

OpenTheo

Kidnapped—Chapter 23: Cluny's Cage

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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 23 Cluny's Cage We came at last to the foot of an exceeding steep wood, which scrambled up a craggy hillside, and was crowned by a naked precipice. It's here, said one of the guides, and we struck uphill. The trees clung upon the slope like sailors on the shrouds of a ship, and their trunks were like the rounds of a ladder by which we mounted.

Quite at the top, and just before the rocky face of the cliff sprang above the foliage, we found that strange house which was known in the country as Cluny's Cage. The trunks of several trees had been wattled across, the interval strengthened with stakes, and the ground behind this barricade levelled up with earth to make the floor. A tree which grew out from the hillside was the living centre beam of the roof.

The walls were of wattle and covered with moss. The whole house had something of an egg-shape, and it half hung, half stood in that steep hillside thicket, like a wasp's nest in a green hawthorn. Within it was large enough to shelter five or six persons with some comfort.

A projection of the cliff had been cunningly employed to be the fireplace, and the smoke rising against the face of the rock, and being not dissimilar in colour, readily escaped notice from below. This was but one of Cluny's hiding-places. He had caves besides, and underground chambers in several parts of his country, and following the reports of his scouts, he moved from one to another as the soldiers drew near or moved away.

By this manner of living, and thanks to the affection of his clan, he had not only stayed all this time in safety, while so many others had fled or been taken and slain, but stayed four or five years longer, and only went to France at last by the express command of his master. There he soon died, and it is strange to reflect that he may have regretted his cage upon Ben Alder. When we came to the door he was seated by his rock chimney, watching a ghillie about some cookery.

He was mighty plainly habited, with a knitted nightcap drawn over his ears, and smoked of foul cutty-pipe. For all that he had the manners of a king, and it was quite a sight to see him rise out of his place to welcome us. Well, Mr. Stuart, come awa, sir, said he, and bring in your friend that has yet I dinna ken the name of.

And how is yourself, Clooney? said Alan. I hope ye do brawly, sir, and I am proud to see ye, and to present to ye my friend, the Laird of Shores, Mr. David Balfour. Alan never referred to my estate without a touch of a sneer, when we're alone, but with strangers he rang the words out like a herald.

Step in by, the both of ye gentlemen, says Clooney. I make you welcome to my house, which is a queer, rude place for certain, but one where I have entertained a royal personage, Mr. Stuart. Ye doubtless ken the personage I have in my eye.

We'll take a dram for luck, and as soon as this handless man of mine has the colops ready, we'll dine and take a hand at the carts, as gentlemen should. My life is a bit dreek, says he, pouring out the brandy. I see little company, and sit and twirl my thumbs, and mind upon a great day that has gone by, and weary for another great day that we all hope will be upon the road.

And so here's a toast to the restoration. Thereupon we all touched glasses and drank. I'm sure I wish no ill to King George, and if he had been there himself in proper person, it's like he would have done as I did.

No sooner had I taken out the drain than I felt hugely better, and could look on and listen, still a little mysterly perhaps, but no longer with the same groundless horror and distress of mind. It was certainly a strange place, and we had a strange host. In his long hiding Clooney had grown to have all manner of precise habits, like those of an old maid.

He had a particular place where no one else must sit. The cage was arranged in a particular way, which none must disturb. Cookery was one of his chief fancies, and even

while he was greeting us in he kept an eye to the collops.

It appears he sometimes visited or received visits from his wife and one or two of his nearest friends, under the cover of night, but for the more part lived quite alone, and communicated only with his sentinels and the ghillies that waited on him in the cage. The first thing in the morning one of them, who was a barber, came and shaved him, and gave him the news of the country, of which he was immoderately greedy. There was no end to his questions, he put them as earnestly as a child, and at some of the answers laughed out of all bounds of reason, and would break out again laughing at the mere memory, hours after the barber was gone.

To be sure there might have been a purpose in his questions, for though he was thus sequestered, and like the other landed gentlemen of Scotland stripped by the late Act of Parliament of Legal Powers, he still exercised a patriarchal justice in his clan. Disputes were brought to him in his hiding-hole to be decided, and the men of his country, who would have snapped their fingers at the court of session, laid aside revenge and paid down money at the bare word of this forfeited and hunted outlaw. When he was angered, which was often enough, he gave his commands and breathed threats of punishment like any king, and his ghillies trembled and crouched away from him like children before a hasty father.

With each of them, as he entered, he ceremoniously shook hands, both parties touching their bonnets at the same time in a military manner. Altogether I had a fair chance to see some of the inner workings of a Highland clan, and this with the proscribed fugitive chief, his country conquered, the troops riding upon all sides in quest of him, sometimes within a mile of where he lay, and when the least of the ragged fellows whom he rated and threatened could have made a fortune by betraying him. On that first day, as soon as the collops were ready, Clooney gave them with his own hand a squeeze of a lemon, for he was well supplied with luxuries, and bade us draw in to our meal.

They, said he, meaning the collops, are such as I gave his royal highness in this very house, bating the lemon juice, for at that time we were glad to get the meat, and never fashed for kitchen. Indeed, there were more dragoons than lemons in my country in the year 46. I do not know if the collops were truly very good, but my heart rose against the sight of them, and I could eat but little.

All the while Clooney entertained us with stories of Prince Charlie's stay in the cage, giving us the very words of the speakers, and rising from his place to show us where they stood. By these I gathered the prince was a gracious, spirited boy, like the son of a race of polite kings, but not so wise as Solomon. I gathered, too, that while he was in the cage he was often drunk, so the fault that has since, by all accounts, made such a wreck of him had even then begun to show itself.

We were no sooner done eating than Clooney brought out an old-thumbed, greasy pack

of cards, such as you may find in a mean inn, and his eyes brightened in his face as he proposed that we should fall to playing. Now this was one of the things I had been brought up to a shoe-like disgrace, it being held by my father, neither the part of a Christian nor yet of a gentleman, to set his own livelihood and fish for that of others, on the cast of painted pasteboard. To be sure I might have pleaded my fatigue, which was excuse enough, but I thought it behoved that I should bear a testimony.

I must have got very red in the face, but I spoke steadily, and told them I had no call to be a judge of others, but for my own part it was a matter in which I had no clearness. Clooney stopped mingling the cards. What in Dale's name is this? says he.

What kind of wiggish, canting talk is this, for the house of Clooney Macpherson? I will put my hand in the fire for Mr Balfour, says Alan. He is an honest and a metal gentleman, and I would have ye bear in mind who says it. I bear a king's name, says he, cocking his hat, and I and any that I call friend are company for the best.

But the gentleman is tired, and should sleep, if he has no mind to the cards. It will never hinder you and me, and I am fit and willing, sir, to play ye any game that ye can name. Sir, says Clooney, in this poor house of mine I would have ye to care that any gentleman may follow his pleasure.

If your friend would like to stand on his head, he is welcome, and if either he or you or any other man is not precisely satisfied, I will be proud to step outside with him. I had no will that these two friends should cut their throats for my sake. Sir, said I, I am very worried, as Alan says, and what's more, as you are a man that likely has sons of your own, I may tell you it was a promise to my father.

Say nay, ma'am, say nay, ma'am, said Clooney, and pointed me to a bed of heather in a corner of the cage. For all that he was displeased enough, looking at me askance, and grumbled when he looked, and indeed it must be owned that both my scruples and the words in which I declared them smacked somewhat of the Covenanter, and were little in their place among wild Highland Jacobites. What with the brandy and the venison, a strange heaviness had come over me, and I had scarce lain down upon the bed before I fell into a kind of trance, in which I continued almost the whole time of our stay in the cage.

Sometimes I was broad awake, and understood what passed. Sometimes I only heard voices, or men snoring, like the voice of a silly river, and the plaids upon the wall dwindled down and swelled out again like firelight shadows on the roof. I must sometimes have spoken or cried out, for I remember I was now and then amazed at being answered, yet I was conscious of no particular nightmare, only of a general black abiding horror, a horror of the place I was in, and the bed I lay in, and the plaids upon the wall, and the voices, and the fire, and myself.

The barber-gilly, who was a doctor too, was called in to prescribe for me, but as he spoke in the Gaelic I understood not a word of his opinion, and was too sick even to ask for a translation. I knew well enough I was ill, and that was all I cared about. I paid little heed while I lay in this poor pass, but Allan and Clooney were most of the time at the cards, and I am clear that Allan must have begun by winning, for I remember sitting up and seeing them hard at it, and a great glittering pile of as much as sixty or a hundred guineas on the table.

It looked strange enough to see all this wealth in a nest upon a cliff-side, waffled about growing trees, and even then I thought it seemed deep water for Allan to be riding, who had no better battle-horse than a green purse and a matter of five pounds. The luck, it seems, changed on the second day. About noon I was wakened as usual for dinner, and as usual refused to eat, and was given a dram with some bitter infusion which the barber had prescribed.

The sun was shining in at the open door of the cage, and this dazzled and offended me. Clooney sat at the table, biting the pack of cards. Allan had stooped over the bed and had his face close to my eyes, to which, troubled as they were with the fever, it seemed of the most shocking bigness.

He asked me for a loan of my money. What for? said I. Oh, just for a loan, said he. But why? I repeated.

I don't see. Huck, David! said Allan. You wouldn't agrudge me a loan.

I would, though, if I had had my senses. But all I thought of then was to get his face away, and I handed him my money. On the morning of the third day, when we had been forty-eight hours in the cage, I awoke with a great relief of spirits, very weak and weary indeed, but seeing things of the size and with their honest everyday appearance.

I had a mind to eat, moreover, rose from bed of my own movement, and as soon as we had breakfasted, stepped to the entry of the cage and sat down outside in the top of the wood. It was a grey day with a cool, mild air, and I sat in a dream all morning, only disturbed by the passing by of Clooney's scouts and servants, coming with provisions and reports, for as the coast was at that time clear, you might almost say he held court openly. When I returned, he and Allan had laid the cards aside, and were questioning a ghillie, and the chief turned about and spoke to me in the Gaelic.

I have no Gaelic, sir, said I. Now since the card question, everything I said or did had the power of annoying Clooney. Your name has more sense than yourself, then, said he angrily, for it's good Gaelic. But the point is this, my scout reports all clear in the south, and the question is, have ye the strength to go? I saw cards on the table, but no gold, only a heap of little written papers, and these all on Clooney's side.

Allan, besides, had an odd look, like a man not very well content, and I began to have a strong misgiving. I do not know if I am as well as I should be, said I, looking at Allan, but the little money we have has a long way to carry us. Allan took his under lip into his mouth, and looked upon the ground.

David, says he at last, I've lost it. There's the naked truth. My money too, said I. Your money too, says Allan, with a groan.

You should nay have given it me. I'm daft when I get to the cards. Who toot? Who toot? said Clooney.

It was all daffing. It's all nonsense. Of course you'll have your money back again, and a double of it, if ye'll make so free with me.

It would be a singular thing for me to keep it. It's not to be supposed that I would be any hindrance to gentlemen in your situation. That would be a singular thing, cries he, and began to pull gold out of his pocket with a mighty red face.

Allan said nothing, only looked on the ground. Will you step to the door with me, sir? said I. Clooney said he would be very glad, and followed me readily enough, but he looked flustered and put out. And now, sir, says I, I must first acknowledge your generosity.

Nonsensical nonsense, cries Clooney. Where's the generosity? This is just a most unfortunate affair. But what would ye have me do, boxed up in this bee-skep of a cage of mine, but just set my friends to the cards when I can get them? And if they lose, of course, it's not to be supposed— And here he came to a pause.

Yes, said I, if they lose you give them back their money, and if they win, they carry away yours in their pouches. I've said before that I grant your generosity, but to me, sir, it's a very painful thing to be placed in this position. There was a little silence, in which Clooney seemed always as if he was about to speak, but said nothing.

All the time he grew redder and redder in the face. I am a young man, said I, and I ask your advice. Advise me as you would your son.

My friend fairly lost his money, after having fairly gained a far greater sum of yours. Can I accept it back again? Would that be the right part for me to play? Whatever I do, you can see for yourself it must be hard upon a man of any pride. It's rather hard on me too, Mr. Balfour, said Clooney, and ye give me very much the look of a man that has entrapped poor people to their hurt.

I would nay have my friends come to any house of mine to accept affronts—no, he cried, with a sudden heat of anger, nor yet to give them. And so you see, sir, said I, there is something to be said upon my side, and this gambling is a very poor employ for gentlefolks, but I am still waiting your opinion. I am sure if ever Clooney hated any man

it was David Balfour.

He looked me all over with a warlike eye, and I saw the challenge at his lips. But either my youth disarmed him, or perhaps his own sense of justice. Certainly it was a mortifying matter for all concerned, and not least Clooney, the more credit that he took it as he did.

Mr. Balfour, said he, I think you are too nice and covenanting, but for all that you have the spirit of a very pretty gentleman. Upon my honest word, ye may take this money. It's what I would tell my son, and here's my hand along with it.