

KIDNAPPED

Robert Louis Stevenson

TIMELESS CLASSICS



The Mysterious House of Shaws

In June of 1751, I locked the door of my father's house for the last time.

As I walked down the road, I came upon Mr. Campbell. This kind man was the minister in our little town, Essendean. "Are you sorry to leave home, boy?" he asked kindly.

"I've been happy here," I said. "But since my father and mother are both dead, there's no reason to stay. To speak the truth, I do not know where I am going."

"Very well, Davie," Mr. Campbell replied. "I have a letter to give you. Your father wrote it when he knew he was dying. It is your inheritance. He said you are to take this letter to the house of Shaws."

"The house of Shaws!" I cried out. "What did a poor man like my father have to do with

the house of Shaws?”

“Who can say for sure?” Mr. Campbell said. “But that is your name, Davie—Balfour of Shaws.”

Then he handed me the envelope. The words on it said: *For Ebenezer Balfour of Shaws, to be delivered by my son, David Balfour. My heart beat hard. This was a great prospect for a poor boy of 17.*

The house of Shaws was a two-day walk. It was in the neighborhood of Cramond, near the great city of Edinburgh. Mr. Campbell gave me some advice as we walked along. He said I should be quick to understand things, but slow to speak. He added that I must obey the master of the house of Shaws. I promised to do my best.

Mr. Campbell spoke comforting words. He promised that if my rich relatives turned me away, I could always stay with him.

Before he turned back, he gave me four things. The first was a little money from the sale of my father’s belongings. Then there were three gifts from him and his wife: a coin, a bible, and instructions for making Lily of the Valley water. He explained that this water is

good for the body in health and in sickness.

On the second day of my journey, I came up a hill. Just below me was the city of Edinburgh, smoking like an oven. I saw a flag on the Edinburgh castle and ships in the water nearby. The sight of the busy, crowded city brought my heart to my mouth.

Soon I reached the neighborhood of Cramond. I began to ask directions to the house of Shaws. The question seemed to surprise people. One man frowned and said, "If you'll take a word from me, you'll keep clear of the house of Shaws."

I came across a barber. Knowing that barbers are great gossips, I asked him, "What sort of man is Ebenezer Balfour?"

"Why, he's no sort of man," the barber grumbled. "No sort of man at all!"

If I wasn't so far from home, I would have turned back. But I was a bit tired after coming all this way. I wanted to see the house of Shaws for myself.

Near sundown I met a dark, sour-looking woman. Again, I asked the way to the house of Shaws. She pointed to a great, dark bulk of a

building. The place looked like a ruin.

“That?” I said.

The woman’s face grew angry and bitter. “Blood built that place!” she cried. “And blood shall bring it down! When you see the master, tell him Jenet Clouston has put a curse on his house! Black be their fall!”

Then she left me. Her words had sapped the energy from my legs. I sat down and stared at the house until the sun went down. Then I saw smoke rising from the chimney. That meant fire, and warmth, and people inside. It comforted my heart wonderfully.

As I walked up to the door, I saw that part of the building had never been finished. Some rooms and a stairway were open to the sky! Bats flew in and out of several windows that had no glass.

Was *this* the house of Shaws? I had imagined a palace. I had hoped to find friends and perhaps a fortune within these walls.

Inside, I heard dishes rattling, and a dry cough. But when I knocked on the door, the house became dead silent. All I could hear was a clock ticking inside. Whoever was in the



house must have been listening, too.

I felt like running away. Then a flash of anger got the upper hand. I pounded on the door and shouted for Mr. Balfour.

I heard the cough overhead. When I looked up, I saw a man's head and the wide-muzzle end of a blunderbuss—aimed at me!

"It's loaded," his stern voice snarled.

"I've come with a letter," I explained. "Is Mr. Ebenezer Balfour of Shaws here?"

"You can put the letter on the doorstep and be off," the man said.

“I will do no such thing,” I said. “I have a letter of introduction for Mr. Balfour.”

There was a long pause. Then the man said, “Who are you?”

“I’m not ashamed of my name,” I said. “I am David Balfour.”

The man seemed to be startled, because I heard the blunderbuss rattling on the window-sill. After a very long pause, he said, “Your father must be dead. That’s what brings you knocking at my door. All right, then. I’ll let you in,” he went on defiantly. With that, he disappeared from the window.

There was a great rattling of chains and bolts. Then the door was opened—and quickly shut again as I stepped inside.

“Go into the kitchen and touch nothing,” the grizzled old man said with a grunt.

I groped my way forward in the dark. The bright fire in the kitchen lit up the barest room I’d ever seen. Half a dozen dishes stood on the shelves. The table was set for supper. I saw a bowl of porridge, a spoon, and a cup of beer. Padlocks hung from chests along the wall and a corner cupboard.

The man was stooped, narrow-shouldered, and unshaven. Above his ragged shirt, his face was the color of clay. His age could have been either 50 or 70. What bothered me most were his eyes. He never stopped watching me—but he refused to look me square in the face. I couldn't tell what sort of man he was. To me, he looked like an old servant, left behind, perhaps, to watch the place.

“Let's see the letter,” he demanded.

I told him the letter was for Mr. Balfour, not for him.

“And who do you think *I* am?” he asked. “Give me Alexander's letter!”

“You know my father's name?” I gasped.

“It would be strange if I didn't,” he said. “He was my own brother! And though you don't seem to like me much, I'm your uncle. So sit down, Davie. Have some porridge, and let me see that letter.”

What a rude man! If I'd been younger, I would have burst into tears from the disappointment. Finding no words to say, I sat down. But I had no appetite at all.

My uncle stooped over the fire, turning the

letter over in his hands. “Don’t you know what’s in the letter, young man?” he asked.

“You can see for yourself, sir,” I replied. “The seal has not been broken.”

“I see,” he said, “but tell me, what brought you here?”

“Why, to give you the letter,” I said.

“But you had some hopes, no doubt?” His face took on a cunning look.

“I confess, sir,” I stammered, “that it lifted my spirits to hear that I had well-to-do family. I hoped they might help me in life. But I’m no beggar, sir. I want no favors unless they’re freely given. As poor as I seem, I have friends of my own who will help me.”

“Hoot-toot!” Uncle Ebenezer said. “Don’t get upset with me. We’ll get along fine.”

I watched him as he ate his porridge. He kept darting glances at my old shoes and my homespun stockings. Once, though, our eyes met accidentally. He looked like a thief who’d been caught with his hand in a man’s pocket!

After a while, he asked sharply, “Has your father been dead long?”

“Three weeks, sir,” I said.

“Has he never mentioned me?” he asked.

“I never knew that he had a brother until you told me,” I replied. For some reason my answer seemed to improve his mood. Then he announced that it was time for bed.

He lit no lamp or candle, but groped his way out of the dark kitchen. I followed him to an upstairs room and asked for a light.

“Hoot-toot!” he said. “I don’t agree with lights in the house—I’m afraid of fires, you see. Good night to you, Davie, my man.” He closed the door and locked me inside.

The fine, embroidered furniture in the room was rotting from years of disuse. The bed was cold and damp. I pulled a blanket out of my backpack and slept on the floor.

The next morning, I banged on the door until he let me out. My breakfast was porridge and beer again.

“Davie,” the old man said, “you’ve done well to come to your Uncle Ebenezer. I mean to do right by you. Meanwhile, just give me a day or two to make a plan. And don’t say anything to anybody.”

With that, he took an old coat and hat from

the cupboard. Locking it behind him, he said he was going out. “I can’t leave you by yourself in the house,” he added. “I’m afraid I’ll have to lock you out.”

Blood rushed to my face as I took in the insult. “If you lock me out,” I said, “that’s the last you’ll see of me as a friend.”

He turned away, trembling, twitching, and mumbling to himself. But when he looked back at me, he had a smile on his face.

“Uncle Ebenezer,” I said, “I can make no sense of this. You treat me like a thief. You don’t trust me in your house. It’s not possible that you can really accept me. Let me go back to my own good friends at home!”

“No, no!” he said very earnestly. “I do accept you, Davie. We’ll get along yet. For the honor of the house, I can’t let you leave the way you came. Stay a while—there’s a good boy—and you’ll find we’ll come to an understanding.”

I was silent for a time. Then I said, “All right, sir, I’ll stay—but only for a while. If we don’t get along, it will be no fault of mine.”