

A Taste of Medicine

Young Jimmy often heard his grandfather say things like “Oh, my rheumatics; I must have a taste of medicine” or “That’s a nasty cough I’ve got! I need a taste of medicine” or “My twinges are playing up; I’d better have a taste of medicine” and so on.

“What is your medicine?” asked Jimmy one day.

“*Uisge beatha*,” said his grandfather, “the water of life; that’s what it is.”

Jimmy wondered if it was that his grandfather was particularly unhealthy and needed to keep taking medicine or whether he was being sensible and concerned for his health. He asked his grandmother about it.

“Him and his medicine,” she scoffed. “He didn’t get that from any doctor!”

“Oh,” said Jimmy, “did he get it from a chemist?”

“A chemist!” exclaimed his grandmother. “You won’t get that in any chemist’s. It’s whisky. It comes from Scotland and you can buy it in the supermarket.”

“Whisky?” said Jimmy surprised. “Grandad said it was *uisge beatha*, the water of life.”

“*Uisge beatha*,” said his grandmother, “is Gaelic and it’s where the word ‘whisky’ comes from – leastways from the *uisge* bit. But water of life it is not; more like water of death, if you ask me. It’s no more a medicine than my cup of tea is; except my cup of tea will do you more good. That whisky will be the death of him. His sister’s no better either.”

“You mean great aunt Mabel?” said Jimmy.

“Yes, I do,” his grandmother replied.

Jimmy remembered when he visited his great aunt, she also used to say things like “Oh, my rheumatics; I must have a taste of medicine” or “My sinuses are playing up; I must have a taste of medicine” or “I feel a migraine coming on; I need a taste of medicine” and other similar times when she had needed a taste of medicine.

“Oh,” said Jimmy, “and her ‘medicine’ is whisky as well?”

“Oh no,” said grandmother, “with her it’s brandy which she claims is more refined and does you more good than whisky.”

“And does it?” asked young Jimmy.

“Of course not,” answered his grandmother. “It’s just as poisonous as whisky. It’ll be the death of her as well.”

Time passed. Jimmy grew older and so did his grandfather and great aunt Mabel; but in the case of Jimmy the changes were more noticeable. From time to time Jimmy thought about what his grandmother had said about his grandfather and his great aunt’s ‘taste of medicine.’ They were gradually getting older, he could see that, but their medicine had not caused their deaths. That, however, was soon to change.

The death of great aunt Mabel came first and in a spectacularly gruesome way. As she had got older she had put on weight and become less and less mobile. She lived alone and a neighbour, who used to do shopping and odd jobs for her and had a key in case of emergencies, became worried one day when he noticed that the milk had not been collected from her doorstep. When he

went to call there was no reply and he could sense that something was wrong. On going in, he found that her whole body had been incinerated apart from the feet and each leg below the knee. On a table by the partially burned out armchair in which he saw her ashen remains, there was an upturned brandy bottle, cracked presumably by the heat of the fire when the brandy had burned.

The neighbour was completely shocked; but when he had recovered he immediately contacted the police. The room was sealed off and a forensic team did their work. Foul play was ruled out and the police forensic officers decided that the incineration of aunt Mabel was due to the wick effect, caused when burning brandy had come into contact with her clothing. It was not entirely clear, however, how the brandy had come to be burning but the most likely cause seemed to be a fault in the small table lamp, now damaged by the fire.

Jimmy, now in his twenties, was not surprised by the brandy burning as he knew how flammable it was from the times he had seen it lit on Christmas puddings each year; but he was surprised by the way his great aunt had burnt. On looking on Google, however, he found that such deaths, though rare, were not unknown: the deaths, for example, of 88-year-old Margaret Hogan of Prussia Street in Dublin in 1970, of 73-year-old Henry Thomas in the Rassau Estate in Ebbw Vale in 1980, and of 78-year-old Michael Faherty in County Galway in 2010. He wondered if she had had her last taste of medicine before she had burnt; her shattered brandy glass had been found on the floor near the partially burnt armchair.

His grandfather did not live alone and was unlikely to suffer the same fate. But he did notice when he visited his grandparents, that his grandfather was gradually getting more confused.

“It’s that so-called medicine of his,” said his grandmother; “it’s making his brain go soft. I always knew it’d do him no good. Look what happened to his sister.”

Jimmy noticed his grandfather was using a walking stick quite a bit; he assumed this was just because of ageing. He did not realize at the time that it was because his grandfather was getting giddy spells and would fall over if did not have the stick to steady himself before, of course, he resorted to a ‘taste of medicine’. One day, his grandmother rang him to tell him that his grandfather had been taken to hospital after a nasty fall.

Jimmy was sorry to hear about that but assumed his grandfather would be looked after and would recover from a fall. However, his grandfather did not come out of the hospital alive. The shock had been too great and he had not responded to the *real* medicine they had tried to give him. Because his death could not be explained simply as the result of a fall and shock, there was an autopsy. It was found that his brain had significant lesions, his liver was severely cirrhotic and the health of other internal organs was seriously impaired. There was little doubt that much of this had been caused by his continued and frequent consumption over many years of whisky, his favourite and, indeed, only ‘medicine.’

Jimmy was sorry that his grandfather had gone. Although Jimmy was not adverse to the odd tot of rum or whisky now and again, he resolved it would be only now and again and *never* as medicines. If he ever had to have a taste of medicine, it would be only of medicine prescribed by a doctor.