

A Good Game of Squirrels

George saw his friend coming round the corner into the small village of Ruthwell. He dashed back into the garden to tell his brother.

‘That’s Robert now!’ he yelled to Will. ‘You go and hide in the den and we’ll do things according to plan.’

Will raced round the back of the house and out of sight while George strolled through the garden and pretended to be surprised by Robert’s arrival. When they met, they spun each other round till they both fell to the ground and couldn’t get up again. Their heads were spinning. It took a couple of minutes for the world to settle down to where it should be and for the boys to untangle themselves from each other and get back on their feet.

‘We’ve made a new den,’ George said. ‘But you’ve got to find it for yourself. The only clue is that it’s in the garden. Count to a hundred, then come looking for us. Will’s already there. Count loud so I know you’re not cheating.’

George led his friend to the side of the house where Robert closed his eyes and began counting to a hundred at the top of his voice.

‘One, two, three...’ and George was off at a pelt to the left.

‘Twenty-four, twenty-five, twenty-six...’ said Robert, as his friend tiptoed behind him to the right.

‘That’ll confuse him,’ George thought. ‘I made plenty of noise going in the other direction so he’s sure to think that’s where I went.’

By the time Robert reached, ‘Sixty-seven, sixty-eight, sixty-nine ...’ George had pelted through the vegetable garden, run along the blackcurrant bushes, and crawled behind an old door that was leaning against the high garden wall.

‘He’ll never find us here,’ Will giggled when his brother reached him. ‘But it’ll be fun watching him try.’

‘Ninety-eight, ninety-nine, a hundred!’ shouted Robert McCheyne, before spinning round on his heels and surveying the scene behind him.

‘He went this way,’ Robert said to himself as he turned to his left. ‘And he made a suspicious amount of noise about it. Still, I’ll go have a look-see. And I’ll be quiet about it.’

The boy walked silently on the grass till he reached the front of the house, then he backed against the wall and eased himself towards the front door. Just before he reached the door it opened and Mr Duncan came out. Thinking his cover was blown, Robert was about to say hello. But Mr Duncan had been a boy once himself, and he recognised the signs of a secret. Winking a welcome to the lad, he strode off down the path and out the gate.

‘Someone will be pleased to see Mr Duncan coming,’ thought Robert. ‘I think everyone in Ruthwell likes their minister. My aunt certainly does.’

Passing the front door, Robert continued along the wall. As he went he looked for all possible cover, but he could see none at all. There were various places where they’d had dens in the past, but all were far too small to house two teenage boys and leave space for a visitor.

‘I think George was being clever,’ he decided, and he turned and went in the opposite direction. The den’s more likely to be round the back anyway.’

Silent as a cat Robert retraced his steps. When he reached the corner of the house, he dodged behind a large rhododendron and took a run and jump for the garden wall, reaching the top in one.

‘This will confuse the pair of them,’ he thought. ‘They’ll be looking at ground level for me.’

Gently Robert eased himself along the wall, carefully avoiding decapitating himself on low-hanging branches! When he arrived at a point from which he was quite invisible from the back garden, he stopped and looked around.

‘They could be behind the shed,’ Robert thought. ‘But that would be a bit tame. Then there’s the shrubbery. There are plenty of hiding-places there. Hmmm.’ The boy considered his options. ‘There’s always a possibility they’ve built something behind the wall of the compost heap.’ He shook his head. ‘But I think they’ve been cleverer than that.’

The old door caught his eye. 'One of them could hide behind there, but not both. In any case, an old door leaning against the wall isn't much of a den.'

In the absence of an alternative he pulled himself along the wall, keeping low and as far out of sight as possible. As he reached the door, he realised that it wasn't quite leaning against the wall. It had been wedged under a branch. The bottom of the door was a metre from the wall and the top was about half of that. When he peered into the darkness behind it the Duncan brothers were nowhere to be seen, but just then his eye caught something interesting. 'There's a rope hanging down behind the door,' he told himself. 'Very suspicious.'

The rope, he saw, hung down to ground level. Following the line of it upwards, he found himself suddenly eye to eye with Will Duncan, who was several branches above him.

'How on earth did you guess where we were?' laughed Will.

George was quick to chip in. 'I thought I'd given you the slip by making such a din when I went in the wrong direction.'

'That was a little too obvious,' grinned Robert. 'If you're thinking of becoming a professional burglar, think again. You'd spend all your life in prison.'

Robert grabbed the rope and used it to steady himself as he climbed up the branches to the wooden platform his friends had constructed in the beech tree.

‘What do you think of it?’ asked Will.

The visitor looked round. ‘It’s the best den we’ve had so far,’ he said. ‘But I’m afraid I found you quite by accident.’

George laughed aloud. ‘Robert McCheyne, you just can’t tell a lie! You can’t even pretend to have worked out where we were!’

‘But I didn’t.’

Will and his brother looked at each other and winked. A year might have gone by since their friend last visited Ruthwell, but he was still the same decent and honest Robert Murray McCheyne. Not only that, they could tell from the mischief in his eyes that he was as much fun as ever.

‘Squirrels?’ said Robert.

His friends grinned.

‘Squirrels it is!’ they said together. ‘And the first one round the garden and back to the den gets to choose what we do tomorrow.’

The three lads crawled along the branches, swinging from tree to tree as they went. The minister’s garden had a high wall all round it, and the previous year the boys had discovered that they could circle the entire garden without touching the ground once. Will and George had practised over and over again and had worked out what they thought was the quickest route.

‘Watch your head!’ a voice called from above.

George Duncan looked up. Robert was two branches above him... and travelling fast! The den was within sight, and the race was tight.

‘Go for it!’ yelled Will from behind, though he wasn’t sure which boy he was supporting!

Robert grabbed a branch of the beech tree, swung as far as he could and dropped to the wooden platform. But just a second earlier George had scrambled on and won the right to choose tomorrow’s game. It took Will a little while to reach them as his trouser leg had caught on a branch. It seemed better to him to lose the race he was losing anyway than to risk an embarrassing darn on his trousers and a ticking-off from his mother.

Although George and Will were older than Robert, they looked forward to his visits to Dumfriesshire. George wondered if he had outgrown the kind of games they played, but it only took the world ‘squirrels’ to show that he was still a boy at heart. And he was glad about that.

‘Are you three coming down for tea?’ a voice asked from underneath the platform. It was Barbara, the third member of the Duncan family.

Robert was down in an instant to see his friend once again. But although Barbara’s invitation was tempting he knew that his aunt was expecting him back.

‘See you tomorrow,’ he said. ‘And you be thinking up something interesting for us to do, George!’

Setting out at a gallop, Robert left the village of Ruthwell and ran the short distance to Clarencefield. Not in the least out of breath he did a quick turn into Clarence Cottage and arrived at the door just as his aunt was taking scones from the flat iron girdle.

‘I thought these would bring you home,’ she said. ‘Scones are like magnets to all the boys I know!’

The table was laid with oatcakes, butter, crowdie, scones and damson jam. Robert looked at it and grinned.

‘You made every single thing yourself,’ he laughed. ‘These are home-made oatcakes and scones. You made butter from the milk from Maud, Mabel, Daisy and Ellen.’

Aunt Dickson smiled. She was pleased that her nephew remembered the names of her four milking cows.

‘You strained the milk to make your own crowdie cheese too,’ said Robert, licking his lips. ‘And your damson jam is famous throughout the whole of Clarencefield.’

‘Which would not be hard,’ his aunt laughed aloud, ‘seeing as there are just a handful of houses here!’

There was near silence for the next quarter of an hour as the boy savoured the warm welcome and the wholesome food. His aunt was quiet too. She was enjoying watching Robert eat every bit as much as he was enjoying eating. The only noise was the whistling of a yellow canary in his cane cage. When they’d finished tea, Aunt Dickson and Robert moved out into the glow of the late afternoon sun.

‘Have you still got Geggely?’ the boy asked, watching eight hens pecking in the garden.

‘She’s over there,’ his aunt said. ‘Behind the bushes.’

Right on cue a brown hen pecked her way round the bush and into full view.

‘She lays the best eggs I’ve ever tasted,’ commented Robert. ‘Is she on the lay just now?’

His aunt assured him that Geggely would provide him with an egg each day.

‘And the pigs?’ he asked.

‘Still there,’ Aunt Dickson grinned, ‘and still rooting around the orchard. They’re counting the days until the first windfall apples land at their feet.’

‘I counted the days until I finished school and came down here,’ Robert said. ‘I always do.’

Aunt Dickson looked at her nephew proudly. ‘You did well at school, I’m told. And you won some prizes.’

Was it a blush or had Robert had a little too much of the sun? Either way, he was unusually red.

‘Tell me what you enjoy doing at the High School in Edinburgh.’

Robert didn’t have to think how to answer that question.

‘I love Latin and Greek,’ he said. ‘And the best thing about learning ancient languages is that you can read books that were written hundreds and hundreds of years ago. They’re full of exciting adventures and terrific battles. You should read them!’

Aunt Dickson laughed. ‘Perhaps I’ve left it rather late to learn Latin and Greek.’

Grinning, Robert told his aunt when he had begun to learn Greek. ‘I was four years old,’ he said, ‘and in bed ill, when the family taught me the Greek alphabet. It was something I could do without getting out of bed.’

I loved the sounds of the letters and the shapes of them on the paper. I think I've been interested in Greek ever since then.'

'Well it was worth being ill, wasn't it?' his aunt laughed.

Robert looked around him and smiled.

'I love coming to Clarencefield,' he said. 'This place feels just as much home as Edinburgh does.'

'And so it should,' Aunt Dickson said. 'Your father was brought up at Thornhill, which is only 20 miles from here. And your mother and I are from just up the road at Nether Locharwood. So of course you're at home here. You belong to these parts.'

The boy laughed. 'And I belong to Ruthwell because I got such a welcome from the Duncans that I couldn't help feeling at home there too.'

He had his aunt in stitches as he told her what they'd got up to that afternoon. She laughed aloud at Mr Duncan just walking past with a wink. 'He's so good-natured. All the young folk like their minister,' Aunt Dickson said. 'The poor people are very grateful to him, and not only in these parts.'

'Why grateful?' Robert wondered.

'Not long ago banks were only for wealthy folk. Poor people, even if they did manage to save a little money, could never open an account. They weren't welcome. Mr Duncan knew that, so he started the Savings Bank for poorer people to use. They can put just a few pence in at a time and save for what they need or

for emergencies. One day there may be savings banks all over the country, and a good thing too.'

Robert was impressed by Mr Duncan's Savings Bank. 'Children could save in a bank like that,' he said.

His aunt nodded. 'Indeed they could. But it's time you did the rounds to see what these fine hens have to offer today. You'll find the nests in the barn as usual.'

Collecting eggs was one of Robert's favourite jobs. He took the basket and lined it with dry grass before going in search of Geggely. The afternoon was so warm that she was sound asleep on her nest and didn't look as though she wanted to be disturbed.

'Are you hiding an egg?' the boy asked, as he lifted the hen in such a way as to prevent her flapping her wings. Geggely opened a jet-black eye and peered at Robert. The beginnings of a protest began deep in her throat, but before she could gather an irritated cluck together Robert had her egg in his hand and she was back on her nest. Opening both eyes in surprise at finding herself where she wanted to be, the hen fluttered into a comfortable position and went back to sleep. When he had collected four eggs, he covered them with dry grass before looking for the others.

'Six laid today,' he told his aunt, as he went into the kitchen.

That night he wrote home to tell about his journey, his welcome at Clarencefield, the den at the manse, and to reassure his brothers and sister that Geggely was still alive and laying.

The summer was warm and dry, and before many weeks had passed the corn was golden and ready for harvest.

‘Do you think I’m big enough to help make the stooks this year?’ Robert asked.

Aunt Dickson eyed him up and down. ‘I think you might be,’ she said. ‘Ask the Duncan boys to show you how.’

Robert was off like a shot to the manse. ‘George!’ he shouted, as he reached the gate.

His friend looked up from the potato patch.

‘Wanting to help pick early potatoes?’ he asked, forking a shaw¹ out of the earth. The lad sank to his knees and teased the roots apart before picking the little potatoes off the shaw. Then he gathered the larger ones that had fallen to the ground.

‘Take some home with you for your dinner and have them with butter and greentails².’

‘What are greentails?’ Robert puzzled.

‘Being a fine city gent you probably call them chives.’

Robert suddenly remembered what he had come for.

‘Will you show me how to make stooks?’ he asked.

George grinned. ‘I thought you were big enough to do a man’s job. Yes, I’ll teach you, but I promise that it’s a scratchy and itchy job.’

¹ The plant/roots that potatoes grow from.

² Chives.

Feeling twice his height, Robert ran all the way back to Clarencefield to tell his aunt that he would help with the harvest after all.

‘Lesson one,’ George Duncan said the following day, when he and Robert met at the edge of the cornfield. ‘You gather a sheaf of corn in your arms and lay it down on the ground. Then you pull a dozen or so stalks out of the sheaf and use them to tie the bundle together just under the heads of corn.’

Robert picked up an armful of corn and pulled a few stalks separate from it. Then he wound them round the bundle ... and stopped. ‘How do you tie it?’ he asked. ‘The stalks break when I try to make a knot.’

His friend smiled. ‘You don’t make a knot at all. You wind the stalks round, twist them together, then tuck the ends in.’

It took a bit of doing, but eventually Robert managed to make decent sheaves. Then the second lesson began.

‘You take two sheaves,’ George said. ‘And you lean them against each other like an Indian tepee. After that you lean a couple of sheaves on one side of the first two, and a couple on the other to make a stook. That lets the wind blow through between them to dry the corn.’

By the end of the day Robert knew what his friend had meant. After hours helping with the harvest he was happily tired, scratched and itchy as could be.

‘It’s the bath for you,’ Aunt Dickson said, as she poured a pan of water into a tin bath on the kitchen floor. ‘You deserve it!’

And so the summer of 1823 passed. Days were full of games with the Duncan boys, and sometimes with Barbara too, and with helping Aunt Dickson look after her pigs, hens and cows. He helped when the stooks were gathered into rickles, each of half a dozen stooks. And he watched when the rickles were forked into stacks. Fascinated, Robert watched the men thatch each stack with long strands of last year's corn so that the rain slid off rather than soaking in. When the time came to go back to Edinburgh, Robert felt he'd lived in the country all of his life.

'You've enjoyed yourself so much,' his aunt said, 'that you'll just have to come back again next year.'

'Try to stop me!' Robert laughed. 'Remember, you told me I belong here!'