

# GOLDEN DAYS

FOR BOYS AND GIRLS.

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# Our Uncle Wheeler

L. M. Montgomery

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In reality he was our great-uncle, and we were very much in awe of him.

The rare times when he came to visit us—usually popping down unexpectedly at some particularly inconvenient moment—were periods of misery for us lively boys, for Uncle Wheeler was a very precise old gentleman, fidgety when boys were around, and with all an old bachelor's decided opinions as to the training and behavior of those unavoidable evils.

Consequently, as Rod used to say, we were “as unhappy as a cat on hot bricks” when Uncle Wheeler came.

He had befriended and aided father more than once in troublous times, for he was really kind-hearted at the core, and hence we were instructed to regard him with gratitude and respect. He was always “Uncle Wheeler” to us. Our other uncles were Uncle Tom, Dick or Harry, but we would as soon have thought of calling Uncle Wheeler “Uncle James” as of saying “hello” to the minister.

Rod and I were the oldest of our family, being fifteen and fourteen respectively. We were hearty, growing boys, and found it very hard to “tone down” during Uncle Wheeler's sojourn.

Nevertheless, we tried our best, for we really liked the old man, in spite of our fear of him. When it was decided that Rod should go to college if it could be managed, Uncle Wheeler wrote to father and mother a letter in which he denounced the project as “absurd nonsense,” and railed at it for three pages. On the fourth he announced his intention of paying Rod's way through college if he were really bent upon going, and hoped he wouldn't disgrace the family.

Rod was jubilant; but it behooved him to be very careful, for Uncle Wheeler was extremely touchy, and sometimes got offended at very trifling things. Therefore we made up our minds to be more than usually sedate and proper on the occasion of his next visit.

About two months after this letter, Rod and I received an invitation to a party at the house of one of our schoolmates. During the afternoon Sydney Hatfield, a cousin of ours, arrived and decided to stay over night, as he was going to Tracy's, too.

Mother intended to put him in the spare room to sleep; but about dusk a cutter drove up to the door, and in it were the three Winsloe boys from Bracebridge, who came in and said they were also bound for the party and would afterwards remain with us until the next day.

We were a big family, all told, so that mother said to us, just before we left:

“I think, boys, you'd better take Sydney up to your room to-night and let the Winsloe boys have the spare room. We can accommodate you all if you won't mind a little crowding.”

Lou Winsloe said uninvited guests ought to be thankful to be taken in at all, and for his part he thought it jolly to sleep three in a bed, if it was a big one, and we all drove off to the party in high spirits.

It was late when we returned, and of course everybody was in bed. Mother had left a light burning for us, and we tip-toed in cautiously, so as not to disturb the sleepers.

While we were putting away our coats I noticed Rod and Dave Winsloe talking earnestly, and when I went out to lock the back porch door Rod followed me.

“Say, Art, Dave’s nervous; he’s afraid of the ghost and doesn’t want to sleep in the spare room. Of course he’s a ninny, but arguing won’t do any good. What’s to be done?”

Dave Winsloe was a delicate boy of nearly fifteen, and we always regarded him as “babyish.” He was extremely sensitive, and his nervous whims had to be indulged.

I don’t know how he’d got wind of “our ghost,” but he had. I may here remark that our spare room had the reputation of being haunted during the sojourn of the family who had preceded us. None of us had ever seen or heard anything worse than ourselves in it, and never felt in the least disturbed. We had good, healthy nerves and didn’t worry about spooks.

But I knew Dave couldn’t help his terror, so, feeling sorry, I said:

“Well, the three Winsloes had better go up stairs to our room and you and Syd and I will take the spare room. We’re equal to any ghost who may be on the hunting trail to-night.”

This arrangement suited all hands, so we showed the Winsloes up stairs and separated.

Our house was an old-fashioned one, and the spare room opened off the end of the parlor. The parlor was a long, narrow room, and the bedroom was also long and narrow, so that from the parlor door to the extreme end of the bedroom, where the bed was, was quite a distance.

Syd, Rod and I went into the parlor and found it deliciously warm, as there had been a fire in the stove. We supposed mother had lit it to warm the spare room for the Winsloes, and we thought it rather a good joke that Dave’s ghostly terrors should have put him out of a warm sleeping room.

We undressed by the fire quietly enough, for we were tired; but when we were ready for bed, Syd, who was always up to mischief, had a brilliant idea.

“Say, you chaps, let’s start from the hall door and see which will get into bed first.”

Rod and I thought it would be good fun, so we didn’t make a noise. So, having

taken a vow of silence, we put out the candle, for the moonlight was streaming in at the windows, ranged ourselves by the hall door, and Syd gave the word, "Go!"

The bedroom door was open, so we flew down the parlor, shot through the door and the spare room, and the whole three of us, with one spring, bounded on the bed at the same instant.

There was one awful moment in which we realized what had happened, and then a wheezy, sleepy, well-known voice puffed out:

"Why, bless my soul, what's the matter?"

It was Uncle Wheeler!

We had jumped upon that bed pretty quick, but we jumped off three times quicker, dashed out of the room and scuttled through the parlor, never stopping for breath until we reached the kitchen.

Rod and I wished the floor would open and quietly let us into the cellar. Syd, being a stranger, of course didn't appreciate the situation so keenly.

"Say, you chaps, that old duffer must have got his breath most lammed out of him. Who is it?"

"Uncle Wheeler," groaned Rod. "And, oh! what *will* he say? How ever did he come to be there, and *why* didn't mother leave some way for us to know?"

Just then we heard a gasp and sigh and a sort of groan in the little breakfast-room off the kitchen.

We all jumped.

"Great Scott! Is that one of Dave Winsloe's ghosts?" exclaimed Syd.

But I had got a lamp lit, and by its light we saw our eleven-year-old brother, Tad, come shuffling out of the breakfast-room, rubbing his eyes.

"Say, you fellows, have you got back? Mother told me to sit up and tell you—"

"Tell us what?"

"That Uncle Wheeler'd come, and she'd put him in the spare room, and that the Winsloe boys must have your room, and you chaps would have to sleep in the kitchen loft. I meant to keep awake—honest, I did—but I got so tired, I went in there and lay down on the lounge. I guess I went to sleep."



“UNCLE WHEELER GLANCED AT US BOYS, AS IF HE KNEW WE WERE THE GUILTY ONES.”

“I guess you did,” growled Rod. “You’ve done for us now.”

And after each of us had rated the still stupid and half asleep Tad soundly by way of venting our ill humor, we crept off, shiveringly, to the kitchen loft.

We were too tired and cold and cross to talk it over then, but by dawn Rod and I were sitting up in bed, discussing our mishap in whispers, so as not to waken Syd.

“Nothing worse *could* have happened,” lamented Rod. “Uncle Wheeler will be piping mad; you could hardly blame him, I suppose. What a rousing scare he must have got! But he won’t listen to any excuse, and not a blessed cent need I expect for college if he finds out. Some men would just look on it as a joke, but Uncle Wheeler isn’t that sort.”

After forlornly admitting that we’d got into a scrape beyond doubt, we got up, put on some old clothes and went down to sneak Syd’s suit out of the parlor for him, for, needless to say, we hadn’t stopped to get our clothes in our stampede of the night before.

On our way through the hall, we met the Winsloe boys tiptoeing down stairs, much to our surprise, for it was barely daylight.

“What’s the rush?” asked Rod, with an attempt at hilarity. “Been seeing any

ghosts, Dave?"

"It's beginning to rain," announced Lou, "and it's setting in for a big thaw, so we decided to get up, rouse you out if we could and start just as soon as possible. You know it's a long drive home, and a wretched road at the best of times. It'll hardly be passable in a thaw."

They passed on out to the stables. Rod and I looked at each other, both struck by the same idea.

"Nobody else will be stirring for an hour yet," said Rod, voicing my thoughts rather shamefacedly. "We'll light a fire and get some grub for the boys, and they'll be gone before mother or Uncle Wheeler come on the scene. They were supposed to be going to the spare room, and if we just hold our tongues, and get Syd to do the same, Uncle Wheeler will think it was the Winsloes."

"But Tad?"

"Tad didn't appear till too late, so that won't give us away; and he was half-asleep, and I'll bet a cent he'll never remember how many of us were there or that we hadn't our clothes on. It hardly seems fair, though, to put it on the Winsloes."

"That won't hurt. They're nothing to Uncle Wheeler, and he doesn't even know them, so it won't do them any harm, while it would do us whole heaps."

We talked it over and decided to go ahead. I left Rod to light the fire, while I went up, wakened Syd, explained the whole affair and easily got him to promise silence.

"We're not going to tell any fibs, of course!" I said, virtuously. "If anybody asks us who it was, we'll have to tell straight out; but not likely any one will, and we'll just keep quiet. See?"

Syd thought it a good joke, and agreed to keep mum. The Winsloes came in; Rod and I got them a cold breakfast and they started off.

Just as they drove away, mother came out at the hall door, and Uncle Wheeler, in dressing gown and slippers, emerged from the sitting room. He just looked as grumpy as Uncle Wheeler could look—and that is saying a good deal.

Mother didn't see him at first, and merely asked us why we were up so early and where the Winsloe boys were. We explained, and then mother saw Uncle Wheeler, and said she hoped he'd slept well and found his pillows high enough for him.

"Slept well!" growled Uncle Wheeler. "I wonder if you, or any one else, Amelia Jane Millar, could sleep well, if, just when you had dropped off to sleep, after a long and arduous journey, you were suddenly awakened by half a dozen great, lubbering louts of boys coming down on you, like an avalanche, in the dead of night? I ask you



how anybody could sleep well under such circumstances, madam?”

And Uncle Wheeler glanced at us boys, as if he knew we were the guilty ones. Mother was greatly distressed.

“Oh, dear me! The Winsloe boys went in, after all. *Didn't* Tad tell you that Uncle was there?”

“Tad went to sleep,” said Rod, promptly, nudging me with his elbow, for fear I'd put in a word too many and complicate matters, “and didn't wake up till too late. When he appeared, the mischief was done. You might have known he couldn't keep awake, mother.”

“There was no one else to leave,” replied mother; “and I warned him not to go to sleep. I'm *very* sorry this should have happened, Uncle Wheeler.”

Uncle Wheeler barely answered.

The Winsloe boys had gone, so he couldn't come down on them, and he had no excuse for blaming any one, except Tad—who kept religiously out of the way that morning—so he felt defrauded of his rights.

He was as snappish and crusty as he could be all through breakfast, and kept making remarks about boys being out late at nights and gadding about to parties and coming home to disturb respectable folks at unseemly hours. *He* was never guilty of it, in his young days, and he felt very sorry to see that his nephews were: and, as for those three fools that had wakened him up, he'd like to teach a lesson to boys who hadn't enough sense to get into bed properly, but must race and tear like a pack of wild cubs.

There was no doubt that Uncle Wheeler was in a fearful humor, and Rod and I realized that we had had a narrow escape.

Syd Hatfield, having no particular interest at stake, enjoyed the whole performance immensely, and afterwards remarked, in the seclusion of the kitchen loft:

“It's a jolly good thing for you chaps that your respected uncle doesn't know that it was you who disturbed his peaceful slumbers. He doesn't seem particularly amiable this morning.”

But, for all our success, I really didn't feel comfortable, and Rod looked awfully glum. Pretty soon he came out with it.

“I feel like an out and out sneak, Art,” he confessed. “I never did anything like this before, and I never will again. We've deceived mother and Uncle Wheeler, and all I wish is that we hadn't.”

“Same here, Rod,” I said, heartily, for Rod had just put my own disquieting reflections into words.

Syd stared at us.

“You’re a pair of geese! *I* think it is all a capital joke. Why, you didn’t *say* a thing—never even stretched the truth itself, and it can’t hurt the Winsloe boys one single mite.”

“That isn’t the question,” replied Rod. “It’s what *we’ve* done. I feel kind of dishonorable, but I suppose there’s nothing more to be said now.”

Still, we did feel mean. Uncle Wheeler got over his ill-humor by next day, and was as good as gold. Everything went well for a week outwardly, but Rod went about kind of grim and sulky, and as for me, I felt somehow or other that I was a pretty mean, sneaking sort of chap.

Rod and I had both been brought up to be strictly truthful and above board in everything, and we felt that we had come short of mother’s standard. It wasn’t that our evasion was going to harm any one else, but we had simply lost our self-respect. Syd had gone home, so we hadn’t him to bolster up our consciences, and we got regularly blue and moody.

One night Uncle Wheeler had another cranky fit on. The wind was northeast and his rheumatism was always bad in a northeast wind. Finally, he remarked to mother:

“I’d a letter to-day from Henry Winsloe, the father of those rascals. He wants me to accommodate him with a loan for a short time. I shan’t; I’ve worked hard for my money, and I’m not going to risk it in doubtful loans—not if he is honest and hard up. I don’t propose to help a man that can’t bring his boys up better than he’s done.”

And Uncle Wheeler poked the fire viciously. The memory of the tousing-up he’d got that unlucky night was still vividly present with him.

Rod and I went softly out, leaving mother trying to intercede for Henry Winsloe, with no very good success, and went to our favorite roost in the kitchen loft.

“Here’s a mess,” said Rod.

“A bad one,” said I. “What’s to be done?”

“Done? Make a clean breast of it to Uncle Wheeler, of course. It’ll ruin my chances with him, but I’m not going to have other people suffer for what isn’t their fault.”

“If we’d only told him at first!” I said, mournfully. “But even if he could forgive us for jumping over him, he never will for bluffing him about it. He’ll think we were just fooling him for pure fun.”

“It’s a blue show,” said Rod, gloomily, “but we deserve it—so I’m not going to flinch. After all, I don’t know that I’m sorry we have to. I’ve felt like a regular sneak this week. Uncle Wheeler will be in a fury, of course, but I think worse of how

mother will feel. She hates any crawly business.”

We made up our minds to beard the lion in his den as soon as possible. The afternoon of the next day we screwed up our courage and marched straight into the parlor, where Uncle Wheeler was writing letters before the table.

He shoved up his specs and looked at us sourly.

“What do you youngsters want?” he demanded, gruffly.

We both knew by experience that it doesn’t do to beat about the bush with Uncle Wheeler. You have to come straight to the point and say what you’ve got to say.

Rod took a header right in.

“We’ve come, Uncle Wheeler, to tell you what we should have told you before. It wasn’t the Winsloe boys who woke you up the other night. It was Syd Hatfield and Art and I.”

Then we waited for the outburst. Uncle Wheeler gazed at us over his specs quite calmly. We knew he had a dozen different ways of getting mad, and this might be one; but, if so, it was brand new.

“It was you, was it?” he said, at last. “You young scamps—and you’ve the face to come and tell me so! And why did you say it was the other boys?”

“Please, sir, we didn’t,” I ventured to say. “Mother just thought it was, because she had told them to go there. But Dave was scared of the ghost; so we changed rooms. Syd wanted us to race and see who’d get into bed first—that’s all. We didn’t know anybody was there, and we are awfully sorry. We were kind of scared, too; so we thought it wouldn’t be any harm to let you all think it was the Winsloes. But it wasn’t right, and we’ve felt mean ever since.”

Uncle Wheeler glared quite fiercely.

“What do you think you deserve?” he asked.

And Rod spoke up manfully:

“Uncle Wheeler, we deserve a sound scolding for deceiving you, and we will get it when mother finds out. But as for the rest, it was only in fun, and I don’t think any one ought to regard it as a serious crime, although it was very silly of us. Most people would merely look upon it as a joke.”

“Oh, they would, would they?” said uncle, grimly. “Perhaps, when you get to be my age, young man, and don’t find it so easy to get to sleep as you do now, you won’t consider it much of a joke to have three great boys come sprawling over you in your first doze.”

“We’re sorry we disturbed you, uncle,” said Rod, firmly, but respectfully, “and we apologize for not owning it up right off like men. That’s all we can do, and I hope

you'll forgive us."

"Humph! Go out, and tell your mother I want her."

That was all the satisfaction we got, but we went gladly, for we had escaped wonderfully well.

Mother went in, and was closeted with Uncle Wheeler for half an hour. When she came out, she looked amused over something, and though she tried to be severe, it was a failure.

"You deserve a scolding, boys, but I promised your uncle I'd let you off this time. He really seems in a good humor over it all, but I wouldn't advise you to repeat the experiment."

"What's he going to do about Mr. Winsloe?" broke in Rod, anxiously.

"He's going to help him, I think, since he found out the boys are not such 'louts' as he thought them."

Rod and I felt a good deal better then, you may be sure. Uncle Wheeler went home the next day, but he parted from us kindly, told Rod to be ready for college in the fall, and to remember mother's training in straightforwardness, and finally left an envelope in our respective hands. We found a twenty-dollar bill in each of them.

"Hurrah for Uncle Wheeler!" said Rod. "He's a brick!"

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Illustration has been enhanced to be more legible.

[The end of *Our Uncle Wheeler* by L. M. (Lucy Maud) Montgomery]