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Kidnapped—Chapter 13: The Loss Of The Brig

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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 13 The Loss Of The Brig It was already late at night, and as dark as it would ever be at that season of the year—and that is to say, it was still pretty bright—when Hoseason clapped his head into the roundhouse door. Here, said he, come out and see if ye can pilot. Is this one of your tricks? asked Alan.

Do I look like tricks? cries the Captain. I have other things to think of. My brig's in danger.

By the concerned look of his face, and above all by the sharp tones in which he spoke of his brig, it was plain to both of us he was in deadly earnest. And so Alan and I, with no great fear of treachery, stepped on deck. The sky was clear, it blew hard and was bitter cold, a great deal of daylight lingered, and the moon, which was nearly full, shone brightly.

The brig was close hauled, so as to round the southwest corner of the island of Mull, the hills of which, and Benmore above them all, with a wisp of mist upon the top of it, lay full upon the larboard bow. Though it was no great point of sailing for the Covenant, she tore through the seas at a great rate, pitching and straining, and pursued by the westerly

swell. Altogether it was no such ill night to keep the seas in, and I had begun to wonder what it was that sat so heavily upon the Captain, when the brig rising suddenly on the top of a high swell, he pointed and cried to us to look.

Away on the lee bow, a thing like a fountain rose out of the moonlit sea, and immediately after we heard a low sound of roaring. "'What do ye call that?' asked the Captain gloomily. "'The sea breaking on a reef,' said Alan.

"'And now ye ken where it is, and what better would ye have?' "'Aye,' said Hoseason, "'if it was the only one.' And sure enough, just as he spoke, there came a second fountain farther to the south. "'There,' said Hoseason, "'ye see for yourself, if I had kent of these reefs, if I had had a chart, or if Shewan had been spared, it's not sixty guineas, nor six hundred, would have made me risk my brig in sicker stoneyard. But you, sir, that was to pilot us, have ye never a word?' "'I'm thinking,' said Alan, "'these'll be what they call the Torren Rocks.' "'Are there many of them?' said the Captain.

"'Truly, sir, I am nay pilot,' said Alan. "'But it sticks in my mind there are ten miles of them.' Mr Reack and the Captain looked at each other. "'There's a way through them, I suppose,' said the Captain.

"'Doubtless,' said Alan, "'but where? But it somehow runs in my mind once more that it is clearer under the land.' "'So,' said Hoseason, "'we'll have to haul our wind then, Mr Reack. We'll have to come as near in about the end of Mull as we can take her, sir, and even then we'll have the land to kept the wind off us, and that stoneyard on our lee. Well we're in for it now, and may as well crack on.' With that he gave an order to the steersmen, and sent Reack to the foretop.

There were only five men on deck, counting the officers, these being all that were fit, or at least both fit and willing, for their work. So as I say, it fell to Mr Reack to go aloft, and he sat there looking out and hailing the deck with news of all he saw. "'The sea to the south is thick,' he cried, and then after a while, "'It does seem clearer in by the land.' "'Well, sir,' said Hoseason to Alan, "'we'll try your way of it, but I think I might as well trust to a blind fiddler.

Pray God you're right.' "'Pray God I am,' said Alan to me. "'But where did I hear it?' "'Well, well, it will be as it must.' As we got nearer to the turn of the land the reefs began to be sown here and there on our very path, and Mr Reack sometimes cried down to us to change the course. Sometimes indeed, none too soon, for one reef was so close on the brig's weatherboard that when a sea burst upon it the lightest sprays fell upon her deck and wetted us like rain.

The brightness of the night showed us these perils as clearly as by day, which was perhaps the more alarming. It showed me, too, the face of the captains he stood by the steersman, now on one foot, now on the other, and sometimes blowing in his hands, but

still listening and looking and as steady as steel. Neither he nor Mr Reack had shown well in the fighting, but I saw they were brave in their own trade, and admired them all the more because I found Alan very white.

"'Arkone, David,' says he, "'this is no the kind of death I fancy.' "'What, Alan?' I cried. "'You're not afraid?' "'No,' said he, wetting his lips, "'but you'll allow yourself it's a cold ending.' By this time, now and then sheering to one side or the other to avoid a reef, but still hugging the wind and the land, we had got round Iona, and begun to come alongside Mull. The tide at the tail of the land ran very strong, and through the brig about.

Two hands were put to the helm, and Hoseason himself would sometimes lend a hand, and it was strange to see three strong men throw their weight upon the tiller, and it, like a living thing, struggle against and drive them back. This would have been the greater danger had not the sea been for some while free of obstacles. Mr Reack, besides, announced from the top that he saw clear water ahead.

"'You were right,' said Hoseason to Alan. "'You have saved the brig, sir. I'll mind that when we come to clear accounts.' I believe he not only meant what he said, but would have done it, so high a place did the covenant hold in his affections.

But this is a matter only for conjecture, things having gone otherwise than he forecast. "'Keep her away a point,' sings out Mr Reack. "'Reef to windward.' And just at the same time the tide caught the brig, and threw the wind out of her sails.

She came round into the wind like a top, and the next moment struck the reef with such a dunch as threw us all flat upon the deck, and came near to shake Mr Reack from his place upon the mast. I was on my feet in a minute. The reef on which we had struck was close in under the south-west end of Mull, half a little isle they call Erod, which lay low and black upon the larboard.

Sometimes the swell broke clean over us, sometimes it only ground the poor brig upon the reef, so that we could hear her beat herself to pieces. And what with the great noise of the sails, and the singing of the wind, and the flying of the spray in the moonlight, and the sense of danger, I think my head must have been partly turned, for I could scarcely understand the things I saw. Presently I observed Mr Reack and the seamen busy round the skiff, and still in the same blank, ran over to assist them, and as soon as I set my hand to work my mind came clear again.

It was no very easy task, for the skiff lay amid ships, and was full of hamper, and the breaking of the heavier seas continually forced us to give over and hold on, but we all wrought like horses while we could. Meanwhile such of the wounded as could move came clambering out of the fore- and aft-cuttles, and began to help, while the rest that lay helpless in their bunks harrowed me with screaming and begging to be saved. The captain took no part.

It seemed he was struck stupid. He stood holding by the shrouds, talking to himself, and groaning out loud whenever the ship hammered on the rock. His brig was like wife and child to him.

He had looked on day by day at the mishandling of poor Ransom, but when it came to the brig he seemed to suffer along with her. All the time of our working at the boat I remember only one other thing, that I asked Alan, looking across at the shore, what country it was, and he answered it was the worst possible for him, for it was the land of the Campbells. We had one of the wounded men told off to keep a watch upon the seas, and cry us warning.

Well, we had the boat about ready to be launched, when this man sang out pretty shrill, For God's sake, hold on! We knew by his tone that it was something more than ordinary, and sure enough, there followed a sea so huge that it lifted the brig right up and cantered her over on her beam. Whether the cry came too late, or my hold was too weak, I know not, but at the sudden tilting of the ship I was cast clean over the bulwarks into the sea. I went down, and drank my fill, and then came up, and got a blink of the moon, and then down again.

They say a man sinks a third time for good. I cannot be made like other folk then, for I would not like to write how often I went down, or how often I came up again. All the while I was being hurled along, and beaten upon, and choked, and then swallowed whole, and the thing was so distracting to my wits that I was neither sorry nor afraid.

Presently I found I was holding to a spar, which helped me somewhat, and then all of a sudden I was in quiet water, and began to come to myself. It was the spare yard I had got hold of, and I was amazed to see how far I had travelled from the brig. I hailed her indeed, but it was plain she was already out of cry.

She was still holding together, but whether or not they had yet launched the boat, I was too far off and too low down to see. While I was hailing the brig, I spied a tract of water lying between us, where no great waves came, but which yet boiled white all over and bristled in the moon with rings and bubbles. Sometimes the whole tract swung to one side, like the tail of a live serpent.

Sometimes for a glimpse it would all disappear, and then boil up again. What it was I had no guess, which for the time increased my fear of it, but I now know it must have been the roost or tide-race, which had carried me away so fast and tumbled me about so cruelly, and at last, as if tired of that play, had flung out me and the spare yard upon its landward margin. I now lay quite becalmed, and began to feel that a man can die of cold as well as of drowning.

The shores of Erard were close in. I could see in the moonlight the dots of heather and the sparkling of the mica in the rocks. Well, thought I to myself, if I cannot get as far as

that, it's strange.

I had no skill of swimming, essen water being small in our neighbourhood, but when I laid hold upon the yard with both arms and kicked out with both feet, I soon began to find that I was moving. Hard work it was, and mortally slow, but in about an hour of kicking and splashing I had got well in between the points of a sandy bay, surrounded by low hills. The sea was here quite quiet.

There was no sound of any surf. The moon shone clear, and I thought in my heart I had never seen a place so desert and desolate. But it was dry land, and when at last it grew so shallow that I could leave the yard and wade ashore upon my feet, I cannot tell if I was more tired or more grateful.

Both at least I was, tired as I never was before that night, and grateful to God as I trust I have been often, though never with more cause.