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Kidnapped—Chapter 20: The Flight In The Heather: The Rocks

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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 20 The Flight In The Heather The Rocks Sometimes we walked, sometimes ran,
And as it drew on to morning, Walked ever the less and ran the more. Though upon its
face that country appeared to be a desert, Yet there were huts and houses of the people,
Of which we must have passed more than twenty, Hidden in quiet places of the hills.
When we came to one of these, Alan would leave me in the way, And go himself and rap
upon the side of the house, And speak a while at the window, With some sleeper
awakened.

This was to pass the news, Which in that country was so much of a duty That Alan must
pause to attend to it, Even while fleeing for his life, And so well attended to by others,
That in more than half of the houses where we called, They had heard already of the
murder. In the others, as well as I could make out, Standing back at a distance and
hearing a strange tongue, The news was received with more of consternation than
surprise. For all our hurry, day began to come in while we were still far from any shelter.

It found us in a prodigious valley, strewn with rocks, and where ran a foaming river, while mountains stood around it. There grew there neither grass nor tree, and I have sometimes thought since then that it may have been the valley called Glencoe, where the massacre was in the time of King William. But for the details of our itinerary, I am all to seek, our way lying now by shortcuts, now by great detours, our pace being so hurried, our time of journeying usually by night, and the names of such places as I asked and heard being in the Gaelic tongue, and the more easily forgotten.

The first peep of morning then showed us this horrible place, and I could see Alan knit his brow. This is no fit place for you and me, he said, this is a place they're bound to watch. And with that he ran harder than ever down to the water side, in a part where the river was split in two among three rocks.

It went through with a horrid thundering that made my belly quake, and there hung over the lin a little mist of spray. Alan looked neither to the right nor to the left, but jumped clean upon the middle rock and fell there on his hands and knees to check himself, for that rock was small and he might have pitched over on the far side. I had scarce time to measure the distance or to understand the peril before I had followed him, and he had caught and stopped me.

So there we stood, side by side upon a small rock slippery with spray, a far broader leap in front of us, and the river dinning upon all sides. When I saw where I was, there came on me a deadly sickness of fear, and I put my hand over my eyes. Alan took me and shook me.

I saw he was speaking, but the roaring of the falls and the trouble of my mind prevented me from hearing, only I saw his face was red with anger, and that he stamped upon the rock. The same look showed me the water raging by and the mist hanging in the air, and with that I covered my eyes again and shuddered. The next minute Alan had set the brandy bottle to my lips and forced me to drink about a gill, which sent the blood into my head again.

Then putting his hands to his mouth and his mouth to my ear, he shouted, Hang or drown! and turning his back upon me, leaped over the farther branch of the stream and landed safe. I was now alone upon the rock, which gave me the more room. The brandy was singing in my ears.

I had this good example fresh before me, and just wit enough to see that if I did not leap at once, I should never leap at all. I bent lower my knees and flung myself forth, with that kind of anger of despair that has sometimes stood me instead of courage. Sure enough, it was but my hands that reached the full length.

These slipped, caught again, slipped again, and I was slithering back into the lin when Alan seized me, first by the hair, then by the collar, and with a great strain dragged me

into safety. Never a word he said, but set off running again for his life, and I must stagger to my feet and run after him. I had been weary before, but now I was sick and bruised, and partly drunken with the brandy.

I kept stumbling as I ran. I had a stitch that came near to overmaster me, and when at last Alan paused under a great rock that stood there among a number of others, it was none too soon for David Balfour. A great rock, I have said, but by rights it was two rocks leaning together at the top, both some twenty feet high, and at the first sight inaccessible.

Even Alan, though you may say he had as good as four hands, failed twice in an attempt to climb them, and it was only at the third trial, and then by standing on my shoulders and leaping up with such force as I thought must have broken my collarbone, that he secured a lodgment. Once there he let down his leathern girdle, and with the aid of that and a pair of shallow footholds in the rock I scrambled up beside him. Then I saw why we had come there, for the two rocks, being both somewhat hollow on the top, and sloping one to the other, made a kind of dish or saucer, where as many as three or four men might have lain hidden.

All this while Alan had not said a word, and had run and climbed with such a savage silent frenzy of hurry that I knew that he was in mortal fear of some miscarriage. Even now we were on the rock he said nothing, nor so much as relaxed the frowning look upon his face, but clapped flat down, and keeping only one eye above the edge of our place of shelter, scouted all round the compass. The dawn had come quite clear, we could see the stony sides of the valley, and its bottom which was bestrewed with rocks, and the river which went from one side to another and made white falls, but nowhere the smoke of a house, nor any living creature but some eagle screaming round a cliff.

Then at last Alan smiled. "'Ay,' said he, "'now we have a chance,' and then looking at me with some amusement. "'Ye're no very gleg at the jumping,' said he.

At this I suppose I coloured with mortification, for he added at once, "'Hoots, small blame to ye. To be feared of a thing and yet to do it is what makes the prettiest kind of a man. And then there was water there, and water's a thing that dauntens even me.

No, no,' said Alan, "'it's no you that's to blame, it's me.' "'I asked him why. "'Why,' said he, "'I have proved myself a gomorral this night. For first of all I take a wrong road, and that in my own country of Appen, so that the day has caught us where we should never have been, and thanks to that we lie here in some danger and mere discomfort.

And next, which is the worst of the two, for a man that has been so much among the heatherers myself, I have come wanting a water-bottle, and here we lie for a long summer's day with naything but neat spirit. Ye may think that a small matter, but before it comes night, David, ye'll give me news of it.' I was anxious to redeem my character,

and offered, if he would pour out the brandy, to run down and fill the bottle at the river. "I would nay waste the good spirit either,' says he.

"It's been a good friend to you this night, or in my poor opinion ye would still be cocking on yon stone. And what's mere,' says he, "ye may have observed, you that's a man of so much penetration, that Alan Breck Stewart was perhaps walking quicker than his ordner.' "You!' I cried. "You were running fit to burst.' "Was I so?' said he.

"Well then, ye may depend upon it, that there was nay time to be lost, and now here is enough said. Gang ye to your sleep, lad, and I'll watch.' Accordingly I lay down to sleep, a little peaty earth had drifted in between the top of the two rocks, and some bracken grew there to be a bed to me. The last thing I heard was still the crying of the eagles.

I dare say it would be nine in the morning, when I was roughly awakened, and found Alan's hand pressed upon my mouth. "Weesht!' he whispered. "Ye were snoring.' "Well,' said I, surprised at his anxious and dark face, "and why not?' He peered over the edge of the rock, and signed to me to do the like.

It was now high day, cloudless and very hot. The valley was as clear as in a picture. About half a mile up the water was a camp of redcoats, a big fire blazed in their midst, at which some were cooking, and nearby, on the top of a rock about as high as ours, there stood a sentry, with the sun sparkling on his arms.

All the way down along the river-side were posted other sentries. Here near together, there widely are scattered, some planted like the first, on places of command, some on the ground level, and marching and counter-marching, so as to meet half-way. Higher up the glen, where the ground was more open, the chain of posts was continued by horse-soldiers, whom we could see in the distance riding to and fro.

Lower down the infantry continued, but as the stream was suddenly swelled by the confluence of a considerable burn, they were more widely set, and only watched the fords and stepping-stones. I took but one look at them, and ducked again into my place. It was strange indeed to see this valley, which had lain so solitary in the hour of dawn, bristling with arms and dotted with the redcoats and breeches.

"Ye see,' said Alan, "this was what I was afraid of, Davy, that they would watch the burn-side. They began to come in about two hours ago, and, man, but ye are a great hand at the sleeping. We're in a narrow place.

If they get up the sides of the hill, they could easy spy us with a glass. But if they'll only keep in the foot of the valley, we'll do yet. The posts are thinner down the water, and come night we'll try our hand at getting by them.' "And what are we to do till night?' I asked.

"Lie here,' says he. "And bursle.'" That one good Scotch word, bursle, was indeed the

most of the story of the day that we had now to pass. You are to remember that we lay on the bare top of a rock, like scones upon a girdle.

The sun beat upon us cruelly, the rock grew so heated a man could scarce endure the touch of it, and the little patch of earth and fern which kept cooler was only large enough for one at a time. We took turn about to lie on the naked rock, which was indeed like the position of that saint that was martyred on a gridiron, and it ran in my mind how strange it was that in the same climate, and at only a few days' distance, I should have suffered so cruelly, first from cold upon my island, and now from heat upon this rock. All the while we had no water, only raw brandy for a drink, which was worse than nothing, but we kept the bottle as cool as we could, burying it in the earth, and got some relief by bathing our breasts and temples.

The soldiers kept stirring all day in the bottom of the valley, now changing guard, now in patrolling parties hunting among the rocks. These lay round in so great a number that to look for men among them was like looking for a needle in a bottle of hay, and being so hopeless a task it was gone about with the less care. Yet we could see the soldiers pike their bayonets among the heather, which sent a cold thrill into my vitals, and they would sometimes hang about our rock so that we scarce dared to breathe.

It was in this way that I first heard the right English speech, one fellow as he went by actually clapping his hand upon the sunny face of the rock on which we lay, and plucking it off again with an oath. "'I tell you it's hot,' says he, and I was amazed at the clipping tones and the odd sing-song in which he spoke, and no less at that strange trick of dropping out the letter H. To be sure I had heard ransom, but he had taken his ways from all sorts of people and spoke so imperfectly at the best that I set down the most of it to childishness. My surprise was all the greater to hear that manner of speaking in the mouth of a grown man, and indeed I have never grown used to it, nor yet altogether with the English grammar, as perhaps the very critical eye might here and there spy out even in these memoirs.

The tediousness and pain of these hours upon the rock grew only the greater as the day went on, the rock getting still the hotter and the sun fiercer. There were giddiness and sickness and sharp pangs like rheumatism to be supported. I minded then, and have often minded since, on the lines in our Scotch psalm, "'The moon by night thee shall not smite, nor yet the sun by day,' and indeed it was only by God's blessing that we were neither of us sun-smitten.

At last, about two, it was beyond men's bearing, and there was now temptation to resist as well as pain to thole. For the sun being now got a little into the west, there came a patch of shade on the east side of our rock, which was the side sheltered from the soldiers. "'As well one death as another,' said Alan, and slipped over the edge and dropped on the ground on the shadowy side.

I followed him at once, and instantly fell all my length. So weak was I, and so giddy with that long exposure. Here then we lay for an hour or two, aching from head to foot as weak as water, and lying quite naked to the eye of any soldier who should have strolled that way.

None came, however, all passing by on the other side, so that our rock continued to be our shield even in this new position. Presently we began again to get a little strength, and as the soldiers were now lying closer along the river-side, Alan proposed that we should try a start. I was by this time afraid of but one thing in the world, and that was to be set back upon the rock.

Anything else was welcome to me. So we got ourselves at once in marching order, and began to slip from rock to rock, one after the other, now crawling flat on our bellies in the shade, now making a run for it heart and mouth. The soldiers, having searched this side of the valley after a fashion, and being perhaps somewhat sleepy with the sultriness of the afternoon, had now laid by much of their vigilance, and stood dozing at their posts, or only kept a lookout along the banks of the river, so that in this way, keeping down the valley, and at the same time towards the mountains, we drew steadily away from their neighbourhood.

But the business was the most wearing I had ever taken part in. A man had need of a hundred eyes in every part of him, to keep concealed in that uneven country, and within cry of so many and scattered centuries. When we must pass an open place, quickness was not all, but a swift judgment not only of the lie of the whole country, but of the solidity of every stone on which we must set foot, for the afternoon was now fallen so breathless, that the rolling of a pebble sounded abroad like a pistol shot, and would start the echo calling among the hills and cliffs.

By sundown we had made some distance, even by our slow rate of progress, though to be sure the sentry on the rock was still plainly in our view. But now we came on something that put all fears out of season, and that was a deep rushing burn, that tore down in that part to join the Glen River. At the sight of this we cast ourselves on the ground, and plunged, head and shoulders in the water, and I cannot tell which was the more pleasant, the great shock as the cool stream went over us, or the greed with which we drank of it.

We lay there, for the banks hid us, drank again and again, bathed our chests, let our wrists trail in the running water till they ached with the chill, and at last, being wonderfully renewed, we got out the meal-bag and made dramach in the iron pan. This, though it is but cold water mingled with oatmeal, yet makes a good enough dish for a hungry man, and where there are no means of making fire, or, as in our case, good reason for not making one, it is the chief standby of those who have taken to the heather. As soon as the shadow of the night had fallen, we set forth again, at first with

the same caution, but presently with more boldness, standing our full height and stepping out at a good pace of walking.

The way was very intricate, lying up the steep sides of mountains and along the brows of cliffs. Clouds had come in with the sunset, and the night was dark and cool, so that I walked without much fatigue, but in continual fear of falling and rolling down the mountains, and with no guess at our direction. The moon rose at last, and found us still on the road.

It was in its last quarter, and was long beset with clouds, and after a while shone out and showed me many dark heads of mountains, and was reflected far underneath us on the narrow arm of the sea-lock. At this sight we both paused. I struck with wonder to find myself so high and walking, as it seemed to me, upon clouds, Allan to make sure of his direction.

Seemingly he was well pleased, and he must certainly have judged us out of earshot of all our enemies, for throughout the rest of our night-march he beguiled the way with whistling of many tunes, warlike, merry, plaintive, real tunes that made the foot go faster, tunes of my own south country that made me feign to be home from my adventures, and all these on the great, dark, desert mountains, making company upon the way.