



River rescue

James stretched his back hard against the measuring rod that was nailed to the kitchen wall and stood as straight and tall as he possibly could.

‘Will you put a mark on the rod to show my height?’ he asked his mother. ‘I must have grown since last year.’

Mrs Chalmers marked her son’s height carefully and James turned round to see if there was a difference between the line made on August 4th 1850 and the one made today, August 4th 1851, his tenth birthday.

‘Look at that!’ he laughed. ‘I’ve grown a lot. Before long I’ll be as tall as Dad.’

‘James thinks he’s the tallest ten-year-old in Scotland,’ his sister teased.

‘Sisters!’ thought James crossly. ‘I wonder if anyone wants two sisters. They could have mine free.’

That afternoon, when the day’s schooling was over, James and his friends sat on the banks of the stream that rushed down the hillside near their school.

‘Ten’s quite old,’ said Calum. ‘A lot can happen to a person in ten years.’

‘Both good and bad,’ agreed James.

‘What’s the best thing that’s happened to you in your ten years?’ Dugald asked.

James thought for a while before answering.

‘I think it was when I tried to build a boat with my





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friends in Ardrishaig. It was such hard work! We decided to tar a herring-box to make it waterproof. As I was captain I had the first sail in it. I climbed into the box and my friends tied a long line to it and dragged it into the sea. At first it seemed as though it would sink under my weight, but it didn't! A big wave lifted it, and I was up, up and away! The current caught me and, for just a few minutes, I felt like the captain of a great clipper. With the wind in my face and the herring-box caught in the current it seemed as though there was nothing between me and a life on the ocean wave.'

Dugald looked at his friend's excited face.

'What happened then?' he asked. 'How far did you go?'

James shook his head then laughed sheepishly.

'Too far,' he said. 'The current washed me out into Loch Fyne. It took some strong swimmers to save me from drowning ... or reaching the open sea.'

'Think of it,' Calum commented. 'You might have ended up being washed ashore on the South Sea Islands! But what's the worst thing that's ever happened to you?'

James Chalmers knew the answer to that question without giving it a second thought.

'Once, in my last school, an older boy said he'd give me sweets if I'd chew something else first.'

'You'd agree to that,' Dugald laughed, 'for there's nothing you like better than sweets.'

'I did,' James admitted. 'The boy gave me a twist of tobacco. I chewed the stuff for all I was worth because he was standing there watching. When the teacher called us in for lessons I could hardly get to the school. I felt so sick and my legs just wanted to give way under me.'

'Did you get your sweets?' asked Calum.





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'I've not finished the story,' James said. 'There was worse still to come.'

His friends sat silent, wondering what could be worse than that.

'My legs gave way just as I arrived at the classroom door and the teacher had to lift me up and carry me in.'

'That must have been embarrassing!' whistled Calum.

'Not half as embarrassing as what happened next. When the teacher heard that I'd been chewing tobacco he made me sit on his high chair with a tall chimneypot hat on my head!'

'What did the class do?' asked Dugald.

'I've no idea,' James admitted. 'The teacher's head was so much bigger than mine that his hat slid over my ears and landed, plonk, on my shoulders. It left me in total darkness!'

'Phew!' Calum said. 'I'm glad nothing like that has ever happened to me. I don't think I could face looking at people ever again!'

'Do you want to know the most embarrassing thing that's ever happened to me?' asked Dugald.

Pleased to think about something other than his early encounter with tobacco, James sat back against a tree stump to listen to his friend.

'When I was six I caught whooping cough. Mum was worried about me because I was coughing fit to burst, so she took me to the two old women in Inveraray who said they had a cure. You'll never guess what their cure was. They got a donkey. One stood on one side and one on the other and they passed me between its legs and over its back!'

'That was a cure for whooping cough?' asked an amazed James. 'Did it work?'



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'Don't be silly!' Calum laughed. 'That's just superstitious nonsense. It's just as silly as the superstition that if you hear a dog crying there's sure to have been a death.'

'My dog cries when she's tied up outside,' said James. 'And if someone died every time she cried, there'd be nobody left alive in Inveraray.'

One day Mr John McArthur, schoolmaster, was aware of some unrest in Glenaray School during the lunchtime interval.

'What's going on, boys?' he asked, when he went out with the handbell to tell them that it was time for lessons to begin.

'Nothing, Sir,' all the boys said in unison.

'If I'm not mistaken there's mischief afoot,' said the teacher severely. 'Why else are you divided up into two groups, with those from the town on one side and those from Glenaray on the other?'

The boys all looked down at their feet. It was a constant source of surprise to them that Mr McArthur seemed to be able to read their minds.

After school that afternoon the boys broke into two groups again: *The Townies* and *The Glenies*. Instead of going home by their usual Three Bridges route, they headed for the high road towards Kilmun. That was a good place for fighting where they were unlikely to be disturbed. Suddenly a clod of earth flew through the air and hit a Townie slap on the back. He spun round, picked up a stone and threw it at the boy he thought had attacked him. Before long missiles zipped in all directions and fists flew. James was not the only one to head for home with a bleeding nose and a black eye. But now that the air was cleared *The Townies* and *The Glenies*

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could live at peace for another six weeks or so before battle commenced yet again.

Some months later the area around Inveraray had heavy rain all morning. But, as the afternoon wore on, the rain stopped and the sun came out.

'You'll get home dry,' said Mr McArthur, opening the classroom door at the end of the school day. 'But watch where you put your feet for some of the puddles are far deeper than your boots!'

'Look at the torrent!' whistled James, as they walked the short distance along the River Aray.

'All the streams flowing into it are full,' Dugald observed. 'I wonder if the Aray will burst her banks before the night's out.'

'Doubt it,' Calum thought aloud. 'The rain's stopped now. The water level will begin to go down soon.'

A short distance away another group of children was nearing the Three Bridges. Something strange was happening up ahead. James stopped to take a closer look and then he heard a scream rip through the air.

'Help!'

James broke into a run before his mind had time to even wonder what was wrong. Where floodwater was concerned you ran first and thought second.

'Johnnie's in the Aray!' someone yelled.

James took in the scene in an instant. Hauling off his jacket, he dashed for the new wooden bridge, scrambled underneath and grabbed on to it for support. He then stretched as far as he could underneath it to catch Johnnie as the torrent rushed him through. Suddenly his arm was hit by the weight of the boy and he grabbed for his clothes. Against





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all probability James managed to catch Johnnie's coat.

'I can't hang on any longer!' he thought desperately.

Then, in a flash of inspiration, he knew just exactly what to do. He released his hold on the bridge and allowed himself and Johnnie to be washed a little way along the Aray to where they could more easily get out.

'Grab that branch!' Dugald yelled from the riverside.

James looked to where his friend was pointing and saw a low branch of willow hanging down to the water. As he and Johnnie were being swept past it, James grabbed with his left hand, while still hanging on to the half-drowned young boy with the other. Suddenly everything happened at once and everyone spoke at the same time.

'Is Johnnie dead?'

'You did it!'

'That was amazing!'

'What a catch!'

Hands reached out to the boys from all directions and both were hauled out of the River Aray on to the bank where Johnnie was laid on his front and thumped on the back to force the water from his lungs. The best noise James heard that day was the rasping cough that showed that Johnnie was still alive. It was several days before Johnnie was back at school. But James, the young hero, was there basking in the glory of having saved his school friend's life.

The rain came back that evening and continued for days. Sunday morning dawned grey and wet, as had Saturday, as had Friday.

'I'm glad I'm a girl,' said one of James's sisters. 'Girls don't have to go to church when it's pouring rain.'

'Some do,' James replied. 'It's just because it's such a





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long walk that Dad doesn't insist on you going when the weather's as bad as this.'

'Dad,' said James, as they walked through the drizzle to church. 'Can I go to Mr Meikle's Sunday School? That's where my friends go and I'd like to go with them.'

'Mr Meikle's a fine man,' said his father. 'I'll think about the Sunday School and tell you when I've made up my mind.'

James knew not to pursue the subject. His father was a quiet man. He didn't say much, but when he did speak he said what he meant and rarely changed his mind.

'Let me hear you saying the 23rd Psalm,' said Mr Chalmers, when they had about a mile still to go.

James said the psalm from beginning to end without a single mistake.

'You've remembered it well,' commented his father. 'And I hope you believe it too.'

'Do you remember when we lived in Ardrishaig?' James asked his father. 'You once gave me a sixpenny piece for learning the 23rd Psalm from the Bible.'

'I remember that,' said James's father.

'Well,' went on the boy. 'I'd never had a six pence before that. So I gave it to Mum and she gave me a penny to spend and kept the rest to put into her housekeeping money.'

'I never knew that,' smiled Mr Chalmers. 'Now, let's say the 23rd Psalm together.'

The autumn and winter storms did some damage to the stonework of Inveraray Jail, and James's father, being a stonemason, was asked to make the repairs.

'I could do with some help with the job,' he told his



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young son. 'Would you be willing to work for me on Saturdays until the job's done?'

'Yes,' agreed James, but not too quickly. Saturdays were sometimes spent down at the quay on the local fishing boats and repointing the jail's stonework seemed a poor alternative. But there were always interesting things to be seen at the jail, as James knew from past experience.

'Hello, young man,' said one of the men who worked at Inveraray jail, when he saw him labouring for his father. 'There's no rest for you this Saturday. But I tell you what, when your dad gives you a break come into the office and I'll show you some things that will interest you.'

James grinned from ear to ear. 'Maybe this isn't going to be so dull after all,' he thought, as he began work once again.

After several hours of hard toil Mr Chalmers sat down to drink his bottle of cold tea and James headed in the direction of the office. When he arrived there were papers everywhere, some of them yellow with age.

'Look at this,' the man said. 'I've been reading through the jail records and I thought you might be interested in seeing some of the earlier ones.'

James looked at the long lists of names, crimes and punishments.

'Ishabel Campbell, aged 12, for the theft of bread, four weeks in jail.

Jeanie Campbell, aged 34, widow, mother of Ishabel, for the theft of bread, six months in jail.

Norman Morrison, aged 45, for drunken and disorderly conduct, one month in jail.





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John Macdonald, aged 39, for the theft of a year-old sheep, transported to the colonies.'

'Do you think Ishabel and her mother were starving when they stole the bread?' James asked the jailor.

'I suppose they might have been,' the man agreed. 'Especially as it says her mother was a widow woman.'

'It must have been awful to be transported to the colonies. Imagine being sent to the other side of the world just for stealing a sheep.'

That evening, after a hard day's work had been done on the jail's stonework, Mr Chalmers and James set off on their long walk home. As usual his father was not very talkative and much of the time the boy was left with his own thoughts for company.

'I suppose it might have been quite exciting to be sent to the colonies. I wonder if John Macdonald thought it was an adventure or a punishment. I imagine it depended on whether or not he had a wife and children.'

As they walked up Glenaray, James thought of the long journey from Inverary in the west of Scotland to the Australian colonies. Holding a picture of the world in his mind, he traced a mental line down Loch Fyne and into the Firth of Clyde, from there out to the Atlantic Ocean and south, over the equator and into the Indian Ocean before turning east towards Australia.

'It's an awful long way,' he thought aloud.

'There's no need to complain about it,' said Mr Chalmers, thinking James was talking of the walk between Inverary and their home up the glen. 'I'll be walking it every day for several weeks to finish the work on the jail.'



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James reckoned that his father would not think of transportation to the penal colonies as an adventure so he kept his thoughts to himself.

