

JUNE IN CROCKETT COUNTRY

This June I was lucky enough to spend some time in Crockett Country and I enjoyed spending time by Woodhall (Grenoch) Loch, reflecting on 'Kit Kennedy'. I agree with Crockett that there is no better place to spend a beautiful June day.



I went to my favourite spot and laid a #GoCrocketteering slate. And thought about the following chapters, which I then shared with an audience at the wonderful Beltie Books in Wigtown.

THE TWO TRUANTS

(From Kit Kennedy, 1899.)

Kit Kennedy was playing truant. The fact is sad, but it must not be blinked. It was a glorious day in June, and the water of Loch Grenoch basked blue and warm in the eighteen-hour-long sunshine. Also Royal was with him, his great red collie, whose left-hand connection with the laird of Craes Newfoundland was suspected on strong presumptive and circumstantial evidence. Royal, however, like most mixed races, was of a joyous disposition, and questions of pedigree did not trouble him. That he should have a blue-blooded Newfoundland or another to his father was all the same to Royal. He had even been known to ‘down’ his putative parent on the open street of Whinnyliggate and to take unfilial toll of his ear, for the first commandment with promise is not of any canine acceptation.

This day, however, he had assuredly led Kit Kennedy astray. The boy had left the cottage in the wood in the most meek and obedient frame of mind. He even ran over the multiplication table as far as nine times nine so quickly that it sounded like the gurring of a sewing-machine in rapid action. It was no use going further, for ten, eleven, and twelve times are too easy to be required seriously of babes, while thirteen times is impossible even to chartered accountants.

Kit proceeded as far as the road end of Crae before letting his good intentions falter. This was the precise distance that Betty Landsborough's sugar ‘piece’ lasted him.

Mistress Armour did not approve of spoiling boys, and would have sent Kit off empty-handed. But Betty thought otherwise. She continued the plan of Kit's mother on his first day of school, and her foolish extravagance was connived at by Matthew the Elder.

So every morning when Kit set out for Whinnyliggate—that is, every day except Saturday and Sunday—Betty spread a scone with butter, and upon the butter, with no illiberal hand, she showered a coating of sugar, thick, brown, and gritty as the desert of Sahara. To Kit's unsophisticated palate the combination constituted the food on which angels grew their wings.

But at the end of the little straight avenue, which led from the cottage door to the pine-edged road, the tempter was lying in wait. Royal, whose position in the family was now purely supernumerary, had vanished from the green in front upon the first appearance of Kit Kennedy at the door with Betty, who was concealing the sugar piece under her apron from Mistress Armour, while that shrewd lady occupied a position of observation in the rear.

So at the end of the road Royal waited on his prey.

Kit caught sight of him and whistled joyously. The dog curved his tail and came bounding up to the boy to beg for ‘scone.’ He had had his breakfast, and he privately despised sugar, except perhaps in lumps and of the best white quality.

But he wanted Kit Kennedy to come down and play with him on the lochside. And so, as Kit himself would have said, Royal ‘let on’ to like it.

The tempter gambolled in front, barking joyously. He said as plain as print, 'Now then, we're off! Hurrah for the water!'

But for awhile—for at least as much as a quarter of an hour—Kit manfully resisted. By that time a considerable distance had been put between the cottage and the wayfarers. The loch was very blue beneath. The little waves sparkled distractingly. The wind waved the yellow broom in a way it really ought not to. The universe was ill-arranged for a small boy attending school that day.

Kit thought of the hot and breathless schoolroom at Whinnyliggate, of Duncan Duncanson and his leathern taws (not that he cared much for those—he would back his granny's palm against them any day), the smell of spilled ink, the mussy, gritty slates and smutty copy-books, the bouquet of crowded and perspiring village childhood, the buzz of flies, the infrequency of so much as a wasp in a girl's class by way of entertainment. And—well, he followed Royal down to the edge of the loch.

He would stay just a minute—not more. He could easily make it up. He knew he could. He had started early that morning. And Royal would be so disappointed. See how he ran on before, saying 'Come along. I want a swim. And I know where there is a lovely stick for you to throw in!'

And so Kit succumbed to temptation, telling himself (like certain wiser and older people who shall be nameless) that it was only this once, and just to see what it was like.

'Splash,' went Royal into the water, his eyes fixed on the stick, his head rising and falling steadily with the power of his mighty chest - strokes and the lift of the little incoming waves. 'Jerk,' he had it, with a snap of the jaws and a snort to clear his windpipe of the water he could not swallow. He was coming back hand over hand. Now he touched ground, and his back appeared above the loch. Royal scorned to pretend he was swimming when his feet were upon the bottom. Kit respected him for this. He was not always so conscientious himself. Who is, at the age of eleven, if it comes to that?

Stand clear all! Shake! The crystal drops flashed every way as Royal dropped the stick and stood ready again. Head a little forward, legs fixed on hair springs, eyes intently watching Kit's hand as he lifted the wet branch, tail switching a little nervily—it was high summer time with Royal Armour.

'Ouch! Get on,' he said in his own language, 'don't keep me waiting. I can't bear it. If you knew how nice it was in the water, you wouldn't like to stop out here either.'

Kit swung the branch over his head, but instead of throwing it far into the water, he flung it up the green back with a great heave into the waving broom on the slope. Then he laughed heartlessly.

Royal gave him one look—contempt mingled with a most painful surprise.

'Et tu, Brute!' he remarked, plain as Caesar at the foot of Pompey's statue.

‘Ha! ha! ha!’ laughed Kit.

‘Ouch!’ snorted Royal, in quite a different key, with his nose in the air, as who would say, ‘Ha! ha! Aren't you funny?’

Then he went slowly and without joyousness up the hill. With a grave submission he brought the branch back and dropped it in dejected fashion at Kit's feet.

‘I wouldn't have expected this from you,’ he said, reproachfully. ‘You treat me as if I were not more than half a water dog. And the nicest half of me, too, on a day like this!’

Whereat being shame-stricken, Kit again cast the branch into the clear brown water of the loch—clear, that is, but with a little amber in its depths decocted from the peat bogs at its upper end and from the green water meadows of Dornal and Crae.

It looked so cool that in a trice Kit had off his clothes, and he and Royal were tumbling hither and thither in a wild wrestle about the sandy shallows. The crystal drops flew every way. Laughter and splashings were mingled with joyous barking. The sun shone down with a broad grin upon the pleasant saturnalia.

Kit could swim a little. Geordie Elphinstone had taught him the breast stroke, but it was pleasanter and more interesting to wrestle near the shore with Royal, because at swimming he had no chance, whereas near the beach he was on more equal terms. The sun poured down upon his white glistening body. He shouted aloud in the young gladness of his heart. Duty, school-masters, lesson-books hid under broad stones, hours of exits and entrances, leathern taws and the moral law, were all alike forgotten.

‘Ouch —let's have another!’ barked Royal, lumbering outwards like a great pot-walloping elephant through the shallows to become instantly perfectly graceful in the amber deeps, ‘come and have another!’ And Kit went. The water was still chillish, for it was early in the year. But the violence of the exercise and the racing of the young blood through his veins kept Kit warm for the better part of an hour.

Then he began to think of putting on his clothes. He waded ashore, feeling as the water fell away from him and the fanning wind blew, as if he had left part of himself behind in the water. He wished he had kept his sugar piece till now.

‘Ouff ouff!’ barked Royal behind him, ‘call yourself a swimmer and going out already—look at me!’

And the doubtful Newfoundland pushed right across the loch for the woods on the farther side.

‘Oh, no doubt,’ said Kit in reply, turning to watch him, ‘it's very easy for you, staying in the water with all that hair on. Try it in your bare skin and see how you like it.’

Then he held up his foot to try how it felt to have the water run between his toes. This proved interesting with the right foot, so Kit repeated the operation on the left. A little shiver of

cold began to strike downward along his spine. He would put on his clothes. Where were they? Oh, yes, he remembered, behind that broom bush on the bank. He sprang up the short turf and rounded the waving green and gold of the obstacle.

There sat his mother beside them.

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE KIT'S EYES ARE OPENED

Kit stopped abashed and ashamed. There is doubtless, a disembodied moral law, a spiritual essence of right somewhere in the air about us, but we seldom let it alight on us till it comes in human guise. We rather shoo it off like a troublesome fly.

Kit Kennedy remembered for the first time that he ought to have gone to school.

'Kit,' said Liliac MacWalter, with sad directness, 'you are playing truant.'

'Yes,' said Kit, hanging his head, and standing meanwhile like a spare young Apollo erect before his mother. The moral law had alighted now.

There was a basket by his mother's side covered with a white napkin. She had been on her way to meet Heather Jock and his donkey as he passed along the highway, that he might take it to the Crae Cottage. She had not seen her father or her mother for many months.

Without saying a word Liliac took the napkin from the basket, and calling Kit to her she began, with strange thrills and upheavings of her mother's heart, to rub some warmth into the boy's chilled limbs. She had not done so much since he was a little lad of three years old. This made her glad that she had chanced upon him that morning, though she meant to speak seriously to the boy all the same. For the space of five long minutes both were silent, the tears welling up in the woman's averted eyes, and the boy casting about for some non-committal subject of conversation.

Then, garment by garment, she helped him on with his clothes, till he stood completely arrayed before her.

Royal had swum and barked, and barked and swum between the deeps and the shallows ever since Kit's desertion. But now he came up the bank, sheepishly wagging his lank wet tail, keeping meanwhile one eye on the intentions of Liliac's hand and one on her uncovered basket.

'Kit,' said his mother, gravely, 'sit down. I want to speak to you.'

Much subdued Kit sat down. He wished that he had been suffering under Dominie Duncanson's taws instead. But he sat meekly down as he was bidden.

Royal settled himself upon his haunches a few yards below on a spit of broiling shingle, cocking his ears alternately at these inexplicable humans, who on such a morning preferred the land to the water, and, having a basket of delicacies such as he could see plainly with his nose, went on making foolish noises with their mouths. Royal could have shown them a better use for these last.

'Kit,' said his mother, 'I have been thinking for a long while that you are old enough to be told what is before you. You are nearly eleven, and older than most boys of twelve or fourteen. I did not mean to trouble you yet, for Mr. Duncanson says that you are doing well at school. But now I must speak. You are getting wild and playing truant. I will not rage upon you. Kit. I will only tell you that if you go on in the way you are doing you will break your mother's heart.'

'Oh, mither!' cried Kit, tears springing into eyes which would not have been wet for the best whipping that Duncan Duncanson could have given, 'I forgot. I did not mean to—at least, I didna ken ye were comin' this road.'

'No,' said his mother, gently, 'that is just it. You did not think; you did not mean any wrong. You did not expect to be found out. That is exactly the way to break a mother's heart.'

Kit hung his head. The moral law was biting steadily now.

‘Kit,’ she went on, after a pause of strengthening silence and upward appeal, Kit, laddie mine, I want you to be a good man, a true man. I think you will be a clever man—you have it in you. Listen, Kit. Once I knew a very clever man—not a bad man, but one who, like you, did not think, did not mean, did not care, so long as he was not found out. Kit, your mother would have been the happiest woman in the world if that man had thought, had meant, had remembered. But—he broke my heart and made my life a living death. Now my heart grows alive again to look at you. But, oh, Kit, I see something of that man in you. I would rather see you lie dead before me than that you should break any woman's heart as that man broke mine!’

‘Was he my father?’ asked Kit, in a low awed tone, not looking at his mother, but down at the loch, which somehow seemed suddenly to have grown misty and far away.

‘He was your father,’ said the woman Liliias, very softly.

There was a long silence between them twain, so long that Royal dropped his head and pretended to go to sleep.

‘Is he dead, mither?’ said Kit at last, the realities of life humming in his ears and making his heart like chill water within him.

‘No, he is not dead,’ said Liliias MacWalter, her face looking ashen gray and drawn in the insolent optimism of the morning sunshine.

Kit thought a while, and then said, with an indignaint ring in his voice, ‘How you must hate him, mither!’

There was a little rustling beyond the dyke in the broom into which Kit had thrown the stick. A thrush which had flown in as if to visit its nest flew out again, ‘cherk-ing’ crossly.

His mother did not answer, so Kit repeated his words: ‘How you must hate that man, mither.’

With eyes pulsing and misty, like the sky over the Northern sea where the ice floats, Liliias replied. She did not sigh—sighing is for hopeful people who are only temporarily unhappy. But this woman was hopeless, expectationless, convicted on a life sentence from which she did not mean to appeal.

‘Hate him — no. I do not hate that man, Kit, she said, slowly, but very distinctly. ‘Rather, God forgive him and me —I love him still. For a woman who once loves truly, Kit, as I loved your father, there is in this life no escape, no hope. I do not know about the next. At any rate she loves to the end. You do not understand. Nor can any man fully understand. Like a wasp that is crushed a man turns to sting that which hurts him. But when a woman is bruised, wounded to the death, ground to powder, if the heel be the heel of the man she loves, it cannot grind the great love out of her heart. Such love as this, Kit, does not come at will. It does not go at bidding. It is there, Kit. You do not understand. You never will wholly, for you are a man. But that is the truth. God has made woman so that because I loved that man once I must love him always.’

The relieving tears welled up silently in the gray-blue eyes. There they stood for a moment like water in an overfull glass held by a sort of surface tension. Then they ran slowly over and dripped unheeded one by one upon her lap. One fell on Kit's hand. It was warm.

‘Oh, mither, dinna!’ he cried, agonized, snatching his hand away with the swift intolerance of youth for mental suffering—an unknown and foolish thing to healthy childhood.

‘Do you love Walter MacWalter?’ said Kit, presently with the remorseless curiosity of youth, whose inquiries sometimes sting like lashes, sometimes cut like knives.

Liliias started at his words. She formed her lips for some vehement answer. But it was unspoken. The fire that leaped into her eyes died out as swiftly. For a space she was silent, and when she spoke it was in a low, even, colourless voice.

‘No,’ she said, ‘I do not love Walter MacWalter.’

‘Did you never love him?’ pursued pitiless youth.

‘I never loved him.’

‘Then why did you marry him?’

In all her life's trials Liliias never had to endure (save once) any moment so terrible as this.

She tried to speak, but a pulsing check rose rebelliously in her throat, and she stammered like a speaker who has suddenly forgotten his next sentence.

'Kit — Kit! Oh, Kit,' she gasped, 'you are cruel. My lad—my lad—but you do not mean to be. I will tell you—yes, you shall know. I married Walter MacWalter because I thought my heart was dead—Because of the man, your father. I thought he did not love me, that he had deceived me. My mother said, 'Marry the man for your father's sake. The debt crushes him to the ground. He is a good man. Love will come afterwards.' I did wrong. Kit, I sinned against love. But do not hate me. Kit. I will die if you hate me. I have gotten so little out of life —I who expected so much. I cannot bear that you should hate me, Kit. At least, I have not deserved that.'

The boy felt the tears well up in his own eyes. He did not understand. He could not. Yet Liliias was wise, for the effort to understand made a deeper impression on Kit's mind than if he had understood all. The mystery of suffering sobered him. He grew older and wiser each moment. By instinct this woman had reached the truth that to make children trust you, you must appeal to their understandings as well as to their hearts.

Kit Kennedy reached his hand across to his mother and laid it on hers. She took her left hand and gently patted it. Then she went on again.

'My boy,' she said, 'I did wrong. I sinned against love. But I have been punished, and God, I think, looks upon it so. Whom He loveth He chasteneth. I heard Mr. Osborne say it. But not as if he knew it. Not as I know it. If I have sinned greatly I have also been greatly punished, and God does not exact the penalty in both worlds. Kit, be a good man. Be true. Speak the truth and take the consequences. If you do wrong, as you will, stand up to the punishment. Kit, do not run from trouble, as—as he did. If he had remained God knows how proudly, how gladly I would have stood by his side—aye, through disgrace, penury, and death. But he was afraid and went away. Oh, Kit, do not flinch, stand up to the storm, and be sure that the woman who loves you will stand beside you. I tell you her heart will be proud and rejoicing because she knows it is done for the man she loves.'

A rabbit or some wild thing stirred in the broom bush. Kit turned his head quickly, but saw nothing.

Having spoken out, Liliias MacWalter's heart was happier than it had been for years. The burden was eased. An unseen hand seemed to lift it from her shoulders.

'You do not hate me for this, Kit?' she said, with a yearning pitifulness in her eyes.

The boy sobbed one great sob, felt his face go cold, and then fell on his mother's neck.

'Mither!' was all he said.

And from the heart of Liliias, the sinned-against, the year-long pain ebbed away.

It was some time before these two friends found articulate words again. When they did it was the woman who began to speak in a hushed tone. Kit had forgotten his eleven years, his adult superiority, his dignity of man. He lay with his head on his mother's breast. She kissed his hair and brow as often as she would. And that was not seldom. God did not grudge her this season and slowed the universe to make it longer. He had done as much for Joshua upon a less important occasion. But overhead a dark and threatening cloud drew down from the Girthon Hills, thunder brooding within its blue-black bosom.

'Kit,' the woman said, gently, 'you are a clever boy. I want you to be something in the world. I am sure you can be if you like. For your mother's sake, try. You must do it for yourself. I cannot help you. Your grandfather and grandmother are too poor to aid you. You must help yourself. I do not want you to be only a ploughman. There is more in you than that. Only remember that mere money-making is nothing, Kit; I want you to be a scholar, like your father. But with the strength he had not. Perhaps one day, who knows, God may repent Him of the evil. No, I must not think of it. It is impossible!' She paused, and was silent a long while.

Kit did not interrupt or ask any questions this time. He was pillowed contentedly under his mother's chin. He liked it—when he was sure that no one could see him. Also he was forming great

resolves within him. For a boy of eleven can make resolves—and sometimes keep them better than a man of forty.

‘Mither, I am going to be a great man,’ said the reformed truant. And even as he spoke there came a vivid flash, and the thunder broke above in sonorous mirth at Kit’s daring!

‘All right, we’ll see!’ said Kit Kennedy, leaping up and shaking his fist at the elements.