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Kidnapped—Chapter 3: I Make Acquaintance Of My Uncle

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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 3. I Make Acquaintance Of My Uncle. Presently there came a great rattling of chains and bolts, and the door was cautiously opened and shut to again behind me as soon as I had passed. Go into the kitchen and touch Nathan, said the voice, and while the person of the house set himself to replacing the defences of the door, I groped my way forward and entered the kitchen.

The fire had burned up fairly bright, and showed me the barest room I think I ever put my eyes on. Half a dozen dishes stood upon the shelves. The table was laid for supper with a bowl of porridge, a horned spoon, and a cup of small beer.

Besides what I have named, there was not another thing in that great stone-vaulted empty chamber but lock-fast chests arranged along the wall and a cupboard with a padlock. As soon as the last chain was up, the man rejoined me. He was a mean, stooping, narrow-shouldered, clay-faced creature, and his age might have been anything between fifty and seventy.

His nightcap was of flannel, and so was the nightgown that he wore, instead of coat and

waistcoat over his ragged shirt. He was long unshaved, but what most distressed and even daunted me, he would neither take his eyes away from me nor look me fairly in the face. What he was, whether by trade or birth, was more than I could fathom, but he seemed most like an old, unprofitable serving-man, who should have been left in charge of that great big house upon board wages.

"'Are ye sharp set?' he asked, glancing at about the level of my knee. "'Ye can eat that drop, Parritch.' I said I feared it was his own supper. "'Oh,' said he, "'I can do fine wanting it.

I'll take the ale, though, for it slarkens my cough.' He drank the cup about half out, still keeping an eye upon me as he drank, and then suddenly held out his hand. "'Let's see the letter,' said he. I told him the letter was for Mr. Balfour, not for him.

"'And who do ye think I am?' says he. "'Give me Alexander's letter.' "'Ye know my father's name?' "'It would be strange if I did, nay,' he returned, "'for he was my born brother, and little as ye seem to like either me or my house or my good Parritch, I'm your born uncle, Davy my man, and you my born nephew, so give us the letter, and sit down and fill your kite.' If I had been some years younger, what was shame, weariness, and disappointment, I believe I had burst into tears. As it was, I could find no words, neither black nor white, but handed him the letter and sat down to the porridge with as little appetite for meat as ever a young man had.

Meanwhile my uncle, stooping over the fire, turned the letter over and over in his hands. "'Do you ken what's in it?' he asked suddenly. "'You see for yourself, sir,' said I, "'that the seal has not been broken.' "'Ay,' said he, "'but what brought you here?' "'To give the letter,' said I. "'No,' says he cunningly, "'but you'll have some hopes, nay doubt.' "'I confess, sir,' said I, "'when I was told that I had kinsfolk well to do, "'I did indeed indulge the hope that they might help me in my life.

"'But I am no beggar. "'I look for no favours at your hands, "'and I want none that are not freely given, "'for as poor as I appear, I have friends of my own that will be blithe to help me.' "'Hoot toot,' said Uncle Ebenezer. "'Denay fly up in the snuff at me.

"'We'll agree fine yet. "'And Davy, my man, if you're done with that bit parritch, "'I could just take us up of it myself.' "'Ay,' he continued, "'as soon as he had ousted me from the stool and spoon. "'There fine hail some food, there grand food, parritch!' "'He murmured a little grace to himself and fell to.

"'Your father was very fond of his meat, I mind. "'He was a hearty, if not a great eater. "'But as for me, I could never do mere than pike at food.' He took a pull at the small beer, which probably reminded him of hospitable duties, for his next speech ran thus.

"'If you're dry, you'll find water behind the door.' "'To this I returned no answer, standing

stiffly on my two feet, "and looking down upon my uncle with a mighty angry heart. "He on his part continued to eat like a man under some pressure of time, "and to throw out little darting glances now at my shoes "and now at my homespun stockings. "Once only, when he had ventured to look a little higher, our eyes met, "and no thief taken with a hand in a man's pocket "should have shown more lively signals of distress.

"This set me in a muse, whether his timidity arose from too long a disuse of any human company, "and whether perhaps, upon a little trial, it might pass off, "and my uncle change into an altogether different man. "From this I was awakened by his sharp voice. "Your father's been long dead,' he asked.

"Three weeks, sir,' said I. "He was a secret man, Alexander, a secret silent man,' he continued. "He never said muckle when he was young. "He'll never have spoken muckle of me.

"I never knew, sir, till you told me it yourself, that he had any brother.' "Dear me, dear me,' said Ebenezer. "Nor yet of Shores, I dare say.' "Not so much as the name, sir,' said I. "To think o' that,' said he, "a strange nature of a man. "For all that he seemed singularly satisfied, but whether with himself, or me, "or with this conduct of my father's, was more than I could read.

"Certainly, however, he seemed to be outgrowing that distaste or ill-will "that he had conceived at first against my person, for presently he jumped up, "came across the room behind me, and hit me a smack upon the shoulder. "We'll agree fine yet,' he cried. "I'm just as glad I let you in, and now come awa' to your bed.' "To my surprise he lit no lamp or candle, but set forth into the dark passage, "groped his way, breathing deeply, up a flight of steps, and paused before a door, "which he unlocked.

"I was close upon his heels, having stumbled after him as best I might, "and then he bade me go in, for that was my chamber. "I did as he bid, but paused after a few steps, and begged a light to go to bed with. "Hoot, toot!' said Uncle Ebenezer.

"There's a fine moon.' "Neither moon nor star, sir, and pit murk,' said I. "I cannae see the bed.' "Hoot, toot, hoot, toot,' said he. "Lights in a house is a thing I dinnae agree with. "I'm unco-feared of fires.

"Good night to ye, Davey, my man.' "And before I had time to add a further protest, he pulled the door to, "and I heard him lock me in from the outside. "I did not know whether to laugh or cry. "The room was as cold as a well, and the bed, when I had found my way to it, "as damp as a peat-hag.

"But by good fortune I had caught up my bundle and my plaid, "and rolling myself in the latter, I lay down upon the floor, "under lee of the big bedstead, and fell speedily asleep. "With the first peep of day I opened my eyes, "to find myself in a great chamber, hung

with stamped leather, furnished with fine embroidered furniture, and lit by three fair windows. Ten years ago, or perhaps twenty, it must have been as pleasant a room to lie down or awaken as a man could wish.

But damp, dirt, disuse, and the mice and spiders had done their worst since then. Many of the window-panes besides were broken, and indeed this was so common a feature in that house, that I believe my uncle must at some time have stood a siege from his indignant neighbours, perhaps with Janet Clouston at their head. Meanwhile the sun was shining outside, and being very cold in that miserable room, I knocked and shouted till my jailer came and let me out.

He carried me to the back of the house, where there was a drawer-well, and told me to wash my face there if I wanted. And when that was done, I made the best of my own way back to the kitchen, where he had lit the fire and was making the porridge. The table was laid with two bowls and two horned spoons, but the same single measure of small beer.

Perhaps my eye rested on this particular with some surprise, and perhaps my uncle observed it, for he spoke up as if in answer to my thought, asking me if I would like to drink ale, for so he called it. I told him such was my habit, but not to put himself about. Nah, nah,' said he, I'll deny you nothing in reason.

He fetched another cup from the shelf, and then to my great surprise, instead of drawing more beer, he poured an accurate half from one cup to the other. There was a kind of nobleness in this that took my breath away. If my uncle was certainly a miser, he was one of that thorough breed that goes near to make the vice respectable.

When we had made an end of our meal, my uncle Ebenezer unlocked a drawer, and drew out of it a clay pipe and a lump of tobacco, from which he cut one fill before he locked it up again. Then he sat down in the sun at one of the windows, and silently smoked. From time to time his eyes came coasting round to me, and he shot out one of his questions.

Once it was, And your mother? And when I had told him that she too was dead, Ay, she was a bonny lassie. Then after another long pause, Way were these friends o' yours? I told him they were different gentlemen of the name of Campbell, though indeed there was only one, and that the minister, that had ever taken the least note of me. But I began to think my uncle made too light of my position, and finding myself all alone with him, I did not wish him to suppose me helpless.

He seemed to turn this over in his mind, and then, David, my man,' said he, you've come to the right bit when you came to your uncle Ebenezer. I've a great notion of the family, and I mean to do the right by you. But while I'm taking a bit think to myself of what's the best thing to put you to, whether the law or the ministry or maybe the

army.

"Wilk is what boys are fond of. "I wouldn't ay like the Balfours to be humbled "'before a wean Highland Campbells, "'and I'll ask you to keep your tongue within your teeth. "'Nay letters, nay messages, "'no kind of word to own a body, "'or else, there's my door.

"Uncle Ebenezer,' said I, "'I've no manner of reason to suppose you mean anything but well by me. "'For all that, I would have you to know that I have a pride of my own. "'It was by no will of mine that I came seeking you, "'and if you show me your door again, "'I'll take you at the word.' "'He seemed grievously put out.

"Hoots toots,' said he. "'Ca' ken ay, man, ca' ken ay. "'Bide a day or two, I'm nay warlock, "'to find a fortune for you in a bottom of a parish bowl, "'but just you give me a day or two, "'and say nay thing to naybody, "'and as sure as sure I'll do the right by you.' "'Very well,' said I. "'Enough said.

"If you want to help me, there's no doubt, "'but I'll be glad of it, "'and none but I'll be grateful. "'It seemed to me, too soon, I dare say, "'that I was getting the upper hand of my uncle, "'and I began next to say that I must have the bed "'and bedclothes aired and put to sun-dry, "'for nothing would make me sleep in such a pickle. "'Is this my house or yours?' said he, in his keen voice, "'and then all of a sudden broke off.

"Na, na,' said he. "'I did nay mean that. "'What's mine is yours, Davey, my man, "'and what's yours is mine.

"Blood's thicker than water, "'and there's naybody but you and me that ought the name.' "'And then on he rambled about the family "'and its ancient greatness, "'and his father that began to enlarge the house, "'and himself that stopped the building as a sinful waste, "'and this put it in my head "'to give him Janet Clouston's message. "'The limmer,' he cried. "'Twelve hunner and fifteen.

"That's every day since I had the limmer rope it. "'Dawd, David, I'll have her roasted on red peats "'before I'm by with it. "'A witch, a proclaimed witch.

"I'll aff and see the session clerk.' "'And with that he opened a chest "'and got out a very old and well-preserved "'blue coat and waistcoat, "'and a good enough beaver hat, "'both without lace. "'These he threw on anyway, "'and taking a staff from the cupboard, "'locked all up again, "'and was for setting out "'when a thought arrested him. "'I can nay leave you by yourself in the house,' said he.

"I'll have to lock you out.' "'The blood came to my face. "'If you lock me out,' I said, "'it'll be the last you'll see of me in friendship.' "'He turned very pale and sucked his mouth in. "'This is no the way,' he said.

"Looking wickedly at a corner of the floor. "'This is no the way to win my favour, David.'

"Sir,' says I, "with a proper reverence for your age and our common blood, "I do not value your favour at a bottle's purchase. "I was brought up to have a good conceit of myself, "'and if you were all the uncle "'and all the family I had in the world ten times over, "I wouldn't buy your liking at such prices.' ""Uncle Ebenezer went and looked out of the window for a while.

"I could see him all trembling and twitching, "like a man with palsy. "But when he turned round, he had a smile upon his face. "Well, well,' said he, "we must bear and forbear.

"I'll no go. "That's all that's to be said of it.' ""Uncle Ebenezer,' I said, "I can make nothing out of this. "You use me like a thief.

"You hate to have me in this house. "You let me see it, every word and every minute. "It's not possible that you can like me, "'and as for me, I've spoken to you "'as I never thought to speak to any man.

"Why do you seek to keep me, then? "Let me gang back. "Let me gang back to the friends I have, "'and that like me.' ""Nah, nah. "Nah, nah,' he said very earnestly.

"I like you fine. "We'll agree fine yet, "'and for the honour of the house, "I could nay let you leave the way you came. "Bide here quiet, there's a good lad.

"Just you bide here quiet a bitty, "'and you'll find that we agree.' ""Well, sir,' said I, "'after I had thought the matter out in silence, "I'll stay a while. "It's more just I should be helped by my own blood "'than strangers, "'and if we don't agree, "I'll do my best it shall be through no fault of mine."