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Opening extract from

Kidnapped

Written by

Robert Louis Stevenson

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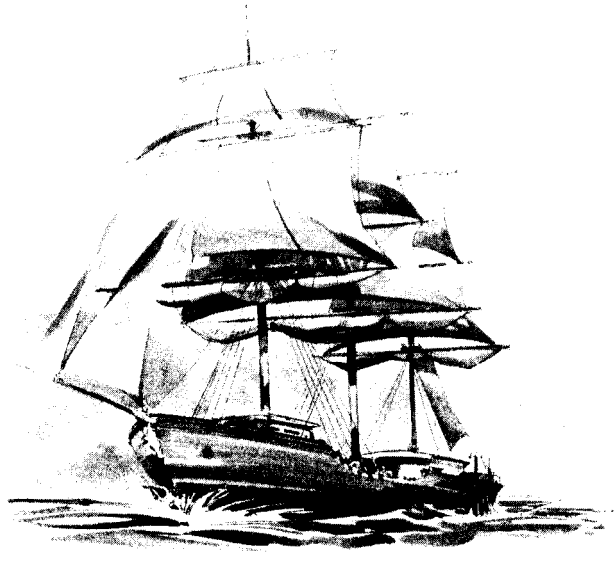
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Kidnapped

from the story by

Robert Louis Stevenson

retold by Henry Brook



Illustrated by Bob Harvey

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About *Kidnapped*

First published in 1886, *Kidnapped* is now acknowledged as one of Robert Louis Stevenson's greatest novels. It describes sixteen-year-old David Balfour's struggle to outwit his evil uncle, Ebenezer, and claim his rightful inheritance. ("Balfour" was Stevenson's mother's maiden name and one of his own middle names.) Stevenson always claimed that he believed the purpose of writing books was "to entertain and not to educate", and in the original dedication to his novel he modestly declared that his only intention was to "steal a young gentleman's attention" from his school books. But *Kidnapped* is much more than a thrilling adventure story. It gives the reader a portrait of war-torn Scotland in the year 1751, and provides a rich description of how the Highland clans (or tribes) lived at the time.

Stevenson was born in Edinburgh in 1850 and was always fascinated by the history of his country. He was proud to be a Scot, but his health was too weak to endure the harsh Scottish weather. As a child he was often confined to bed, and as a young university student there were days when his chest was so sensitive, it caused him agony to wear even a light

cotton jacket. Doctors told him that if he wanted to live for more than a few more years he must migrate to a warm and dry climate. This enforced absence made the author feel like an exile from his own country. *Kidnapped* was written while he lived in a small resort town in the south of England, where he was terribly homesick. He wrote *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* in the same year, and although that book is supposed to be set in London, most of the character's names are Scottish and the urban descriptions have more in common with Edinburgh than they do with the English capital. In *Kidnapped*, Stevenson no longer had to disguise his wish to write about the Scottish countryside he longed to revisit. In all his stories, he liked to include lots of old Scottish words, some of which are no longer used. This version of *Kidnapped* has been updated to modern English.

The book was inspired by the real-life assassination of Colin Campbell - an agent for the English king - in 1752, and the subsequent trial of James Stewart for the murder. Stevenson was interested in the background tensions that led up to the killing and trial and he crafted his story using some of the known facts. The book that resulted is a gripping story with a breathless pace, and it features two of Stevenson's greatest characters - David Balfour and Alan Breck.

These two meet each other at a time when Scotland was divided by religion. In the northern part of the country, the Highlands, the clans were mainly Catholic. But in the south, the Lowlands, the people were Protestants. The last great uprising of the clans

took place in 1745, and in 1746 they were finally defeated by English forces at the battle of Culloden. Although *Kidnapped* uses these events in part for its framework, Stevenson was looking further back in history to provide the atmosphere for his novel - to the time of the Celts, the first settlers in the Highlands, who arrived before Roman times. He wanted to explore the great variety of influences that had contributed to the Scottish national character.

At one point, David Balfour finds himself shipwrecked on the west coast of Scotland. But Stevenson suggests that his Lowland hero could have been dropped into a foreign country. David feels like an alien in his own land. The people he encounters speak a language he can't understand (Gaelic), their customs are unfamiliar and the way they organize their society is different from his own. Some of the traditions of the Highland clans were inherited from the Celts: music, language and dress for instance. Stevenson forces David to confront this Celtic influence by introducing the highlander, Alan Breck. Alan rescues David from a bloodthirsty ship's crew and guides him to safety across the wild Highland landscape. He speaks Gaelic and lives by the sword, like a warrior from an earlier age.

The conflict between David and Alan - two Scots who seem to inhabit different countries - is one of the things that makes *Kidnapped* such a great story. Although he states that he wrote to entertain, throughout his life Stevenson tried to understand the customs and beliefs of the other world cultures he

visited (see *About Robert Louis Stevenson* at the end of this book). Through the character of Alan Breck he describes the "warrior traditions" of the Highland clans, and the clash with David's Lowland values. But, despite all their disagreements, the two Scotsmen unite against the dangers they face and become close friends. Their shared belief in the values of honesty and loyalty as they battle the rogues and pirates they come across in the story, binds them together like blood brothers.

The Letter of Inheritance

If anyone tells you life is a dull and predictable business, let them hear my story. In the year 1751 I lost my parents and my home. I was sixteen years old and all I possessed were the clothes on my back. I had nowhere to go, and no reason to think my life would amount to much. But over the following weeks I had more adventures than most people see in a lifetime. I learned how it feels to be rich, and what it means to be a slave. I saw sword fights and shipwrecks and was an outlaw in my own country. But I'll begin at the beginning, in a sleepy village in Scotland...

It was a fine, summer morning as I locked the door of my father's house for the last time. The blackbirds were whistling among the garden flowers, and the dawn mist had started to lift and die away. The church minister, Mr. Campbell, was waiting for me at the gate.

"Have you had any breakfast, Davie?" he asked kindly.

I nodded my head.

"Well, I will go with you as far as the ford crossing,

to see you on your way."

After a few minutes of walking together in silence, Mr. Campbell turned to me. "Are you sorry to leave the village of Essendean?"

"Well, sir," I replied, "I've been very happy here, but now that my parents are both dead, I'll be no nearer to them in Essendean than I would if I was on the other side of the world, or any other place. There are good memories here, and some sad ones. So, if I knew where I could find work and build a life for myself, I would go there gladly."

The minister smiled and gave me a pat on my shoulder. "I have something to tell you, Davie, something that will change your life forever."

He looked around for somewhere to sit and, spying a flat-topped boulder by the side of the road, led me over to it. The sun was beating down on us now, and I could smell the scent of the wild flowers and the heather, drifting down from the open country at the top of the valley. I sat next to him on the rock and he took my hand.

"When your mother was dead," he began in a serious voice, "and your father himself was dying, he gave me a letter, which he said was your inheritance. 'Once I am gone,' he told me, 'and the house has been emptied, give my boy this letter and send him off to the House of Shaws, in the district of Cramond. That is where I am from, and it seems right that my son should return there.' That was his request, Davie.

"I always had my suspicions that your father was well-born. His manners and conversation were not

those of a common schoolteacher. The House of Shaws is an ancient, honest and respected family name, though these days the estate is somewhat decayed."

"Estate?" I stammered in my excitement. The minister slowly reached inside his cloak and took out an envelope. It was addressed:

To be delivered to Ebenezer Balfour,
of The House of Shaws,
by my son, David Balfour.

"Congratulations, Davie," he laughed. "You should reach Cramond, which is near Edinburgh, in two days. If the worst happens, and your rich relations turn you away, then come straight back to my door. But I'm sure they'll invite you to stay, as your father believed."

Then, with an uplifted, waggling finger, and a stern voice to accompany it, he warned me about the variety of evils I might encounter in the world. Next, he said a few words about how I should behave with my new relatives. "Remember, you have been brought up in the country. Don't shame us with any 'farm boy' bad manners. In that great house, with all its servants, try not to say anything stupid. As for the laird - don't forget he is master of the estate. It's a pleasure for a Scotsman to obey a good laird."

"I promise to do my best, sir."

He hugged me, then held me at arm's length, studying me with a sad expression. At last he cried

"goodbye" and set off back to the village at a run. It was a strange sight to watch the minister jogging away from me, but I realized he was unhappy to see me go, and had to get away before his emotions got the better of him.

I knew I should feel sad too, but I was longing to meet my new family. After scolding myself for such ungrateful thoughts, when I was saying farewell to my only friend, I waded the ford and climbed the side of the valley. Out on the drover's road that runs wide through the heather, I turned and took my last look at the church of Essendean, the tall, wind-curled trees around its graveyard and the rowan trees with their bright red berries, marking the spot where my mother and father rested. Then I was on my way.



Two days later I spotted Edinburgh, with thousands of chimneys smoking like a forest fire, high upon a ridge that ran down to the sea. There was a flag on the

highest castle tower and a flotilla of ships bobbing around by the docks. I stared at this scene for hours, my country eyes amazed by the new sights of the ocean and the city.

Coming down onto the road for Cramond, I saw a regiment of English soldiers, marching in perfect step to a tune played on the Highland pipes. At the head of the column was an old, red-faced general, who rode a grey horse. The gold buttons on their red uniforms glittered in the sun, and the pipe music made me want to start marching myself.

I asked the people I met for directions to "The House of Shaws". But the question surprised everyone. At first I thought it must be that my dusty, travel-worn appearance was so unlike the grand tradition of that name, but I soon began to wonder if there might be something strange about the Shaws themselves.

I decided to pose my questions more carefully. Seeing a man driving down the lane in a cart, I asked him if he had heard of the house.

"I have," he answered. "Why do you want to know?"

"Is it a large place?" I continued.

"It's a big house, that's for sure."

"But what about the people that live in it?" I tried.

"People?" he shouted. "What people?"

"But, there's Mr. Ebenezer," I said, my voice wobbling a little.

"Oh, the laird," the man growled. "What's your business with *him*?"

"I was told I might be able to get a job there," I lied,

still hoping for more information.

"A job?" he screamed, so loudly his horse almost bolted. "Listen, boy, you look like a good lad to me. If you'll take a word of advice, you'll stay away from the House of Shaws, *and* its laird."

If it hadn't been two days walk back to the cozy fireside of Mr. Campbell, I might have turned around, then and there. But I knew I had to go on and discover the truth for myself, and deliver my father's letter.

Towards sundown I saw a woman in a ragged, black cloak, trudging down a slope. Despite the sour expression on her face, I asked her if she knew the House of Shaws. Silently, she led me to the summit of the hill she had just descended.

"There," she hissed.

The next valley was a collection of pretty fields and low hills, specked with streams and clumps of woods. In the middle of the plain was a huge house, that looked a bit more like a ruin than a place of residence. There was no road running up to it, no smoke from the chimneys, and no garden that I could see.

"That is the place," she spat at me. She was trembling with a sudden anger. "Blood built it," she cried, "blood stopped the building of it, and blood shall bring it down." She waved her fist in the air. "I curse the laird and his estate. I curse his house, his stable, and every man, woman and child that goes near the place." She turned and was off on her way.

I stood there, shocked, my hair standing on end. In those days, people still believed in witches, and after



hearing her terrible curse I was shaking so much my teeth chattered. I rested on the hill, not sure if I should retreat or advance.

At last, I saw a tiny line of smoke curling from one of the chimneys. It was hardly more than a puff, but it proved there was some life in that old pile of stones. So, I went down the hill along a faint track that meandered toward the house.

It was truly a beautiful valley; streaked with hawthorn bushes full of flowers, sheep roaming in the fields and a flurry of birds in the sky. But the closer I got to the wreck of the house, the drearier it seemed. Where the upper stories should have been, I could see open staircases and piles of stones that showed the builders had left before completing their work. Most of the windows had no glass in them, and bats flew in and out of the rooms like bees around a hive.

I stepped forward cautiously and, over the murmur of the wind, I heard the clatter of dishes and a dry, rasping cough. But there was no sound of voices - not even the bark of a dog.

The main door was tall and studded with old rusty nails. I knocked once, and the house fell into dead silence. A whole minute passed and nothing stirred except the bats fluttering around my head. Again I knocked. By now, my ears were so used to the quiet, I could hear the faint tick of a clock, deep inside the house. But whoever had been coughing now kept completely still and must have held his breath.

I was in two minds about whether to knock again or give up, but my anger got the better of me. I started raining kicks and punches on the door, shouting out for Mr. Balfour to show himself.

Suddenly I heard the cough directly above me and I jumped back from the door. I could see a man in a nightcap, and the black muzzle of a huge gun pointing straight at me.

"It's loaded," said a thin, creaking voice.

"I have a letter," I answered boldly. "For Mr. Ebenezer Balfour. Is he here?"

"Put it down on the doorstep and clear off," said the man, crouching behind his gun.

"I will do no such thing," I shouted, my anger making me brave. "It is a letter of introduction and it must be passed into Mr. Balfour's hands."

"Introducing who?" the voice asked.

"I am not ashamed of my name," I replied. "I am David Balfour."