

## FOR CHILDREN OF ALL AGES

MARY FORD

*Willie the Squowse*, Ted Allan. Illus. Quentin Blake. McClelland and Stewart, 1977. 57 pp. \$5.95 hardcover.

In 1973, Canadian playwright Ted Allan's story "Willie the Squowse" won the *London Times* children's story competition and was subsequently printed in the *Times' Saturday Review* (1973) and the *Times' Anthology of Children's Stories* (1974). It has now been published in book form with illustrations by Quentin Blake. Unlike the hero of E.B. White's classic, *Stuart Little*, whose oddity of birth propels him into an alien world in a lonely search for selfhood, the hero of Allan's story, like Stuart a freak of nature, nonetheless is the instrument of luck and happiness to the humans with whom he comes in contact.

Willie is a squowse — that is, the product of a union between a squirrel and a mouse — and he is fortunate, as the author tells us, to have "the best features of both parents". He is intelligent and talented; he can perform tricks on the trapeze and hum *Alouette* while dancing a jig. In fact, he is so good that his friend and agent, Joe, is eager to get him into show business, but alas, he is told that the antics of the squowse are not "box office". While his future is being discussed Willie gets lost in the maze of pipes and sticks and lattices between two joined houses, is struck by falling plaster and rendered unconscious, while his friend, believing him to have fled, leaves the house in pursuit of a dancing elephant act. Left on his own, Willie takes up residence between the two houses, and thus begins a most unusual tale of benevolence by innocence.

The Pickerings, a lovable old couple who live on one side of the double house and who worry a great deal, suddenly come into some wealth in the form of stock dividends amounting to two hundred pounds a week. Unable to use such abundance, but nonetheless comforted by its solid presence, they tuck it away in a hole in the kitchen wall. Meanwhile, on the other side of the partition in the house vacated by Willie's friend Joe, and living a squalid existence with their six children, are Mr. and Mrs. Smith. One day, Mrs. Smith, determined to catch poor Willie whom she has seen briefly, lays a cheese trap, and Willie, in order to protect himself from the intoxicating aroma, stuffs the wall on that side of the house with a neat ten pound note. Mrs. Smith, given to superstition, accepts the money as "manna from heaven", and she regards the act of presenting the cheese at the hole and her position on a rickety chair as the magical ingredients responsible for such largesse.

The Smiths grow rich and socially prominent on the Pickerings' money. Willie leads a somewhat frantic existence between the two houses, daily stuffing

the Smiths' hole with the Pickering ten pound notes — "Twice a day, no more, no less". Finally, after five years it comes to an end. The money runs out, the aged Pickerings die secure and content, the Smiths move away, and Willie, taking his trapeze and his window blind (a crisp ten pound note) sets out in search of a new life. He meets his old pal, Joe, there is a joyful reunion and the two join forces once again and live happily ever after.

The story itself is intriguing, but the social comment, filtered through the dramatic-comic episodes in Willie's life, is devastating. The author pokes fun at the fussy stolidity of the middle class, he belittles the pretensions of the *nouveau riche*, he points up the abuses of alcohol and the trivial pastimes of the idle rich. He has a word about the joy of young love, the benefits of education and the endurance of friendship. His characters, through luck or guile, achieve a certain happiness in the end: the Pickerings see their only son happily married to the Smiths' daughter before they die together; Mr. Smith, somewhat mellowed by his wealth, is elected to Parliament (we wonder what that says about election to high office?) and Joe, by his reunion with the venerable beneficent squowse, discovers the "meaning of love".

The book is amusingly satirical. The drawings by Quentin Blake enhance the Allan story by providing their own satiric comment. In the hands of artist Blake we see wealth transform Mr. Smith from a sloppy drunk into a gesturing double-breasted politician, cigar in hand, decanter at his elbow, who, Allan tells us, hiccups when he speaks. Mrs. Smith undergoes a dramatic change from a frowzy housewife bent over the ironing board to a full-corseted matron sitting "elegantly" astride a horse, "something people in the big cities often do when they get rich." Only Willie does not change although he has been the instrument of change in the book. He remains from beginning to end the handsome, endearing, bushytailed squowse whose innocent action transforms the lives of the human beings who populate his world. Ted Allan's style is light and fluid, the tone is humorous, but with a gently biting edge. The book is attractive and not too expensive in hard cover at \$5.95. Good reading for any age — fun and adventure for the young, humour and social comment for the mature.

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