

A Half-Pint of Old Darling

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PTOLEMY PROUDFOOT and Miss Minnie did not often take a lively interest in politics. They were Democrats, like virtually everybody else in the vicinity of Cotman Ridge and Goforth. They had been born Democrats, had never been anything but Democrats, and had never thought of being anything but Democrats. To them, being Democrats was much the same sort of thing as being vertebrates; it was not a matter of lively interest. Their daily lives were full of matters that were in the most literal sense lively: gardens and crops and livestock, kitchen and smokehouse and cellar, shed and barn and pen, plantings and births and harvests, washing and ironing and cooking and canning and cleaning, feeding and milking, patching and mending. That their life was surrounded by great public issues they knew and considered, and yet found a little strange.

The year 1920, however, was one of unusually lively political interest, especially for Miss Minnie. In January of that year, the constitutional amendment forbidding “the manufacture, sale, or transportation of intoxicating liquors” went into effect. And in August the women’s suffrage amendment was ratified. Miss Minnie did not approve of drinking intoxicating liquors, which she believed often led to habitual drunkenness. And she certainly did believe that women ought to have the vote.

Tol, for his part, enjoyed a bottle of beer occasionally, and occasionally he had been known to enjoy a good drink of somebody else’s whiskey—whether homemade or bottled in bond he did not particularly care, so long as it was good. He liked whiskey of a quality to cure a sore throat, not cause one. This was not something that Miss Minnie knew or that Tol had ever considered telling her. It was not something she had ever had any occasion—or, so far as he knew, any need—to know. Liquor also was something that he could easily go without. If the country chose not to drink, then he could comfortably endure the deprivation as long as the country could.

And so very little was said between them on the subject of the Prohibition amendment. Miss Minnie belonged to the

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Woman's Christian Temperance Union, and supported the amendment, and that was all right with Tol, and that was that.

On the question of the suffrage amendment, Tol's conclusion was that if he had the vote, and if (as he believed) Miss Minnie was smarter than he was, then Miss Minnie should have the vote. Miss Minnie (who did not think she was smarter than Tol, and did not wish to be) said that though Tol had not accurately weighed all the evidence, his reasoning was perfect.

"The vote," said Tol, "means that us onlookers and bystanders get to have a little bit of say-so."

"And I want my little bit," Miss Minnie said.

"So it's out with the whiskey and in with the women," Tol said.

Miss Minnie let him have a smile then, for she loved his wit, but she said that by and large she thought that was the way it would have to be, for women hated liquor because of all they'd had to suffer from drunken men. She had seen some of her own students grow up to be worthless drunkards.

Tol said that she was right there, and he knew it. By and large, he was content to believe as she believed. She had been a schoolteacher and knew books, and he looked up to her.

To say that Tol looked up to Miss Minnie is to use a figure of speech, for Tol was an unusually big man and Miss Minnie an unusually small woman. And so at the moment when he was in spirit looking up to her, he was in the flesh beaming down upon her from beneath a swatch of hair that projected above his brows like a porch roof.

It was still dark on a morning in the middle of November. Tol had done his chores while Miss Minnie fixed breakfast; they had eaten and, having completed their conversation, had stood up from the table. Tol's hair, which he had wetted and combed when he washed his face, had reverted to its habit of sticking out this way and that. This condition had been aggravated by Tol's habit of scratching under his cap from time to time without taking it off. To an impartial observer Tol might have looked a little funny, as though he had put a pile of jackstraws on his head.

Miss Minnie, however, was not an impartial observer. To her he looked comfortable. To her he was shelter and warmth.

When he smiled down at her that way, it was to her as though the sun itself had looked kindly at her through the foliage of a tall tree.

It was a Saturday morning. That day they were going to make one of their twice- or thrice-yearly trips to Hargrave, the county seat, ten miles down the river from Port William.

Tol said he had a few odds and ends to do at the barn before he harnessed Redbird. And Miss Minnie said that would be fine, for she had to finish up in the house and ought to be ready by the time he would be.

Tol said, well, he thought they needn't be in a big hurry, for it was a little nippy out, and maybe they should give it a chance to warm up. And Miss Minnie said, yes, that was fine.

And so in the slowly strengthening gray November daylight Tol set things to rights around the barn, the way he liked to do on Saturday, and brought Redbird out of his stall and curried and brushed and harnessed him, and left him tied in the driveway of the barn. Tol pulled the buggy out of its shed then and went back to the house. He shaved at the washstand by the kitchen door and put on the fresh clothes that Miss Minnie had laid out for him.

Miss Minnie had the gift of neatness. Her house was neat, and she was neat herself. Even in her everyday dresses she always looked as if she were expecting company. This in addition to her fineness of mind and character made her, Tol thought, a person of quality. Tol loved the word *quality* much as he loved the words of horse anatomy such as *pastern*, *stifle*, and *hock*. He liked it when a buyer said to him of his crop or a load of lambs or steers, "Well, Mr. Proudfoot, I see you've come with quality again this year." And when he thought about what a fine woman Miss Minnie was, with her neat ways and her book learning and her correct grammar, he enjoyed saying to himself, "She's got quality."

Tol was like Miss Minnie in his love of neatness, and his farm was neatly kept. His barn was as neat in its way as Miss Minnie's house. But Tol was not a neat person. He was both too big, I assume, and too forgetful of himself to look neat in his clothes. The only time Tol's clothes looked good was before he put them on. In putting them on, he forgot about them and began, without the slightest malice toward them, to

subject them to various forms of abuse. When he had got them on that morning, Miss Minnie came in and went over them, straightening his shirtfront, buttoning his cuffs, tucking in his pocket handkerchief and the end of his belt. She pecked over his clothes with concentrated haste, like a banty hen pecking over a barn floor, as if Tol were not occupying them at all, Tol meanwhile ignoring her as he transferred his pocket stuff from his discarded pants and put on his cap and coat.

"Now you look all nice," she said.

And Tol said, "You look mighty nice, too, little lady." That was his endearment, and she gave him a pat.

The sun had come up behind clouds, and from the looks of the sky it would be cloudy all day.

"Is it going to rain?" Miss Minnie said.

"I doubt it," Tol said. "May snow along about evening, from the looks of things and the feel of that wind."

They went together to where the buggy stood. Tol brought Redbird from the barn and put him between the shafts, handed Miss Minnie up into the buggy, and got in himself, the buggy tilting somewhat to his side as his weight bore on the springs, so that it was natural for Miss Minnie to sit close to him. Sitting close to him was not something she ever minded, but on that morning it was particularly gratifying, for the wind, as Tol said, was "a little blue around the edges." They snugged the lap robe around them and drove out onto the road.

For a while they did not talk. Redbird was a young horse in those days, Tol having hitched him for the first time only that spring, and he was feeling good. The sharp air made him edgy. He was startled by the steam clouds of his breath, and he enjoyed the notion that he was in danger of being run over by the buggy rolling behind him.

"Cutting up like a new pair of scissors, ain't he?" Tol said. "Whoa, my little Redbird! Whoa, my boy! Settle down, now!" Tol sang to the colt in a low, soothing voice. "You'll be thinking different thoughts by dark."

Redbird and his notions amused Tol. He gave him his head a little, letting him trot at some speed.

"He requires a steady hand, doesn't he?" Miss Minnie said, impressed as always by Tol's horsemanship.

"He's a little notional," Tol said. "He'll get over it."

Redbird abandoned his notions about halfway up the first long hill, and settled down to a steady jog. Tol could relax then, and he and Miss Minnie resumed their never-ending conversation about the things they saw along the road and the things those sights reminded them of, and this morning, too, they talked more from time to time about politics.

What brought the subject up now, as at breakfast, was that in this year of unusual political interest Latham Gallagher was running for the office of state representative. "The Gallagher boy," as Miss Minnie called him, had been sheriff and court clerk, and now he aspired to the seat of government in Frankfort. He was the son of an old friend of Miss Minnie's, and for that reason Miss Minnie thought him fine and handsome and an excellent orator. A month or so ago she and Tol had gone to hear him speak on the porch of the old hotel in Port William.

Tol thought that the Gallagher boy had already made far too much of some of his opportunities, and he did not like oratory made up of too many sentences beginning "My fellow Kentuckians," but he kept his opinions to himself. The boy, after all, was a Democrat, which meant that there was at least one worse thing he could have been.

Now and again as they drove along, Tol and Miss Minnie would see one of the Gallagher boy's posters attached to a tree or a telephone pole. "Gallagher for Representative," the posters said, "A Fair Shake for the Little Man."

"A Fair Shake for the Little Woman," said Tol Proudfoot, nudging Miss Minnie beneath the lap robe, and she nudged him back.

They went through Port William and on down the river road to Ellville and over the bridge into Hargrave, talking the whole way. It had been a busy fall; Tol had been out of the house from daylight to dark, and Miss Minnie had been equally preoccupied with her own work, preparing for winter. So it was pleasant to ride along behind the now-dutiful Redbird, in no particular hurry, and just visit, telling each other all they'd thought of and meant to say as soon as they found a chance.

When they got to Hargrave, they left Redbird at the livery stable where he could rest well and have some hay to eat and

a ration of grain while they went about their errands. At first they did a little shopping together, and carried their purchases back and stored them in the buggy. And then they went to the Broadfield Hotel to eat dinner. This was a place Tol particularly favored because they did not bring the meals out on individual plates to little separate tables, but instead the patrons sat together at long tables, and the food was set before them on heaped platters and in large bowls, and pans of hot biscuits and cornbread were passing around almost continuously, and pitchers of sweet milk and buttermilk and pots of coffee were always in reach, and when a person's plate began to look clean, there would be waiters coming around with various kinds of pie, and all of it was good. It was a place where a man like Tol could eat all he wanted without calling too much attention to himself—cooking for him, Miss Minnie had been heard to say, was like cooking for a hotel—and where also he could have his fill of conversation. Tol loved to eat and he loved to talk. The hotel dining room appealed to him because while he ate there he could expect to be in the company of some people he knew and of some he did not know, and in the course of a meal he would extract from all of them a great deal of information about themselves, their families, and their businesses or farms—also their opinions about the national and local economies, the market prospects for tobacco, cattle, sheep, and hogs, and any other opinions they might care to express. The meal characteristically would take an hour and a half or two hours, for Tol stretched to the limit the leisure and the pleasure of it. It was one of the main reasons for their trip to Hargrave, as Miss Minnie knew, though Tol never said so. He ate and talked and laughed and complimented the cooks and urged more food on his fellow guests just as if he were at home.

When the meal was over and they had lingered, talking, at the table for long enough, Tol and Miss Minnie strolled out onto the hotel porch, from which they could see the broad Ohio River flowing past and the mouth of their own smaller river opening into it. The ferry that connected Hargrave with the nearby towns in Indiana pulled away from the dock while they watched.

And then Miss Minnie, who wanted to buy Tol's Christmas

present, a little awkwardly presented the falsehood that she had "a few little errands" and would meet him at the livery stable in an hour and a half. Her business would not require that long, but she knew that Tol, wherever he went, would get to talking and would be that long at least. Tol, who wished to do some private shopping of his own, agreed, and they parted.

Tol first returned to a dry goods store that he and Miss Minnie had visited together that morning. He had heard her say to a clerk of a certain bolt of cloth, intending perhaps that he should overhear, "Now *that's* pretty." He bought her enough of the cloth to make a dress. And then, because it took so little cloth to make a dress for Miss Minnie, he went to another store and bought her a pretty comb that caught his eye, and also—what he had never done before—he bought a bottle of perfume, which lasted for years and years because, as Miss Minnie said, it smelled so wonderful that she used it seldom and only the teensiest bit at a time. He stuck these things into various pockets to be smuggled home, talked with the clerk until another customer came in, and went back out to the street.

The thought struck him then that he might not get back to Hargrave before his ewes started to lamb, and he was out of whiskey. Tol always liked to keep a little whiskey on hand during lambing. Some sheepmen would say that if you had a weak lamb and a bottle of whiskey, it paid better to knock the lamb in the head and drink the whiskey yourself. But Tol believed that "a drop or two," on a bitter night, would sometimes encourage a little heart to continue beating—as, despite his religion and Miss Minnie, he believed it had sometimes encouraged bigger ones to do.

And so, without giving the matter much thought, he went to the drugstore where he was used to buying the occasional half-pint that he needed. And then, as he entered the door, he thought, "Prohibition!" And then he thought, "Well, no harm in trying."

So he went up to the druggist, whom he knew, who was leaning against a wall of shelves behind the counter in the back.

"I don't reckon you could let me have half a pint of whiskey," Tol said to him in a low voice.

"Medicinal?" the druggist asked.

“Medicinal,” Tol said, nodding.

The druggist handed him a half-pint bottle, and Tol stuck it into his pocket and paid. It was a local brand known as Old Darling—a leftover, Tol supposed.

The druggist, also a conversationalist, said, “Somebody a little under the weather?”

“No,” Tol said. “Lambs. I like to have a little on hand when I’m lambing.”

There followed an exchange of some length in which Tol and the druggist told each other a number of things that both of them already knew.

When he was back at the livery stable, hitching Redbird to the buggy, Tol remembered the bottle and tossed it onto the floor of the buggy box under the seat, thinking not much about it one way or another.

Redbird, well rested and fed and now going in his favorite direction, required a good bit of attention at first. They were across the bridge and well out into the country again before he settled down. When he settled down, Tol settled down, too, and so did Miss Minnie. The interests and pleasures of the town were all behind them, the trip had fulfilled its purposes, and now they had ahead of them only the long drive home and their evening chores, which would seem a little strange after their day in town. Tol drove with his eye on Redbird and the road ahead, humming to himself in a grunty, tuneless way that meant, Miss Minnie knew, that he had gone way off among his thoughts and no longer knew she was there. “Mr. Proudfoot,” she had actually said to him once, “when you are thinking you might as well be asleep.”

That made him laugh, for he enjoyed a good joke on himself. But it was true. Sometimes, in his thoughts, he departed from where he was.

Tol and Miss Minnie had been married for twelve years. In that time they had found how secret their lives had been before. They had made many small discoveries that were sometimes exciting, sometimes not. One of the best had been Tol’s discovery that Miss Minnie could whistle.

Though he had known a whistling woman or two in his time, he had always known also the proverb holding that

*These will come to no good end:
A whistling woman and a crowing hen,*

and he assumed that Miss Minnie, who had quality, would be the last woman on earth to whistle. Imagine his surprise, then, not long after they were married, when he was going by the house one morning and overheard Miss Minnie rattling the breakfast dishes and whistling "Old Joe Clark" as prettily and effortlessly as a songbird.

That night after supper, when they were sitting together by the fire, he said to her, "Go ahead. Whistle. I know you can do it. I heard you."

So she whistled for him—"Soldier's Joy" this time. It was a secret revelation. It made them so gleeful she could hardly control her pucker.

And now I am going to tell about the more famous revelation by which Miss Minnie learned Tol's method of reviving a weak lamb.

Tol had been humming and thinking only a little while when Miss Minnie needed to blow her nose. Her handkerchief was in her purse, which she had set behind her heels under the seat of the buggy. She fished under the lap robe with her hand to bring it up and so encountered the cold hard shape of Tol's half-pint bottle of Old Darling. It was a shape that, as an avid student of the problem of drunkenness, she knew very well. Thereupon a suspicion flew into her mind—as sudden and dark as a bat this suspicion was, and as hard to ignore in such close quarters.

She felt the bottle again to make sure, and then stealthily drew it up to the light on the side opposite Tol, and looked at it. At the sight of it, she could have wept and cried out with anger and with bitter, bitter disappointment. The label carried the seductive name of Old Darling, and it declared shamelessly that the bottle contained whiskey, ninety proof. That the amber liquid inside the bottle was actually rather beautiful to the eye did not surprise her, for she knew that the devil made sin attractive.

She almost flung the bottle into the roadside weeds right there and then, but two thoughts prevented her. First, she imagined that if the bottle did not hit a rock and break, then

some innocent boy or young man might come along and find it and be tempted to drink the whiskey, and that would not do. Second—and perhaps this thought was not even second, for her mind was working fast—she remembered that whiskey was an expensive product. When she thought, “It would be a shame to waste it,” she meant of course the money that Tol had spent for the whiskey, not the whiskey itself.

But she did think, “It would be a shame to waste it,” and the thought put her in a quandary. For if she did not want to throw the whiskey away, neither did she want to put it back under the seat to be carried home and drunk by her wayward husband, from the mystery of whose being this bottle had emerged.

And now Miss Minnie’s mind revolved in a curious metamorphosis from the great virtue of thriftiness to the much smaller virtue of romantic self-sacrifice. Her anger and disappointment at Tol as she now had discovered him to be only increased her love for him as she had thought him to be—and as he might, in fact, become, if only she could save him from his addiction to the evil drug that she at that moment held in her hand. For such a man as he *might* be, she felt, she would do anything. She had read much of loyalties given and sacrifices made by the wives of drinking men. In her love for Tol, she had at times already wished to be capable of some legendary fidelity or sacrifice to make her worthy of her happiness in him. And by how much now was this wish magnified by her thought of Tol fallen and redeemed! “Oh,” she thought, “I will do it! I will say to the world I did it without hesitation.” She shifted as she might have shifted if she had wanted to look at something interesting off to the right-hand side of the road.

She broke the paper seal and twisted out the cork. She put her nose carefully over the opening and sniffed the vile fumes. “*Awful!*” she thought. And the thought of its awfulness made her sacrifice more pleasing to her. She tilted the bottle and drew forth bravely half a mouthful and swallowed it.

It was fire itself in her throat. If she had looked quickly enough, she thought, she would have seen a short orange flame protruding from her nose. Though she sternly suppressed the impulse to cough, there was no refusing the tears that filled her eyes.

But then as the fiery swallow descended into her stomach, a

most pleasing warmth, a warmth at once calming and invigorating, began to radiate from it. For a few minutes she bestowed upon this warmth the meditation that it seemed to require, and then she tried another swallow, a more wholehearted one. The effect this time was less harsh, because less surprising, and the radiance even warmer and more reassuring than before. She felt strangely ennobled by the third, as if the rewards of her sacrifice were already accruing to her. The radiance within her had begun to gleam also in a sort of nimbus around her. If the devil made sin attractive, then she would have to admit that he had done a splendid job with Old Darling.

She sat half turned away from Tol, and leaning back so that she sat also a little behind him. He was still departed in his thoughts, no more aware of what she was doing than were the occupants of the occasional buggies and wagons that they met.

Miss Minnie sipped from time to time as they drove along, finding her sacrifice not nearly so difficult as she had expected. In fact, she was amazed at how quickly she was getting rid of the repulsive contents of the bottle. It occurred to her that perhaps she should drink more slowly, for soon there would be none left.

Suddenly she experienced a motion that recalled her to her school days when she had swung in swings and ridden on seesaws. But the likeness was only approximate, for Redbird, the buggy, the road, and indeed the whole landscape had just executed a motion not quite like any she had ever known.

“Whoo!” said Miss Minnie.

Tol had been humming along, figuring and refiguring how much he might get for his crop in view of the various speculations and surmises he had heard in town. When Miss Minnie said “Whoo!” it was news to him. “What?” he said.

“Do that again,” she said. “Oh! Whoo!”

He said, “What?”

“Old Darling,” she said. “Whoo!”

“Mam?” Tol Proudfoot said.

And then he saw the bottle in her hand. For a moment he thought he was going to laugh, and then he thought he wasn't. “Oh, Lordy!” he said. “Oh, Lordy Lord! Oh, Lordy!”

Now as they went around a curve in the road they met

another couple in a buggy. Miss Minnie leaned forward and called out to them momentarily the name of Gallagher. "A vote for Gallagher," she cried, "is a vote for the little man!"

"Come up, Redbird," said Tol Proudfoot.

But as luck would have it, speeding up only brought them more quickly face-to-face with the next buggy coming down the road.

"Gallagher!" cried Miss Minnie. "A fair shake for the little man is a fair shake for the little woman!"

"Miss Minnie," Tol said, "I believe you've had about all you need of that."

He held out his hand for the bottle, and was surprised to see, when she handed it to him, how little was left.

"Take it, then!" she said. "Drunkard!"

"Drunkard?" he said, and then put out his hand again to steady her, for she was attempting to stand up, the better to point her finger at him. "No, mam. I'm not no drunkard. You know better."

"Then *what*," Miss Minnie said, pointing to the incontrovertible evidence, "were you doing with *that*?"

"Lambs," Tol said.

"You get little lambs drunk," Miss Minnie declared. "Oh, my dear man, you are the limit."

"For when they're born on the cold nights," Tol said. "Sometimes it'll help the weak ones live."

"Ha!" said Miss Minnie.

Tol said no more. Miss Minnie spoke only to urge Gallagher upon the people they met—though, fortunately, they met only a few.

By the time they went through Port William, she had ceased to call out, but she was saying in a rather loud voice and to nobody in particular that though she was not sure, she was sure the Gallagher boy had never taken a drink in *his* life—and though she was not sure, she was sure that *he* at least understood that now that women had the vote, there would be no more liquor drinking in the land of the free and the home of the brave. Her voice quivered patriotically.

When they drove in beside the house at last, and Redbird gladly stopped in front of the buggy shed, Tol stepped down

and turned to help Miss Minnie, who stood, somewhat grandly spurning his offer, and fell directly into his arms.

Tol carried her to the house, helped her to remove her hat and coat and to lie down on the sofa in the living room. He covered her with the afghan, built up the fire, and returned to the barn to do his chores.

The house was dark when he came back in. Miss Minnie was lying quietly on the sofa with her forearm resting across her brow. Tol tiptoed in and sat down.

After a little while, Miss Minnie said, "Was it really just for the lambs?"

Tol said, "Yessum."

And then Miss Minnie's crying jag began. Regrets flew at her from all sides, and she wept and wept. Of all her sorrows the worst was for her suspicion of Tol. But she mourned also, for his sake and her own, the public display that she had made of herself. "I surely am the degradedest woman who ever lived," she said. "I have shamed myself, and most of all you."

Tol sat beside her for a long time in the dark, patting her with his big hand and saying, "Naw, now. Naw, now. You didn't do no such of a thing."

It was, as Miss Minnie would later say, a lovely time.

When at last she grew quiet and sleepy, Tol helped her to bed and waited beside her until her breath came in little snores. And then he went down to the kitchen and cooked himself a good big supper, for it had been a hard day.

This was, oddly, a tale that Miss Minnie enjoyed telling. "It was my only binge," she would say, giggling a little. And she liked especially to quote herself: "I surely am the degradedest woman who ever lived."

She said, "Mr. Proudfoot was horrified. But after it was over, he just had to rear back and laugh. Oh, he was a man of splendid qualities!"