

A Llanrwst Christmas Not Worth Dying For

Caroline's Story

It is Christmas Day 1937. I had on a grey skirt, brown blouse. They were actually children's clothes, me being so small, just 4ft 1in. I'd got them in a jumble sale as there was no way I could afford new clothes. My hair was still dark though - that came from my gypsy roots. Bill, on the other hand, was big-built and over 6ft tall, so we made a strange pair walking along. I am 48 now and Bill is 68, so a bit of an age difference, but still!

Bill isn't a gypsy but we have moved around quite a bit and have been in Llanrwst for some time now. We have seven children between us, the last two being twins. Oh, we have our rows, and they can be hum-dingers – what married couple doesn't? He gets in a right mood sometimes, especially when he's had a few but, apart from that, he is

normally quite affectionate, and I still love him, after all of the years and through everything we have been through.



Bill and I left home together. “Can you give me some money, I haven’t a coin to my name.”

“Yes, Bill, I’ve got a 10s note, but we’ll need to change that somewhere so I can have a drink too.” We both went into a public house, and I gave him a shilling out of the ten. When we came out, I went to one public house and he to another.

“I’ll be making my way home for 2.30pm so see that you do the same. I’ll see what I can scrape together to eat.”

I went to the New Inn where my sister, Emily, came to find me. “Oh, I’ve found you at last. Come on Caroline, Bob’s waiting for us at the Penybryn Hotel.”

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So, we met up with Robert Lovell and had a few drinks there. While Emily was at the bar, Robert and I talked. The bar was crowded, so she would have a wait getting served.

“You’re the one I should have married, Caroline. I’ve always loved you. Don’t know what you’re doing with that good-for-nothing William.” William didn’t want to hold her hand in case Emily looked back, but he was caressing her feet under the table.

“Look you, Robert, we might have had a fling or two in the past, but that’s all over and done with years ago, can’t you let it be. I’m happy and you’ve got Emily and two sons, so give over with all the smarmy talk.”

“You’re not happy, Caroline. Everyone has heard the constant rows. You can hear you two cackling halfway down the street. You weren’t saying ‘No’ a couple of years

ago, come on, I haven't had a bit of you for ages, probably around the time you fell pregnant with the twins. I'm still not sure if they're mine or not, or how many of your other children!"

"Yes, you got me drunk. I didn't know what I was doing, you bugger."

"Many a time. Ah, but I've got the gypsy in my soul, a real Romany, just like you - I like to go roaming...." He said as he moved his calf, further up her leg.

"Get off." Caroline moved her legs away.

Just then Emily returned with the drinks.

"Oh there's such a heave at the bar, thought I'd never get back..... anyway, it's Christmas again. I remember just after last Christmas, all that fuss with Bill."

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“Oh, I don’t want to be reminded. It was all just a tiff that turned into nothing much” Caroline replied.

“Nothing much, but the police were called. If I remember correctly, it was 12th January, the beginning of this year. Bill, calling himself by his nickname Bill Buckley went into the Red Lion Inn here with a wound at the back of his neck.” Robert said.

“Yes, he called himself that, as that’s where he came from, Buckley, but don’t bring this up again, please.”

Robert continued, unheeded, “He was bleeding profusely and the boys took him under the tap to wash it. He said that his wife had done it – that’s you, Caroline! David Jones of Watling Street, if I recall correctly, was one of the boys who washed it. So, what’s the truth?”

“I’m saying nothing. He made it up. It wasn’t me. He was just angry at me and getting his own back.”

“Ah, but we’ve seen you waving your carving knife around at him before, during your heated squabbles, you can’t deny that!” Emily added.

“Yes, but I wouldn’t hurt him. I wouldn’t do anything like that. Anyway, Bob, you’ve had a few scrapes in your life, a few stories to tell. I’m sure Emily’s heard them all. Actually, you’ve got yourself in some tight spots too, Emily.” Caroline said, trying to draw the conversation away from her.

“Well, it goes with the territory, Caroline, as you well know. We’ve got to defend ourselves. I’m not putting up with any nonsense,” Emily answered.

“Anyone want another beer?”

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We all agreed, so Robert went to the bar.

Emily continued, “I’m glad Bob has gone to the bar as this concerns his family. Yes, there was that time I was hauled up in court for assault. That stupid cow, Harriet Owen, married to William Owen, who was serving with the forces. She’s actually a Lovell, before she married William Owen. She argued that I was only a Lovell by marriage. Well, I had to tell her what for. Anyway, she just riled me so much that I started berating the Lovell family, and before we knew it, we were calling each other such names. Well, I’d had enough, and I struck the little German a clout across the face and followed this up by throwing her on the ground, where we got into a right hair-pulling and scratching scuffle.”

“Good for you,” Caroline piped up.

“Of course, the police were called, and her sister-in-law, Jane Lovell, acted as witness. I stood my ground and declared it was false evidence. I said it was she who had violently assaulted me. I showed them my right arm, which was badly bruised all over. Anyway, they had their witness, so I was fined £5 and bound over to keep the peace.

“Wasn’t there another time you were fined, Emily.” Said Caroline.

“Oh, that was for using indecent language. PC Rogers stated that he was passing a door, which was wide open, and heard me having a right to-do with this woman, which he said could be plainly heard out in the street. I mean, can’t a person have an argument with another in their own home, without the police sticking their noses in? Yes, I got fined 7s 6d for that.

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“I was done over for indecent language too: If I can remember right, it was 18th December 1925 – I was fined 5s. Oh, and before that, on 30 June 1925, I was fined 10s. Then there was another case, on 8 October 1928, when I was bound over for £5 for two years for receiving 37lbs of horse hair.”

“Well, us gypsies have got to make a living somehow, but that’s a lot of money, Caroline. How in hell did you raise it?”

Just then, Bob came back, expertly holding three beers.

“We’re not letting you off the hook, Bob.” Caroline stated, “I’m sure you’ve got a story or two to tell.”

“Well, nothing much. There was that incident, on 20th August 1949. I was called up at the Petty Session, for being drunk and disorderly.”

“What’s new there?” Caroline interrupted, “We all need to let our hair down a bit, have a bit of fun.”

Bob continued, “I was charged with a Mr G Griffiths. We were caught fighting at Castle Square, in Conway, at 9.50 at night. Deputy Chief Constable Williams saw us, Griffith’s was stripped to the waist. PC Williams said we should have been in camp, but Griffith’s behaviour had been so bad, that he’d been dismissed. I didn’t start it, it was just that Griffith’s was out to pick a fight with anyone. He was fined 20s and I was fined 10s. I vowed there and then not to appear in court ever again.

Of course, there was that time when I was just a lad. It was in 1882. I had been living in Carnarvon but had lately moved to Festiniog. Well, I was only a young lad, and I’d gone fishing. I didn’t know it was wrong, but I was found with salmon fry in my possession.”

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“But, all lads go fishing, there’s nothing wrong with a bit of poaching, surely, if you can get away with it?” Emily said.

“Ah, but not salmon fry so it seems. It seems that immature salmon are protected, and anglers are required to release any young salmon back into the water, unharmed. Anyway, I promised I wouldn’t offend again, and Mr R J Davids, on behalf of the river conservators, applied to the magistrates that I might be discharged on paying costs. I was so pleased to get off and thanked them for their leniency extended towards me.”

“Well, you know how to grovel when you need to, Bob!”
Caroline added.

“Well, I was only young then. I learnt not to get caught now.”

Just then the closing time bell rang in the pub. “Time to go home, folks.” The landlord shouted out.

“Oh, well, time to go home. Are you coming to ours for dinner Caroline. You look like you need a bit of feeding up? Bob said.

“No, I’ve arranged to meet up with Bill, thanks anyway.”

Emily was walking in front and Bob, blew Caroline a kiss and patted her backside, “See if you can get away from Bill.”

“Ger off you old scoundrel. I’ll do nothing of the sort. Leave me be.

We walked up Denbigh Street and we parted at the Institute. I went up Plough Street into Scotland Street.

That’s when I saw Bill, limping up behind me. He was with a crowd of others, friends and family, all singing carols.

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They had been to the Albion and were making their way home, all very drunk. It was very chilly - the sky was white as if there was snow in the air, but no-one seemed to care as the drink was warding off the cold.

“Come on everyone,” William shouted out, hobbling along, trying desperately to keep up with the others. “Let’s have a sing-song.” He started off in his deep, resonating voice, “Hark the herald angels sing, glory to the newborn king,” and the others picked up the carol, harmonising in unison, each voice complementing the other, with female voices adding the descant as the final verse rang out in the street. Even though they were all quite inebriated, they could still hold a note. Others they were passing in the street joined in the fun. If there’s anything the Welsh are good at, it’s singing, and it sounded beautiful.

The merriment continued as each went to their own homes. I was the first to enter the house, and my Bill followed behind me. Bill was roaring drunk and I had had had a few. He was singing, Good King Wenseslas. I pulled off my coat and put on my black pinafore with coloured top. Bill started slobbering all over me saying to give him a cwutch (cuddle). “Get off, Bill. I can’t bear you when you’re slobbering drunk,” and pushed him away. Then, of course, he starts to argue. “Look you, I’m in too good a mood to let this jolly time go to waste, so, get out the melodion and we’ll have a sing-song of carols. So, I retrieved the melodion from the side of my armchair and started playing, taking up from where William had left off with Good King Wenceslas.

William had sat down on the bed-chair.

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Just then, Adolphus Lovell, Robert Lovell's 14-year-old son, came in, "Can I have the melodeon back, Aunt Caroline?"

"But you lent it to us, and we're playing it. Surely you can wait a bit longer, then we'll get it back to you." I said.

He went off in a bit of huff.

Soon after we got in, just after 2.30pm George, our fourth son, popped his head in.

"Merry Christmas mum and dad.", He was with his younger brother, Henry, and George Lovell (Robert and Emily's son). So, George and Robert George Lovell were cousins. There wasn't much really for them there and, in any case, they wanted their Christmas dinner. Henry still lived with us as he was only 17, but he wanted to be out with the lads, so left with them.

They only stayed for about 5-10 minutes, then all three made their way down the entry towards George's own house at 1 Capel Curig Terrace. His house backed onto ours. They could get through the back door or an alley way that led through a shop. George went first, and then Henry and Robert George followed shortly afterwards.

"I fancy a cup of tea, could you fill up the kettle for me please, Bill. I'll make us a pork sandwich."

Bill hobbled out to the outside tap, situated over the road in Scotland Street. He had been a miner, and you could always recognise his walk, as he had a limp, following a mining accident, which had permanently crippled him.

....So, that left us on our own and I started to make the sandwich. That's all we had for Christmas dinner. Bill was just a hawker now, after his accident at the mine, making

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basketware and selling them around the neighbouring villages and towns. But that didn't bring in much money and I had our 4-year-old twins to look after, not that I could do anything much because of the state of my hands – neuralgia, the doctor said. So, just a couple of beers was our Christmas celebration, after going to the chapel in the morning. We didn't even have any decorations up. That really wasn't a thing in Llanrwst.

Bill came hobbling back again with the water. “Oh that Hannah Roberts has her beady eye out again, spying out. I ignored her, old busy-body..... Darn leg, It's really starting to hurt again.” The Christmas good mood had been broken.

“It must be the rheumatism brought on by the cold weather. I know what it's like, what with my hands and all.

“Oh, turn my pain to talkin' about you, won't you!. It's always got to be about you. You don't give a damn.”

“I do, Bill, you know I do, but let's not argue. Go on, sit down, rest your leg”. He then plonked himself down on the bed chair. I made a pot of tea, then sat in the armchair opposite. He started staring at me, with venom in his eyes. ‘I've seen oo, out with your old lover, Robert Lovell. Couldn't wait to get your feet under the table with him, eh.”

“Bill, I was out celebrating Christmas with him - and his wife – his wife, my sister, was there! What are you bringing all this up for? You always do this. He means nothing to me, not in that way anyway and look you, we've brought up a great family together. Robert has his own family. Anyway, keep your voice down, you know the neighbours can hear everything through these thin walls.

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Bill gave a few huffs, but then started again, but in a lowered voice, ‘Yes, but I’m old, past it, crippled, and can’t work, whereas he’s still fighting fit still and has a good job, so go to him, see how I care’.

“But Bill, I love you. Where has all this jealousy come from? Fed up I am with all this.” I just looked down and started crying.

‘Oh, boo hoo, you old faggot. Cry your eyes out - I’m not listening. It’s Christmas and there’s no meal for me, there’s nothing in the cupboard apart from a stale piece of bread and some lousy scraps. Everyone else is tucking into their Christmas meals, and what have I got, nothing.’

“I can’t help that, Bill, you give me nothing, and I can’t work ‘cos of my hands. I’ve got nothing to eat either.

“Grr, self, self, self. You’re nothing but a fetid old has been, a foul piece of shite. You can’t even make a sandwich properly. How much time does it take to make a lousy sandwich? A person could starve waiting for you. Well, spoil my Christmas will you? Well I’m gonna spoil yours now. You’ll feel my belt twp (stupid).”

I just couldn’t handle him in this mood, when he was full of drink. I loved him, and he could be so nice other times, but he’d upset me so much, I needed to get away from him now, so I think I ran out the front. I was so upset - and just mooched around a bit to calm down.