

My Childhood Hero

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DURING MY CHILDHOOD I had several heroes and heroines whom I would worship for a short time and then drop in favor of another one. These heroes were usually movie stars, sometimes school teachers, and occasionally a character from a favorite book. But my favorite one of all was a relative: my uncle, a Methodist minister.

The thing I remember most vividly about him is his sense of humor. Knowing so few ministers at close range, I stood a little in awe of him at first. Then, during the summer of my ninth birthday, my sister and I went to the Rivervale Youth Camp, where Uncle Henry was acting as director. We ate our meals there at long, oil-cloth-covered tables, with about twelve of us on each side. This arrangement led to what became the favorite camp trick. The person seated at the end of the table would turn up the oilcloth cover, making a sort of gutter of it; and when no one was looking he would pour into it his water glass, and the water would go splashing merrily down toward the other end of the table. The unwatchful person who failed to hold up his edge of the cloth as the water went past would suddenly find himself with a lapful of water. Although there were no hard feelings, I kept expecting Uncle Henry to put a stop to it. He did not, however, and I found out later that the whole thing was his idea.

It was not until I grew older that I began to realize how much he knew about other things as well as playing tricks and telling jokes. He was an accomplished linguist: as well as his smattering of French and Italian, he could converse quite fluently in German, and he could read and write Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and Sanskrit. He took great delight in teaching my sister and me the foreign words for familiar objects, almost before we could pronounce their English equivalents. And by the time we were five or six years old, we could sing two verses of "Adeste Fidelis" in Latin, "Silent Night" in German, and several German and French folk songs in their original dialects.

My uncle wrote, too. My favorite of his literary efforts was a story he wrote for my sister and me, about two children who lived on a farm. He also wrote a Boy Scout manual called *Chicago Aids in Scouting*, and he wrote a chapter for a book entitled *The Rural Church*. The last two pieces I did not know about until recently, but the one he wrote for my sister and me is still enjoyed by the younger members of the family.

One incident I loved to hear him tell happened a short time after he had graduated from Northwestern University, and had begun his life as a minister at a small church in Chicago's Italian district. One day he had to send a tough, unruly boy from the church playground for annoying the younger children. Less than half an hour later the boy returned with his father and a horde of relatives. His father was carrying a gun. Very calmly my uncle started toward him, talking to him. The man fired once, and missed. A lifetime later, as Uncle Henry put it, he reached the man and wrested the gun away from him through sheer force. Then, with his meager Italian vocabulary he tried to tell the man why he had sent the boy away. The man went home, apparently only half convinced. He returned the next day—with an armload of new footballs, baseballs, bats, and catchers' mitts, "for the boys," and a stumbling apology for having caused so much trouble.

When I was twelve years old my uncle came to Indianapolis to preach. I joined his church and began attending the youth meetings there. Then I had another surprise. All the young people there called him "Uncle Henry" instead of the more proper "Reverend." Sometimes he pretended to grumble about the lack of respect of the younger generation, but knowing my uncle as I do, I am sure he would not have had it any other way.