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Kidnapped—Chapter 18: I Talk With Alan In The Wood Of Lettermore

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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 18. I Talk With Alan In The Wood Of Lettermore. Alan was the first to come round.

He rose, went to the border of the wood, peered out a little, and then returned and sat down. Well, said he, yon was a hot burst, David. I said nothing, nor so much as lifted my face.

I had seen murder done, and a great, ruddy, jovial gentleman struck out of life in a moment. The pity of that sight was still sore within me, and yet that was but a part of my concern. Here was murder done upon the man Alan hated.

Here was Alan skulking in the trees and running from the troops, and whether his was the hand that fired, or only the head that ordered, signified but little. By my way of it, my only friend in that wild country was blood guilty in the first degree. I held him in horror.

I could not look upon his face. I would have rather lain alone in the rain on my cold isle

than in the warm wood beside a murderer. Are you still wearied? he asked again.

No, said I, still with my face in the bracken. No, I am not wearied now, and I can speak. You and me must twine, I said.

I liked you very well, Alan, but your ways are not mine, and they are not God's, and the short and the long of it is just that we must twine. I will hardly twine from you, David, without some kind of reason for the same, said Alan, mighty gravely. If ye ken anything against my reputation, it is the least thing ye should do, for old acquaintance's sake, to let me hear the name of it, and if ye have only taken a distaste to my society, it will be proper for me to judge if I am insulted.

Alan, said I, what is the sense of this? Ye ken very well young Campbellman lies in his blood upon the road. He was silent for a little. Then, says he, did ye ever hear tell of the story of the man and the good people, by which he meant the fairies? No, said I, nor do I want to hear it.

With your permission, Mr Balfour, I will tell it you whatever, says Alan. The man, you should ken, was cast upon a rock in the sea, where it appears the good people were in use to come and rest as they went through to Ireland. The name of this rock is called the Scary Vore, and it is not far from where we suffered shipwreck.

Well, it seems the man cried so sore, if he could just see his little bairn before he died, that at last the king of the good people took pity upon him, and sent one flying that brought back the bairn in a poke, and laid it down beside the man where he lay sleeping. So when the man woke there was a poke beside him, and something into the inside of it that moved. Well, it seems he was one of these gentry that think I the worst of things, and for greater security he stuck his dirk throughout that poke before he opened it, and there was his bairn dead.

I'm thinking to myself, Mr Balfour, that you and the man are very much alike." "'Do you mean you had no hand in it?' cried I, sitting up. "'I will tell you first of all, Mr Balfour of Shores, as one friend to another,' said Alan, "'that if I were going to kill a gentleman it would not be in my own country, to bring trouble on my clan, and I would not go wanting sword and gun, and with a long fishing rod upon my back.' "'Well,' said I, "'that's true.' "'And now,' continued Alan, taking out his dirk and laying his hand upon it in a certain manner, "'I swear upon the holy iron I had neither art nor part, act nor thought in it.' "'I thank God for that,' cried I, and offered him my hand. He did not appear to see it.

"'And here is a great deal of work about a Campbell,' said he. "'They are not so scarce that I can—' "'At least,' said I, "'you cannot justly blame me, for you know very well what you told me in the brig. But the temptation and the act are different.

I thank God again for that. We may all be tempted, but to take a life in cold blood, Alan.'

"And I could say no more for the moment." "And do you know who did it?" I added. "Do you know that man in the black coat?" "I have nay clear mind about his coat," said Alan cunningly, "but it sticks in my head that it was Blue." "Blue or Black, did you know him?" said I. "I could nay just conscientiously swear to him," said Alan.

"He gayed very close by me, to be sure, but it is a strange thing that I should just have been tying my brogues." "Can you swear that you don't know him, Alan?" "I cried, half angered, half in a mind to laugh at his evasions. "Not yet," says he, "but I have a grand memory for forgetting David. "And yet there was one thing I saw clearly," said I, "and that was that you exposed yourself and me to draw the soldiers." "It's very likely," said Alan, "and so would any gentleman.

"You and me were innocent of that transaction." "The better reason, since we were falsely suspected that we should get clear," "I cried. "The innocent should surely come before the guilty." "Why David?" said he. "The innocent have I a good chance to get us soiled in court, "but for the lad that shot the bullet, "I think the best place for him will be the heather.

"Them that have nay dip their hands in any little difficulty "should be very mindful of the case of them that have, "and that is the good Christianity. "For if it was the other way round about, "and the lad whom I could nay just clearly see had been in our shoes, "and we in his, as might very well have been, "I think we would be a good deal obliged to him ourselves "if he would draw the soldiers. "When it came to this I gave Alan up.

"But he looked so innocent all the time, "and was in such clear good faith in what he said, "and so ready to sacrifice himself for what he deemed his duty, "that my mouth was closed. "Mr Hendelands' words came back to me, "that we ourselves might take a lesson by these wild Highlanders. "Well, here I had taken mine.

"Alan's morals were all tale first, "but he was ready to give his life for them, "such as they were. "Alan," said I, "I'll not say it's the good Christianity as I understand it, "but it's good enough, "and here I offer ye my hand for the second time." "Whereupon he gave me both of his, "saying surely I had cast a spell upon him, "for he could forgive me anything. "Then he grew very grave, "and said we had not much time to throw away, "but must both flee that country.

"He because he was a deserter, "and the whole of Appen would now be searched like a chamber, "and every one obliged to give a good account of himself, "and I because I was certainly involved in the murder. "Oh," says I, "willing to give him a little lesson, "I have no fear of the justice of my country." "As if this was your country," said he, "or as if ye would be tried here, "in a country of Stuarts." "It's all Scotland," said I. "Man, I wiles wonder at ye," said Alan. "This is a Campbell that's been killed.

"Well, it'll be tried in Inverarra, "the Campbell's head place, "with fifteen Campbells in

the jury box, "and the biggest Campbells of all, "and that's the Duke, "sitting cocking on the bench. "Justice David, "the same justice by all the world "as Glen Yor found a while ago at the roadside. "This frightened me a little, I confess, "and would have frightened me more "if I had known how nearly exact "were Alan's predictions.

"Indeed it was but in one point "that he exaggerated, "there being but eleven Campbells on the jury, "though as the other four "were equally in the Duke's dependence, "it mattered less than might appear. "Still I cried out that he was unjust "to the Duke of Argyll, "who, for all he was a Whig, "was yet a wise and honest nobleman. "Hoot!" said Alan.

"The man's a Whig, nay doubt, "but I would never deny "he was a good chieftain to his clan, "and what would the clan think "if there was a Campbell shot, "and naybody hanged, "and their own chief the Justice General? "But I have often observed," says Alan, "that you low-country bodies "have no clear idea of what's right and wrong." "At this I did at last laugh out loud, "when to my surprise Alan joined in, "and laughed as merrily as myself. "Nah, nah," said he, "we're in the Highlands, David, "and when I tell you to run, "take my word and run. "Nay doubt it's a hard thing "to skulk and starve in the heather, "but it's harder yet to lie shackled "in a redcoat prison.

"I asked him whither we should flee, "and as he told me, "to the lowlands, "I was a little better inclined to go with him, "for, indeed, I was growing impatient "to get back and have the upper hand of my uncle. "Besides, Alan made so sure "that there would be no questions "of justice in the matter, "that I began to be afraid he might be right. "Of all deaths I would truly like "least to die by the gallows, "and the picture of that uncanny instrument "came into my head with extraordinary clearness, "as I had once seen it engraved "at the top of a peddler's ballad, "and took away my appetite for courts of justice.

"I'll chant, said Alan," said I, "I'll go with you. "But mind you," said Alan, "it's no small thing. "Your morn lie bare and hard, "and brook many an empty belly.

"Your bed shall be the moor-cocks, "and your life shall be like the hunted deer's, "and you shall sleep with your hand upon your weapons. "Ay, man, you shall tige many a weary foot, "or we get clear. "I tell you this at the start, "for it's a life that I ken well, "but if ye ask what other chance ye have, "I answer, nain.

"Either take to the heather with me, "or else hang." "That's a choice very easily made," said I, "and we shook hands upon it. "And now let's take another peek at the redcoats," "says Alan." "And he led me to the north-eastern fringe of the wood. "Looking out between the trees "we could see a great side of mountains, "running down exceeding steep "into the waters of the loch.

"It was a rough part, "all hanging stone and heather, "and big scrogs of birchwood,

"and away at the far end towards Balakulish, "little wee red soldiers were dipping up and down over hill and howe, and growing smaller every minute. "There was no cheering now, for I think they had other uses for what breath was left them, but they still stuck to the trail, and doubtless thought that we were close in front of them.' Alan watched them smiling to himself. "Aye,' said he, 'they'll be gay weary before they've got to the end of that employ.

"And so you and me, David, can sit down and eat a bite, and breathe a bit longer, and take a dram from my bottle. "Then we'll strike for Akan, the house of my kinsman, James of the Glens, where I must get my clothes and my arms and money to carry us along. "And then, David, we'll cry, Forth Fortune, and take a cast among the heather.' "So we sat again and ate and drank, in a place whence we could see the sun going down into a field of great, wild, and houseless mountains, such as I was now condemned to wander in with my companion.

"Partly as we so sat, and partly afterwards, on the way to Akan, each of us narrated his adventures, and I shall here set down so much of Alan's as seem either curious or needful. "It appears he ran to the bulwarks as soon as the wave was past, saw me and lost me, and saw me again, as I tumbled in the roost, and at last had one glimpse of me clinging on the yard. "It was this that put him in some hope I would maybe get to land after all, and made him leave those clues and messages which had brought me, for my sins, to that unlucky country of Apan.

"In the meanwhile, those still on the brig had got the skiff launched, and one or two were on board of her already. "When there came a second wave greater than the first, and heaved the brig out of her place, I would certainly have sent her to the bottom, had she not struck and caught on some projection of the reef. "When she had struck first, it had been bows on, so that the stern had hitherto been lowest.

"But now her stern was thrown in the air, and the bows plunged under the sea, and with that the water began to pour into the foreshuttle like the pouring of a mill-dam. "It took the colour out of Alan's face, even to tell what followed, for there were still two men lying impotent in their bunks, and these seeing the water pour in and thinking the ship had foundered, began to cry out aloud, and that were such harrowing cries that all who were on deck tumbled one after another into the skiff and fell to their oars. "They were not two hundred yards away, when there came a third great sea, and at that the brig lifted clean over the reef.

"Her canvas filled for a moment, and she seemed to sail in chase of them, but settling all the while, and presently she drew down and down as if a hand were drawing her, and the sea closed over the covenant of Dysart. "Never a word they spoke as they pulled ashore, being stunned with the horror of that screaming, but they had scarce set foot upon the beach, when Hoseason woke up, as if out of a

muse, "and bade them lay hands upon Alan. "They hung back indeed, "having little taste for the employment, "but Hoseason was like a fiend, "crying that Alan was alone, "that he had a great sum about him, "that he had been the means of losing the brig "and drowning all their comrades, "and that here was both revenge "and wealth upon a single cast.

"It was seven against one. "In that part of the shore "there was no rock that Alan could set his back to, "and the sailors began to spread out "and come behind him. "And then,' said Alan, "the little man with the red head, "I have nay mind of the name that he is called.

"Riach,' said I. "Ay,' said Alan, "Riach. "Well, it was him that took up the clubs for me. "Ask the men if they were nay feared of a judgment, "and says he, "Dod, I'll put my back "to the Highland man's myself.

"That's none such an entirely bad little man, "young little man with the red head,' said Alan. "He has some spunks of decency. "Well,' said I, "he was kind to me in his way.

"And so he was to Alan,' said he. "And by my troth I found his way a very good one. "But ye see, David, "the loss of the ship "and the cries of these poor lads "sat very ill upon the man, "and I'm thinking that would be the cause of it.' "Well, I would think so,' says I, "for he was as keen as any of the rest at the beginning.

"But how did Hoseasen take it?' "It sticks in my mind that he would take it very ill,' says Alan. "But the little man cried to me to run, "and indeed I thought it was a good observe, and ran. "The last that I saw they were all in a knot upon the beach, "like folk that were not agreeing very well together.' "What do you mean by that?' said I. "Well, the fists were going,' said Alan, "and I saw one man go down like a pair of breeks.

"But I thought it would be better no to wait. "You see there's a strip of camels in that end of Mull, "which is no good company for a gentleman like me. "If it hadnae been for that "I would have waited and looked for ye myself, "let alone giving a hand to the little man.' "It was droll how Alan dwelt on Mr. Reack's stature, "for, to say the truth, "the one was not much smaller than the other.

"So,' says he, continuing, "I set my best foot forward, "and whenever I met in with anyone "I cried out that there was a wreck ashore. "Man, they didnae stop to fash with me. "You should have seen them linking for the beach.

"And when they got there "they found they had had the pleasure of a run, "which is aye good for a Campbell. "I'm thinking it was a judgment on the clan "that the brig went down in the lump and didnae break. "But it was a very unlucky thing for you that same, "for if any wreck had come ashore "they would have hunted high and low "and would soon have found ye.'