

# Games

Katherine MacLean



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**games**

By **KATHERINE MacLEAN**

Illustrated by **ASHMAN**

It is a tough assignment for a child to know where a daydream ends and impossibility begins!

---

R

onny was playing by himself, which meant he was two tribes of Indians having a war.

"Bang," he muttered, firing an imaginary rifle. He decided that it was a time in history before the white people had sold the Indians any guns, and changed the rifle into a bow. "Wizzthunk," he substituted, mimicking from an Indian film on TV the graphic sound of an arrow striking flesh.

"Oof." He folded down onto the grass, moaning, "Uhhhooh ..." and relaxing into defeat and death.

"Want some chocolate milk, Ronny?" asked his mother's voice from the kitchen.

"No, thanks," he called back, climbing to his feet to be another man. "Wizzthunk, wizzthunk," he added to the flights of arrows as the best

archer in the tribe. "Last arrow. Wizzzz," he said, missing one enemy for realism. He addressed another battling brave. "Who has more arrows? They are coming too close. No time—I'll have to use my knife." He drew the imaginary knife, ducking an arrow as it shot close.



## T

hen he was the tribal chief standing somewhere else, and he saw that the warriors left alive were outnumbered.

"We must retreat. We cannot leave our tribe without warriors to protect the women."

Ronny decided that the chief was heroically wounded, his voice wavering from weakness. He had been propping himself against a tree to appear unharmed, but now he moved so that his braves could see he was pinned to the trunk by an arrow and could not walk. They cried out.

He said, "Leave me and escape. But remember..." No words came, just the feeling of being what he was, a dying old eagle, a chief of warriors, speaking to young warriors who would need advice of seasoned humor and moderation to carry them through their young battles. He had to finish the sentence, tell them something wise.

Ronny tried harder, pulling the feeling around him like a cloak of resignation and pride, leaning indifferently against the tree where the arrow had pinned him, hearing dimly in anticipation the sound of his aged voice conquering weakness to speak wisely of what they needed to be told. They had many battles ahead of them, and the battles would be against odds, with so many dead already.

They must watch and wait, be flexible and tenacious, determined and persistent—but not too rash, subtle and indirect—not cowardly, and above all be patient with the triumph of the enemy and not maddened into suicidal direct attack.

His stomach hurt with the arrow wound, and his braves waited to hear his words. He had to sum a part of his life's experience in words. Ronny tried harder to build the scene realistically. Then suddenly it was real. He was the man.

*He was an old man, guide and adviser in an oblique battle against great odds. He was dying of something and his stomach hurt with a knotted ache, like hunger, and he was thirsty. He had refused to let the young men make the sacrifice of trying to rescue him. He was hostage in the jail and dying, because he would not surrender to the enemy nor cease to fight them. He smiled and said, "Remember to live like other men, but—remember to remember."*

And then he was saying things that could not be put into words, complex feelings that were ways of taking bad situations that made them easier to smile at, and then sentences that were not sentences, but single alphabet letters pushing each other with signs, with a feeling of being connected like two halves of a swing, one side moving up when the other moved down, or like swings or like cogs and pendulums inside a clock, only without the cogs, just with the push.

It wasn't adding or multiplication, and it used letters instead of numbers, but Ronny knew it was some kind of arithmetic.

And he wasn't Ronny.

He was an old man, teaching young men, and the old man did not know about Ronny. He thought sadly how little he would be able to convey to the young men, and he remembered more, trying to sum

long memories and much living into a few direct thoughts. And Ronny was the old man and himself, both at once.

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## I

It was too intense. Part of Ronny wanted to escape and be alone, and that part withdrew and wanted to play something. Ronny sat in the grass and played with his toes like a much younger child.

Part of Ronny that was Doctor Revert Purcell sat on the edge of a prison cot, concentrating on secret unpublished equations of biogenic stability which he wanted to pass on to the responsible hands of young researchers in the concealed-research chain. He was using the way of thinking which they had told him was the telepathic sending of ideas to anyone ready to receive. It was odd that he himself could never tell when he was sending. Probably a matter of age. They had started trying to teach him when he was already too old for anything so different.

The water tap, four feet away, was dripping steadily, and it was hard for Purcell to concentrate, so intense was his thirst. He wondered if he could gather strength to walk that far. He was sitting up and that was good, but the struggle to raise himself that far had left him dizzy and trembling. If he tried to stand, the effort would surely interrupt his transmitting of equations and all the data he had not sent yet.

Would the man with the keys who looked in the door twice a day care whether Purcell died with dignity? He was the only audience, and his expression never changed when Purcell asked him to point out to the authorities that he was not being given anything to eat. It was funny to Purcell to find that he wanted the respect of any audience to his dying, even of a man without response who treated him as if he were already



a corpse.

Perhaps the man would respond if Purcell said, "I have changed my mind. I will tell."

But if he said that, he would lose his own respect.

At the biochemists' and bio-physicists' convention, the reporter had asked him if any of his researches could be applied to warfare.

He had answered with no feeling of danger, knowing that what he did was common practice among research men, sure that it was an unchallengeable right.

"Some of them can, but those I keep to myself."

The reporter remained dead-pan. "For instance?"

"Well, I have to choose something that won't reveal how it's done now, but—ah—for example, a way of cheaply mass-producing specific antitoxins against any germ. It sounds harmless if you don't think about it, but actually it would make germ warfare the most deadly and inexpensive weapon yet developed, for it would make it possible to prevent the backspread of contagion into a country's own troops, without much expense. There would be hell to pay if anyone ever let that out." Then he had added, trying to get the reporter to understand enough to change his cynical unimpressed expression, "You understand, germs are cheap—there would be a new plague to spread every time some pipsqueak biologist mutated a new germ. It isn't even expensive or difficult, as atom bombs are."

The headline was: "Scientist Refuses to Give Secret of Weapon to Government."



## G

overnment men came and asked him if this was correct, and on having it confirmed pointed out that he had an obligation. The research foundations where he had worked were subsidized by government money. He had been deferred from military service during his early years of study and work so he could become a scientist, instead of having to fight or die on the battlefield.

"This might be so," he had said. "I am making an attempt to serve mankind by doing as much good and as little damage as possible. If you don't mind, I'd rather use my own judgment about what constitutes service."

The statement seemed too blunt the minute he had said it, and he recognized that it had implications that his judgment was superior to that of the government. It probably was the most antagonizing thing that could have been said, but he could see no other possible statement, for it represented precisely what he thought.

There were bigger headlines about that interview, and when he stepped outside his building for lunch the next day, several small gangs of patriots arrived with the proclaimed purpose of persuading him to tell. They fought each other for the privilege.

The police had rescued him after he had lost several front teeth and had one eye badly gouged. They then left him to the care of the prison doctor in protective custody. Two days later, after having been questioned several times on his attitude toward revealing the parts of his research he had kept secret, he was transferred to a place that looked like a military jail, and left alone. He was not told what his status was.

When someone came and asked him questions about his attitude, Purcell felt quite sure that what they were doing to him was illegal. He

stated that he was going on a hunger strike until he was allowed to have visitors and see a lawyer.

The next time the dinner hour arrived, they gave him nothing to eat. There had been no food in the cell since, and that was probably two weeks ago. He was not sure just how long, for during part of the second week his memory had become garbled. He dimly remembered something that might have been delirium, which could have lasted more than one day.

Perhaps the military who wanted the antitoxins for germ warfare were waiting quietly for him either to talk or die.

---

## R

ronny got up from the grass and went into the kitchen, stumbling in his walk like a beginning toddler.

"Choc-mil?" he said to his mother.

She poured him some and teased gently, "What's the matter, Ronny—back to baby-talk?"

He looked at her with big solemn eyes and drank slowly, not answering.

In the cell somewhere distant, Dr. Purcell, famous biochemist, began waveringly trying to rise to his feet, unable to remember hunger as anything separate from him that could ever be ended, but weakly wanting a glass of water. Ronny could not feed him with the chocolate milk. Even though this was another himself, the body that was drinking was not the one that was thirsty.

He wandered out into the backyard again, carrying the glass.

"Bang," he said deceptively, pointing with his hand in case his mother was looking. "Bang." Everything had to seem usual; he was sure of that. This was too big a thing, and too private, to tell a grownup.

On the way back from the sink, Dr. Purcell slipped and fell and hit his head against the edge of the iron cot. Ronny felt the edge gashing through skin and into bone, and then a relaxing blankness inside his head, like falling asleep suddenly when they are telling you a fairy story while you want to stay awake to find out what happened next.

"Bang," said Ronny vaguely, pointing at a tree. "Bang." He was ashamed because he had fallen down in the cell and hurt his head and become just Ronny again before he had finished sending out his equations. He tried to make believe he was alive again, but it didn't work.

You could never make-believe anything to a real good finish. They never ended neatly—there was always something unfinished, and something that would go right on after the end.

It would have been nice if the jailers had come in and he had been able to say something noble to them before dying, to show that he was brave.

"Bang," he said randomly, pointing his finger at his head, and then jerked his hand away as if it had burned him. He had become the wrong person that time. The feel of a bullet jolting the side of his head was startling and unpleasant, even if not real, and the flash of someone's vindictive anger and self-pity while pulling a trigger... *My wife will be sorry she ever...* He didn't like that kind of make-believe. It felt unsafe to do it without making up a story first.

Ronny decided to be Indian braves again. They weren't very real, and

when they were, they had simple straightforward emotions about courage and skill and pride and friendship that he would like.

---

A

man was leaning his arms on the fence, watching him. "Nice day." *What's the matter, kid, are you an esper?*

"Hul-lo." Ronny stood on one foot and watched him. *Just making believe. I only want to play. They make it too serious, having all these troubles.*

"Good countryside." The man gestured at the back yards, all opened in together with tangled bushes here and there to crouch behind, when other kids were there to play hide and seek, and with trees to climb. *It can be the Universe if you pick and choose who to be, and don't let wrong choices make you shut off from it. You can make yourself learn from this if you are strong enough. Who have you been?*

Ronny stood on the other foot and scratched the back of his leg with his toes. He didn't want to remember. He always forgot right away, but this grownup was confident and young and strong-looking, and meant something when he talked, not like most grownups.

"I was playing Indian." *I was an old chief, captured by enemies, trying to pass on to other warriors the wisdom of my life before I died.* He made believe he was the chief a little to show the young man what he was talking about.

"Purcell!" The man drew in his breath between his teeth, and his face paled. He pulled back from reaching Ronny with his feelings, like holding his breath in. "Good game." *You can learn from him. Don't leave him shut off, I beg you. You can let him influence you without*

*being pulled off your own course. He was a good man. You were honored, and I envy the man you will be if you contacted him on resonant similarities.*

The grownup looked frightened. *But you are too young. You'll block him out and lose him. Kids have to grow and learn at their own speed.*

Then he looked less afraid, but uncertain, and his thoughts struggled against each other. *Their own speed. But there should be someone alive with Purcell's pattern and memories. We loved him. Kids should grow at their own speed, but.... How strong are you, Ronny? Can you move ahead of the normal growth pattern?*

Grownups always want you to do something. Ronny stared back, clenching his hands and moving his feet uneasily.

The thoughts were open to him. *Do you want to be the old chief again, Ronny? Be him often, so you can learn to know what he knew? (And feel as he felt. It would be a stiff dose for a kid.) It will be rich and exciting, full of memories and skills. (But hard to chew. I'm doing this for Purcell, Ronny, not for you. You have to make up your own mind.)*

"That was a good game. Are you going to play it any more?"



H

is mother would not like it. She would feel the difference in him, as much as if he had read one of the books she kept away from him, books that were supposed to be for adults only. The difference would hurt her. He was being bad, like eating between meals. But to know what grownups knew....

He tightened his fists and looked down at the grass. "I'll play it some more."

The young man smiled, still pale and holding half his feelings back behind a dam. *Then mesh with me a moment. Let me in.*

He was in with the thought, feeling Ronny's confused consent, reassuring him by not thinking or looking around inside while sending out a single call, *Purcell, Doc*, that found the combination key to Ronny's guarded yesterdays and last nights and ten minutes agos. *Ronny, I'll set that door, Purcell's memories, open for you. You can't close it, but feel like this about it—and he planted in a strong set, questioning, cool, open, a feeling of absorbing without words ... it will give information when you need it, like a dictionary.*

The grownup straightened away from the fence, preparing to walk off. Behind a dam pressed grief and anger for the death of the man he called Purcell.

"And any time you want to *be* the old chief, at any age he lived, just make believe you are him."

Grief and anger pressed more strongly against the dam, and the man turned and left rapidly, letting his thoughts flicker and scatter through private memories that Ronny did not share, that no one shared, breaking thought contact with everyone so that the man could be alone in his own mind to have his feelings in private.

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## R

onny picked up the empty glass that had held his chocolate milk from the back steps where he had left it and went inside. As he stepped into the kitchen, he knew what another kitchen had looked like for a five-

year-old child who had been Purcell ninety years ago. There had been an iron sink, and a brown-and-green-spotted faucet, and the glass had been heavier and transparent, like real glass.

Ronny reached up and put the colored plastic tumbler down.

"That was a nice young man, dear. What did he say to you?"

Ronny looked up at his mamma, comparing her with the remembered mamma of fifty years ago. He loved the other one, too.

"He tol' me he's glad I play Indian."

—KATHERINE  
MacLEAN

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