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Kidnapped—Chapter 24: The Flight In The Heather: The Quarrel

May 28, 2020



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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 24, The Flight In The Heather, The Quarrel. Alan and I were put across Loch Erecht under cover of night, and went down its eastern shore to another hiding place near the head of Loch Rannoch, whither we were led by one of the ghillies from the cage. This fellow carried all our luggage and Alan's greatcoat in the bargain, trotting along under the berthen, far less than half of which used to weigh me to the ground, like a stout hillpony with a feather.

Yet he was a man that in plain contest I could have broken on my knee. Doubtless it was a great relief to walk disencumbered, and perhaps without that relief and the consequent sense of liberty and lightness I could not have walked at all. I was but new risen from a bed of sickness, and there was nothing in the state of our affairs to hearten me for much exertion, travelling as we did over the most dismal deserts in Scotland, under a cloudy heaven, and with divided hearts among the travellers.

For long we said nothing, marching alongside or one behind the other, each with a set

countenance. I, angry and proud, and drawing what strength I had from these two violent and sinful feelings, Alan angry and ashamed, ashamed that he had lost my money, angry that I should take it so ill. The thought of a separation ran always the stronger in my mind, and the more I approved of it the more ashamed I grew of my approval.

It would be a fine, handsome, generous thing indeed for Alan to turn round and say to me, Go, I am in the most danger, and my company only increases yours. But for me to turn to the friend who certainly loved me, and say to him, You are in great danger, I am in but little, your friendship is a burden, go take your risks and bear your hardships alone. No, that was impossible, and even to think of it privily to myself made my cheeks to burn.

And yet Alan had behaved like a child, and what is worse a treacherous child, wheedling my money from me while I lay half conscious was scarce better than theft, and yet here he was trudging by my side without a penny to his name, and by what I could see quite blithe to sponge upon the money he had driven me to beg. True, I was ready to share it with him, but it made me rage to see him count upon my readiness. These were the two things uppermost in my mind, and I could open my mouth upon neither without black ungenerosity, so I did the next worst, and said nothing, nor so much as looked once at my companion save with the tail of my eye.

At last upon the other side of Loch Erecht, going over a smooth, rushy place, where the walking was easy, he could bear it no longer, and came close to me. "'David,' says he, "'this is no way for two friends to take a small accident. I have to say that I am sorry, and so that said.

And now, if you have anything, you had better say it.' "'Oh,' says I, "'I have nothing.' He seemed disconcerted, at which I was meanly pleased. "'No,' said he, with rather a trembling voice, "'but when I say I was to blame—' "'Why, of course you were to blame,' said I coolly, "'and you will bear me out that I have never reproached you.' "'Never,' says he, "'but ye ken very well that ye've done worse. Are we to part? Ye said so once before.

Are ye to say it again? There's hills and heather enough between here and the two seas, David, and I will own I'm no very keen to stay where I'm no wanted.' This pierced me like a sword, and seemed to lay bare my private disloyalty. "'Alan Breck,' I cried, and then, "'do you think I'm one to turn my back on you and your chief need? You dercent say it to my face, my whole conduct's there to give the lie to it. It's true, I fell asleep upon the mule, but that was from weariness, and you do wrong to cast it up to me.' "'Which is what I never did,' said Alan.

"'But aside from that,' I continued, "'what have I done that you should even me to dogs by such a supposition? I never yet failed a friend, and it's not likely I'll begin with you. There are things between us that I can never forget, even if you can.'" "'I will only say

this to you, David,' said Alan very quietly, "that I have long been owing you my life, and now I owe you money. You should try to make that burden light for me.

This ought to have touched me, and in a manner it did, but the wrong manner. I felt I was behaving badly. I was now not only angry with Alan, but angry with myself in the bargain, and it made me the more cruel.

"You asked me to speak,' said I. "Well, then, I will. You own yourself that you have done me a disservice. I have had to swallow an affront.

I have never reproached you. I never named the thing till you did. And now you blame me,' cried I, "'because I cannae laugh and sing as if I was glad to be affronted.

The next thing will be the time to go down upon my knees and thank you for it. You should think more of others, Alan Brack. If ye thought more of others, ye would perhaps speak less about yourself, and when a friend that you very well has passed over an offence without a word, you would be blithe to let it lie, instead of making it a stick to break his back with.

By your own way of it, it was you that was to blame. Then it shouldnae be you to seek the quarrel. I will,' said Alan.

"Say nae, mare,' and we fell back into our former silence, and came to our journey's end, and supped and lay down to sleep without another word. The ghillie put us across Loch Rannoch in the dusk of the next day, and gave us his opinion as to our best route. This was to get us up at once into the tops of the mountains, to go round by a circuit, turning the heads of Glen Lyon, Glen Loughy, and Glen Dugart, and come down upon the lowlands by Kippen, and the upper waters of the Forth.

Alan was little pleased with the route that led us through the country of his blood foes, the Glenorchy Campbells. He objected that by turning to the east we should come almost at once among the Athol Stuarts, a race of his own name and lineage, although following a different chief, and come besides by a far easier and swifter way to the place whither we were bound. But the ghillie, who was indeed the chief man of Clooney's scouts, had good reasons to give him on all hands, naming the force of troops in every district, and alleging, finally, as well as I could understand, that we should nowhere be so little troubled as in a country of the Campbells.

Alan gave way at but with only half a heart. It is one of the dowiest countries in Scotland, said he. There is naething there that I can but heath and crows and Campbells.

But I see that you are a man of some penetration, and be it as you please. We set forth accordingly by this itinerary, and for the best part of three nights travelled on eerie mountains and among the well-heads of wild rivers, often buried in mist, almost continually blown and rained upon, and not once cheered by any glimpse of sunshine. By

day we lay and slept in the drenching heather, by night incessantly clambered upon break-neck hills and among rude crags.

We often wandered. We were often so involved in fog that we must lie quiet till it lightened. A fire was never to be thought of.

Our only food was dramach and a portion of cold meat that we had carried from the cage, and as for drink, heaven knows we had no want of water. This was a dreadful time, rendered the more dreadful by the gloom of the weather and the country. I was never warm.

My teeth chattered in my head. I was troubled with a very sore throat, such as I had on the isle. I had a painful stitch in my side, which never left me, and when I slept in my wet bed, with the rain beating above and the mud oozing below me, it was to live over again in fancy the worst part of my adventures, to see the tower of shores lit by lightning, ransom carried below on the men's backs, Shewan dying on the round-house floor, or Colin Campbell grasping at the bosom of his coat.

From such broken slumbers I would be aroused in the gloaming, to sit up in the same puddle where I had slept, and sup cold dramach, the rain driving sharp in my face, or running down my back in icy trickles, the mist enfolding us like as in a gloomy chamber, or perhaps, if the wind blew, falling suddenly apart and showing us the gulf of some dark valley where the streams were crying aloud. The sound of an infinite number of rivers came up from all round. In this steady rain the springs of the mountain were broken up, every glen gushed water like a cistern, every stream was in high spate, and had filled and overflowed its channel.

During our night tramps it was solemn to hear the voice of them below in the valleys, now booming like thunder, now with an angry cry. I could well understand the story of the water Kelpie, that demon of the streams who was fabled to keep wailing and roaring at the ford until the coming of the doomed traveller. Alan I saw believed it, or half believed it, and when the cry of the river rose more than usually sharp, I was little surprised, though of course I would still be shocked, to see him cross himself in the manner of the Catholics.

During all these horrid wanderings we had no familiarity, scarcely even that of speech. The truth is that I was sickening for my grave, which is my best excuse. But, besides that, I was of an unforgiving disposition for my birth, slow to take offence, slower to forget it, and now incensed both against my companion and myself.

For the best part of two days he was unweariedly kind, silent indeed, but always ready to help, and always hoping, as I could very well see, that my displeasure would blow by. For the same length of time I stayed in myself, nursing my anger, roughly refusing his services, and passing him over with my eyes as if he had been a bush or a stone. The

second night, or rather the peep of the third day, found us upon a very open hill, so that we could not follow our usual plan and lie down immediately to eat and sleep.

Before we had reached a place of shelter the grey had come pretty clear, for though it still rained the clouds ran higher, and Allan, looking in my face, showed some marks of concern. You had better let me take your pack, said he, for perhaps the ninth time since we had parted from the scout beside Lough Ranoch. I do very well, I thank you, said I, as cold as ice.

Allan flushed darkly. I'll not offer it again, he said. I'm not a patient man, David.

I never said you were, said I, which was exactly the rude, silly speech of a boy of ten. Allan made no answer at the time, but his conduct answered for him. Henceforth it is to be thought he quite forgave himself for the affair at Clooney's, cocked his hat again, walked jauntily, whistled airs, and looked at me upon one side with a provoking smile.

The third night we were to pass through the western end of the country of Balqueda. It came clear and cold, with a touch in the air like frost, and a northerly wind that blew the clouds away and made the stars bright. The streams were full, of course, and still made a great noise among the hills, but I observed that Allan thought no more upon the Kelpie, and was in high good spirits.

As for me, the change of weather came too late. I had lain in the mire so long that, as the Bible has it, my very clothes abhorred me. I was dead weary, deadly sick, and full of pains and shiverings.

The chill of the wind went through me, and the sound of it confused my ears. In this poor state I had to bear from my companion something in the nature of a persecution. He spoke a good deal, and never without a taunt.

Wig was the best name he had to give me. Here, he would say, here's a dub for ye to jump, my Wiggy, I ken you're a fine jumper, and so on, all the time with a gibing voice and face. I knew it was my own doing, and no one else's, but I was too miserable to repent.

I felt I could drag myself but little farther. Pretty soon I must lie down and die on these wet mountains like a sheep or a fox, and my bones must whiten there like the bones of a beast. My head was light, perhaps, but I began to love the prospect.

I began to glory in the thought of such a death, alone in the desert, with the wild eagles besieging my last moments. Alan would repent then, I thought. He would remember, when I was dead, how much he owed me, and the remembrance would be torture.

So I went like a sick, silly, and bad-hearted schoolboy, feeding my anger against a fellow-man, when I would have been better on my knees crying on God for mercy. And at each

of Alan's taunts I hugged myself. Ah, thinks I to myself, I have a better taunt in readiness.

When I lie down and die, you will feel like a buffet in your face. Ah, what a revenge! Ah, how you will regret your ingratitude and cruelty! All the while I was growing worse and worse. Once I had fallen, my legs simply doubling under me, and this had struck Alan for the moment.

But I was afoot so briskly, and set off again with such a natural manner, that he soon forgot the incident. Flushes of heat went over me, and then spasms of shuddering. The stitch in my side was hardly bearable.

At last I began to feel that I could trail myself no farther, and with that there came on me all at once the wish to have it out with Alan. Let my anger blaze, and be done with my life in a more sudden manner. He had just called me Whig.

I stopped. Mr. Stewart, said I, in a voice that quivered like a fiddle-string, you are older than I am, and you should know your manners. Do you think it either very wise or very witty to cast my politics in my teeth? I thought where folk differed, it was the part of gentlemen to differ civilly, and if I did not, I may tell you I could find a better taunt than some of yours.

Alan had stopped opposite to me, his hat cocked, his hands in his breeches' pockets, his head a little on one side. He listened, smiling evilly, as I could see by the starlight, and when I had done he began to whistle a Jacobite air. It was the air made in mockery of General Cope's defeat at Preston Pans.

Hey, Johnny Cope, are you walking yet, and are your drums a-beating yet? And it came in my mind that Alan, on the day of that battle, had been engaged upon the royal side. Why do you take that air, Mr. Stewart? said I. Is that to remind me that you have been beaten on both sides? The air stopped on Alan's lips. David, said he.

But it's time these manners ceased, I continued, and I mean you shall henceforth speak civilly of my King, and my good friends the Campbells. I am a Stewart, began Alan. Oh, says I, I can you bear a King's name, but you are to remember, since I have been in the Highlands, I have seen a good many of those that bear it, and the best I can say of them is this, that they would be none the worse of washing.

Do you know that you insult me? said Alan, very low. I am sorry for that, said I, but I am not done, and if you distaste the sermon, I doubt the purlicue will please you as little. You have been chased in the field by the grown men of my party.

It seems a poor kind of pleasure to outface a boy. Both the Campbells and the Whigs have beaten you. You have run before them like a hare.

It behoves you to speak of them as your betters. Alan stood quite still, the tails of his greatcoat clapping behind him in the wind. This is a pity, he said at last.

There are things said that cannot be passed over. I never asked you to, said I. I am as ready as yourself. Ready, said he.

Ready, I repeated. I am no blower and boaster like some that I could name. Come on! And drawing my sword, I fell on guard as Alan himself had taught me.

David, he cried, are ye daft? I can a draw upon you, David. It's fair murder. That was your look-out when you insulted me, said I. It's the truth, cried Alan, and he stood for a moment wringing his mouth in his hand like a man in sore perplexity.

It's the bare truth, he said, and drew his sword. But before I could touch his blade with mine, he had thrown it from him and fallen to the ground. Na, na, he kept saying.

Na, na, I can a, I can a. At this the last of my anger oozed all out of me, and I found myself only sick and sorry and blank and wondering at myself. I would have given the world to take back what I had said, but a word once spoken, who can recapture it? I minded me of all Alan's kindness and courage in the past, how he had helped and cheered and borne with me in our evil days, and then recalled my own insults, and saw that I had lost for ever that doughty friend. At the same time the sickness that hung upon me seemed to redouble, and the pang in my side was like a sword for sharpness.

I thought I must have swooned where I stood. This it was that gave me a thought. No apology could blot out what I had said.

It was needless to think of one. None could cover the offence. But where an apology was vain, a mere cry for help might bring Alan back to my side.

I put my pride away from me. Alan, I said, if you can a help me, I must just die here. He started up sitting, and looked at me.

It's true, said I, I'm by with it. Oh, let me get into the beeld of a house. I'll can die there easier.

I had no need to pretend. Whether I chose or not, I spoke in a weeping voice that would have melted a heart of stone. Can you walk? asked Alan.

No, said I, not without help. This last hour my legs have been fainting under me. I've a stitch in my side like a red-hot iron.

I cannae breathe right. If I die, you'll can forgive me, Alan. In my heart I liked you fine, even when I was the angriest.

Weeshed, weeshed, cried Alan. Don't say that, David-man, you can. He shut his mouth

upon a sob.

Let me get my arm about ye, he continued. That's the way. Now lean upon me hard.

Good can't where there's a house. We're in Balwida too. There should be no want of houses.

No, nor friend's houses here. Do ye gang easier so, Davy? Aye, said I, I can be doing this way. And I pressed his arm with my hand.

Again he came near sobbing. Davy, said he, I'm no a right man at all. I have neither sense nor kindness.

I couldnae remember. Ye were just a-bairn. I couldnae see ye were dying on your feet.

Davy, you'll have to try and forgive me. Oh, man, let's say no more about it, said I. We're neither one of us to mend the other. That's the truth.

We must just bear and forbear, man-Alan. Oh, but my stitch is sore. Is there nay house? I'll find a house to you, David, he said stoutly.

We'll follow down the burn, where there's bound to be houses. My poor man, will ye know be better on my back? Oh, Alan, says I, and me a good twelve inches taller? Ye're no such a thing, cried Alan, with a start. There may be a trifling matter of an inch or two.

I'm no saying I'm just exactly what ye would call a tall man, whatever, and I dare say— He added, his voice tailing off in a laughable manner. Now when I come to think of it, I dare say ye'll be just about right. Ay, it'll be a foot, or near hand, or may even be mare.

It was sweet and laughable to hear Alan eat his words up in the fear of some fresh quarrel. I could have laughed, had not my stitch caught me so hard. But if I had laughed, I think I must have wept, too.

Alan, cried I, what makes ye so good to me? What makes ye care for such a thankless fellow? Deed and I don't know, said Alan, for just precisely what I thought I liked about ye was that ye never quarrelled. And now I like ye better.