather, come from the isles of the sea, O far-beholding eagles, here is your meat.

Now this song which he made, both words and music, in the hour of our victory, is something less than just to me, who stood beside him in the tussle. Mr. Shewan and five more were either killed outright or thoroughly disabled, but of these two fell by my hand, the two that came by the skylight. Four more were hurt, and of that number, one, and he not the least important, got his hurt from me, so that altogether I did my fair share both of the killing and the wounding, and might have claimed a place in Alan's verses.

But poets have to think upon their rhymes, and in good prose-talk Alan always did me more than justice. In the meanwhile I was innocent of any wrong being done to me, for not only I knew no word of the Gaelic, but what with the long suspense of the waiting, and the scurry and strain of our two spurts of fighting, and more than all the horror I had of some of my own share in it, the thing was no sooner over than I was glad to stagger to a seat. There was that tightness on my chest that I could hardly breathe.

The thought of the two men I had shot sat upon me like a nightmare, and all upon a sudden, and before I had a guess of what was coming, I began to sob and cry like any child. Alan clapped my shoulder, and said I was a brave lad, and wanted nothing but a sleep. I'll take the first watch, said he.

You've done well by me, David, first and last, and I wouldn't lose you for all Apen, no, nor for Bredelbane. So I made up my bed on the floor, and he took the first spell, pistol in hand and sword on knee, three hours by the captain's watch upon the wall. Then he roused me up, and I took my turn of three hours, before the end of which it was broad day, and a very quiet morning, with a smooth rolling sea that tossed the ship, and made the blood run to and fro on the round-house floor, and a heavy rain that drummed upon the roof.

All my watch, there was nothing stirring, and by the banging of the helm I knew they had even no one at the tiller. Indeed, as I learned afterwards, there were so many of them hurt or dead, and the rest in so ill a temper that Mr. Reack and the captain had to take turn and turn like Alan and me, or the brig might have gone ashore and nobody the wiser. It was a mercy the night had fallen so still, for the wind had gone down as soon as the rain began.

Even as it was, I judged by the wailing of a great number of gulls that went crying and

fishing round the ship, that she must have drifted pretty near the coast, or one of the islands of the Hebrides, and at last looking out of the door of the round-house I saw the great stone hills of Skye on the right hand, and, a little more stern, the strange Isle of Rum.