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# My Uncle Willie

A SHORT STORY  
Written for "The Listener"  
by J. GIFFORD MALE



THERE was a boy about my own age I remember at Sunday School. He always sat behind a couple of fat girls, and he used to annoy them like anything, chiefly by pinching them. The girls would turn round to him and say, "Don't be Uncle Willie," and then titter to themselves as though they'd said something smart.

Personally I welcomed it as a diversion, because the teacher, who was a Presbyterian and looked as though he was just a thin piece of skin stretched over a skull, was a dry old stick, and I know now he didn't like me. He once told me on the quiet that he didn't go much on my chances of getting into the Kingdom of Heaven. Good Lord, how he was dry. All I remember now of Sunday school is something about a woman driving a tent-peg through a man's head and the boy pinching the fat girls in the behind. I can see him now, a little restless kid with a red nose, shifting round in his seat and wiping his nose on his sleeve and every now and then giving a sly look at us and pinching the girls in front of him. Then, Don't be Uncle Willie, they'd say to him. Don't be Uncle Willie, Albert.

NOW, the point is, I really had an Uncle Willie, and I thought it was a personal reflection on me. Evidently the Uncle Willie they were talking about was a silly old man, and I didn't like it at all.

I must tell you about my Uncle Willie, because he was quite a character round where I lived. He stayed with us, and when he wasn't at the local pub, he spent most of his time sitting on our front veranda, spitting into the dahlia patch and smoking Irish twist that stank the place out.

He had worked in the Waihi mines for 15 years until one day a great lump of quartz fell on him and broke both his legs. One of them didn't set properly, and with the compensation he received and some money he had in the bank he was able to retire and live on us. He was a big fat old chap with a deep, wheezy voice and a wonderful stream of profanity. There were times when he got terribly quarrelsome. His long moustache would bristle with rage and he would break into the most lurid stream of language you can imagine until my mother would come running out and say Uncle Willie stop that language. Remember the children.

Uncle Willie must have had a lot of dust from the mines still in his lungs, for every now and then his stomach would heave and a huge cough would

start deep down inside. When it had worked up to the top, he would clear his throat with a noise you could hear all down the street, and spit. I shone in a sort of reflected glory from Uncle Willie's powers of expectoration. The kids from next door would watch the performance with their eyes popping out, and say to me, Gosh, your Uncle Willie can spit; and they'd spend hours imitating him.

At the time I'm thinking of my Uncle Willie was an old man. His moustache was nearly white, and his hair stuck out like a mop which has had the centre worn away. He used to find it more and more trouble hobbling round to the pub, though I will say that up to the very last, when he did go on a drunk he proved himself a real old hell-buster. He usually started a quarrel, and when he had worked himself up into a rage he would throw glasses about. Then they would call for my father, and Uncle Willie would arrive home, half carried by my father, and collapse into his chair on the front veranda and sit wheezing and puffing until he went to sleep.

AS I said, he was one of the local characters, and in the street where I lived there weren't many people who didn't know all about Uncle Willie, the accident in the mine, and the compensation he'd got.

My mother, who used to get tired of Uncle Willie smoking and spitting all over the place, often said to my father that Uncle Willie would make a good match for some nice respectable widow. She'd dig Uncle Willie in the ribs and say, Uncle Willie, it's time you thought of getting married and settling down. Then Uncle Willie would say, I never was one for the girls. Though you never know, there's no fool like an old fool.

But there came a time when even I could see that there was something strange about Uncle Willie. He was beginning to spruce himself up a bit, and he hadn't been on a bust at the pub for weeks. His language was also a lot quieter than usual. My mother got worried at first, and said to him, What's the matter, Uncle Willie? You're not your old self at all. Uncle Willie got mad at this and bristled up and roared What the hell? Can't you women leave a man alone, and behaved just like he used to.

One day (I wasn't old enough then to realise what it was all about, but I've heard them telling the story so many times that I know every detail now) my mother twigged what had really happened. Uncle Willie had fallen in love with the woman who kept the dairy at

the corner. She was a thin, peaked little woman of about fifty, and heaven knows what any man could have seen in her. I gather that she had a wheedling manner with her, and she first got round Uncle Willie by talking about his gammy leg and saying wasn't it a pity a fine big man like him couldn't lead an active life because of his leg.

My mother didn't like it at all, in spite of the fact that she had been telling Uncle Willie it was time he settled down. Don't you be an old fool, Uncle Willie, she said. That woman's after your money. You mark my words.

Looking back on the whole affair it is obvious my mother was right. What other reason could the woman have had?

AND so Uncle Willie got deeper and deeper into it, and one day he created a sensation by announcing that he was going to get married. You've no idea what a scene there was. My mother burst into tears, and Uncle Willie swelled up and got madder than I'd ever seen him. You should have heard the language. The news went round the neighbourhood like wildfire. Uncle Willie's getting married. Have you heard that Uncle Willie's going to marry the woman in the dairy? . . . Good Lord, Uncle Willie married . . . Getting married. I couldn't of believed my ears. And at his age, too. . . . Uncle Willie getting married? The old fool. She's marrying him for his money . . . Uncle Willie getting married . . . It's his money she's after. He must be worth close on a thousand if he's worth a penny . . . You don't tell me. She knows a thing or two . . . Uncle Willie? I'd never have guessed . . . Getting married . . . Getting married.

Well, the upshot of it all was that my mother decided to make the best of it, and Uncle Willie got married all right. It was the biggest day of my life, I can tell you, though what I remember most is some woman giving me wine on top of a lot of jelly, and making me sick.

Uncle Willie was so excited he nearly collapsed. He hobbled round roaring with laughter and shouting at everybody, and finally got very drunk. But instead of quarrelling and throwing things about, he just collapsed in a chair and sat heaving with laughter and nearly choking from his cough. They took him home to the house behind the dairy, where he and the woman were going to live, and left him flat out on the bed.

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