

Foreword

Adventurers need friends. The journey may be lonely, and the quest a private mission, but a hero is never entirely on his own. The wonderful story of *Kidnapped* is about friendship as well as a thrilling chase, in which loyalty is everything. One of the reasons why Robert Louis Stevenson is a storyteller of magical gifts is that he understands the depth of that longing, and everyone's fear of a solitary fate. He makes you shiver, not only at the crack of the boat on the rocks or the approaching soldier's tread on a Highland road, but in the quiet moments too.

Towards the end of the story, when David Balfour turns in anger on his friend and protector Alan Breck Stewart, who has saved him from transportation to the colonies but led him through different and terrible dangers in pursuit of his inheritance, it's as chilling as any of the snares and threats he's avoided on his journey. They're in flight through the heather on the braes of Balquhiddy in the cold, David is 'dead weary, deadly sick and full of pains and shiverings' and for a moment he breaks. He refuses his friend's help to carry his pack, mocks his politics and his Jacobite faith, laughs at the pretensions of his clansmen who have helped them to escape capture – 'the best I can say of them is this – that they would be none the worse of washing.'

Always, just below the surface, there's the threat of a friendship gone wrong, loyalty betrayed. Their argument on the hillside is as scary as the moment near the start of the story when David is sent by his uncle in the dark up the unfinished stone stairs at the House of Shaws ('blood built it, blood stopped the building of it, blood shall bring it down' says Jennet Clouston in her curse when David meets her on the road). When the boy rages at Alan, everything is threatened for a moment – all that they've shared on their journey, from the

fight on the brig *Covenant* to its shipwreck and the murder in Argyll of Colin Campbell, the ‘Red Fox’, and on to their bloody hide-and-seek through the glens. Yet somehow the row is not a strange twist in events, and that is what makes it so affecting. Stevenson understands how his hero might well lose his bearings in an instant – perhaps, that it was inevitable – and also knows how to describe the private shame that follows. His is an honest story.

Stevenson knows how to touch his readers at such moments. Think of Jim Hawkins hiding in the apple barrel on board the *Hispaniola* in *Treasure Island* when he hears Long John Silver plotting his mutiny, or the first shuddering transformation of Dr Jekyll into Mr Hyde in the story that was written just before *Kidnapped* appeared in 1886, first as a serial and then in one volume. I can still remember as a boy putting my head under the bedclothes just thinking about the tapping of Blind Pew’s stick outside the Admiral Benbow Inn at the beginning of *Treasure Island*, or the rattling of the chains on the door of the House of Shaws when Uncle Ebenezer Balfour first appears with his blunderbuss.

The whole world of *Kidnapped* trembles with that feeling of danger. Scotland is divided, bitter, wild. Five years have passed since the Battle of Culloden in April 1746 when the last of Bonnie Prince Charlie’s troops were put to the sword on a bleak hillside on the Moray Firth and the second Jacobite rebellion came to its miserable end. The Highland places that David Balfour discovers on his flight are gripped by the experience. From his own family he’s inherited the outlook of a King’s man, so his journey takes him into a world he has never known, where the Jacobite talisman of Alan Breck’s silver button can introduce him to people who speak another language, their Gaelic being the outward sign of a culture that operates in ways that he struggles to understand.

When he makes his way to Argyll he finds out that offering money to a Highlander as a token of thanks is an insult. In Appin, he's told how the tenants of the Campbells – enforcers of the King's writ – pay two rents, one to their landlords and the other in secret to their own Clan chief's man of business, James of the Glen, who sees to it that it is passed along the line to France, where Charles Edward Stuart has returned after the disaster of his feeble military campaign and where some still dream in their salons of the restoration that will never come.

The vivid picture of the places that David Balfour discovers is extraordinary in its richness. Stevenson wrote the book largely on a sick bed in Bournemouth, of all places, and it's surely not fanciful to think that the quality of his evocation of the Highland journey is the greater for the fact that it was written from a distance. He writes with longing. There aren't any flowery descriptions of Highland scenes, no dreamy interludes in which he muses on the beauties of a loch at dawn or the sweep of a moor with the mountains behind. Instead, the country emerges naturally from the emotional course of the story itself. The landscape and the people come from David's experience; everything is seen through his own eyes. No intervening narrator is required.

When Alan Breck takes him to see Cluny Macpherson, a Jacobite chieftain with a high price on his head, they struggle 'through a labyrinth of dreary glens and hollows and into the heart of that dismal mountain of Ben Alder'. There, in Cluny's hideaway high on the hillside, they play cards at the same table where Prince Charlie drank (too much) in the long evenings following his flight after Culloden, and there is nothing easy or pretty about it. The place is gloomy and dark, the spirits defiant but pricked with sadness. There isn't much to look forward to, and the toasts to the lost King over the water have a valedictory feeling to them.

Stevenson paints the picture of a world in which the order

and elegance of Edinburgh, with its lawyers and drawing rooms and cobbled streets, is only a stone's throw from something much more primitive and passionate. When David and Alan get near to the city at last, where the mystery of the inheritance may be solved and justice done, the River Forth stretches before them like a chasm that will swallow them up. They are fugitives, and Stirling Bridge is guarded. Further down, the *firth* is too wide. Where can they cross? In David's imagination, the gentle windings of the river – it's a placid and friendly thing – are turned into threatening coils that might easily devour him, just like Captain Hoseason's crew or the shipwreck or the Redcoat patrols.

At journey's end, these experiences seem quite naturally to David to be the things that will mark his life, more even than the righting of his family wrong. As he walks through Edinburgh to the bank where he will get his due share, and where he will become a gentleman as a consequence, he thinks back to an Argyll hillside and his just-departed friend, Alan, and knows that he will always be with him. In Stevenson's poem, *Requiem*, which is on his grave on the Samoan island in the South Pacific where he died in 1894, he expresses precisely his profound feeling that rest and comfort at the end somehow require the memory of adventure, lived 'under a wide and starry sky'.

*Here he lies where he longed to be;
Home is the sailor, home from the sea,
And the hunter home from the hill.*

From the moment that David Balfour puts his pack on his back and leaves his village, his parents dead and his fortunes unsure, he is drawn towards that truth. He doesn't know what he'll find at the House of Shaws, nor anything of the adventures that will soon grip him fast, but Stevenson describes in him,

and through him, an urge to explore, and to take the next bend in the road, that compels the reader to hold on to him. That same curiosity and drive are, of course, what make Stevenson the storyteller he is.

Whether it is in the foul depths of the *Covenant* or on the sodden heather of Mull or with Cluny Macpherson high up in his mountain cage in the forest, we're with David Balfour at every turn. That is because his adventures, for all their melodrama, are the making of the man in ways that seem real to us. They are authentic because they describe how a boy might grow up; and perhaps how we would most like to grow up ourselves.

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