

## A Young Woman Detective

---

Peddlers, like horse-jockeys, have a reputation for being tricky and for not remembering the golden rule. At least they are frequently accused of this, but as a tin-peddler of fifty-nine years' standing I deny the charge as applying to peddlers more than any other class of traders.

Not only do I deny it for myself, but for the majority of the men who are engaged in the business – not including, of course, the many self-styled “agents,” those hawkers of patented articles who are found in every State of the Union. But in defense of the old-fashioned tin-peddler, with horse and cart, I pick up the cudgels.

We were as honest as other men! And I wish I could say as much for all the women we have to deal with. Not that I intend to be disrespectful to the ladies, for I always enjoy trading with them. But during the last sixty years I have obtained some very queer glimpses of the workings of the feminine mind when it is intent upon making a bargain.

During the whole of my long career, I can truly say that I was never guilty of but one trick of which I am really ashamed; and in that I was outwitted by a young lady. She came within a hand's turn of sending me to jail. If I had been a handsome young fellow, the case might have been different, or it might not, I cannot say; but she was a young woman of good character, and she was acting in defense of a cause which she believed to be a just one. The story is against me, but I am going to tell it.

To begin with, I was not in my younger days a temperance man. I was born in the old Bay State before the temperance movement began. My folks, in common with all other families, always had liquor in the house; and when any of us were not feeling well, or were out in the cold and came home chilled, mother would prepare a little cup of “toddy” to warm us up and prevent our taking cold.

So I grew up in the belief that it was right to drink liquors now and then. None of our family were drunkards, though I must say that one of the boys came very near to being one. He saw the awful precipice just as he came to it, and stopping short, turned and escaped it. It isn't every one can do that, so don't go too near.

When I began peddling I carried a bottle of “West India” tucked away in my cart. I did not drink, as I have said, to excess, but used perhaps a quart in a month. That was about the kind of person I was then, as regards temperance.

From 1850 to 1858 my “round”—and by round I mean the route over which I sold my goods—lay through a portion of Southern New Hampshire and two of the western counties of Maine. I had not been trading in this section very long, when the Neal Dow temperance crusade began, and the “Maine law,” wholly prohibiting the sale of all intoxicating liquors, was enacted. That was a law, too, as many persons well remember,

which was supported by a strong and enthusiastic temperance party, and a law that had genuine vigor to enforce it.

Then came *dry* times in Maine. Not a drop of liquor could be had legally for love or money, and diligent search was made for all illicit sellers, and for drinkers, too. You may be sure there was moaning among the steady old toppers, and not a little discontent among the moderate drinkers.

I had a great many of both toppers and moderate drinkers among the people on my route. Often, with a wistful look, a man would beckon me aside. I knew what to expect. “Haven’t got a drop of *anything* in yer cart, have ye, Mr. K—?”

When I replied no, he would turn away in great sadness, or perhaps vigorously berate Neal Dow, or urge me to bring him a “quart” the next time I came from “over Hampshire way.”

I sympathized with these thirsty ones; I did not favor the “law,” or any sort of prohibitory law then. I looked upon prohibition as a fanatical raid on every man’s rights, and hence I had no compunctions in seeing the law evaded or broken.

But the man who broke the law did it at no small peril! The temperance people were alert and merciless. Everywhere the State swarmed with “Watchmen Clubs,” “Temperance Bands,” and vigilance committees. Not only gentlemen, but often ladies were on these committees. Some of the women, indeed, were among the most successful of the temperance police.

As I have said, I did not sympathize at all with this anti-rum crusade, and after a year or two I hit on the following *ruse* for outwitting the “Ramrods”—as the reformers were called by the toppers—and of supplying some of my thirsty Maine friends with an occasional dram.

I bought a lot of hard-shelled “cushaws,” or crook-necked gourds, as some call them. These I carefully prepared by removing the inside of the gourds through a small hole in the stem end—not neglecting to preserve the stem to be used as a stopper, or rather to be placed over the stopper.

I had a dozen of these hard-shelled gourds. They held from a quart to two quarts each, and the shells, when carefully dried and shellacked, made very good flasks for water, or any other common liquid that might be put in them.

When these were full, sealed up and ornamented with the stems, held in the proper places by glue, they so closely resembled the green gourds that it would have taken a vigilant eye to detect the difference.

These gourds I placed in the bottom of my cart among paper-rags and tag-locks. If any one saw or spoke of them, I replied that it was a lot that I had bought to gratify a whim.

So it came to pass that a select circle of my customers in the Pine-Tree State received from time to time a gourdful of *something*, which I always noticed they were very anxious about. On returning the gourds to me, they filled them with water or grain of some kind, and carefully restored the stem to its place.

This kind of smuggling went on for a long time without interruption. My customers were not informers, as you may suppose. I felt in no danger of being betrayed by them. They would have lost a hand sooner than given the slightest hint to the “prohibitionists.”

Nevertheless, I did not make much money out of the business. It was not done by me for money, nor had I any idea of turning my cart into a traveling rum-shop. I never carried more than a dozen gourds at once, and these more to gratify a little circle of genial old fellows whom I knew, than for any motive of gain.

One day I stopped to trade at a house near the “Corners,” in the town of F—, where there had of late been several “run-cases” tried. There were three or four women at this house, and, as usual, they came out to look over my tin-ware, prints and notions in the cart.

Women will always do that, whether they want to buy or not; we expect it. It is one of the things a peddler must accept good-naturedly.

When I first began peddling, this habit of the women made me angry; for I thought they did it to make me work in folding things up and putting them away again. But that is not the reason. They cannot help it; it is natural to them. And they like to see a peddler fold and replace his goods carefully, even if it takes him half an hour.

You would think, perhaps, that they did not care, or realize, how much work they make the trader, but they *do*, and that is the funniest part of it; and think very much more of you if you have unbounded patience with them.

A bright woman always knows that she has several weaknesses, and she is apt to confide in a man who she sees knows it, and has a heartful of patience for her whims. It took me thirty or forty years to learn even so much of woman nature. I don’t pretend to know much about women yet; and, in fact, I never saw the man who did.

As I have said, there were three or four women at the house, one of them a very pretty, blue-eyed young lady about twenty years old, who seemed to be a caller or a visitor. She came to the back of the cart with the others, and while peering in, her sharp eyes spied one of the gourds.

“O,” said she, “do let me look at that droll, crook-necked squash!” and at once she pulled one of them from under the paper-rags.

It chanced to be one that I had received back from an old customer only the day before, full of barley-corns. He had neglected to glue on the stem as carefully as he should have

done. While the young lady was holding it, the stem came off and some of the barley ran out.

That circumstance I might perhaps have explained satisfactorily to her, if nothing else except the barley had run out. But something else, not perceptible to the eye, but appreciable by the nose, also came out of the gourd.

She first sniffed, and then put it to her pretty nose and sniffed again. Then she gave me a quick little look out of the corners of her blue eyes.

I knew in an instant that I was caught, though she did not say a word for a moment or two, and then only asked me, innocently enough, to be so kind as to sell her one of those droll little gourds.

I tried to plead off. I wanted to carry them all home, I said, which was very true.

But she pouted and seized another one—one of the *full ones*, too, as it happened—and said that I must, and that I should sell her that one.

I was now in trouble. As coolly as I could, I replied: “No, no; I cannot do it.” But she had the gourd in her hand, and I could not very well get it without taking it from her by force, and that I wouldn’t do.

She offered me fifty cents, and held on to the gourd. I would not take the money—I knew better than that—but I assured her, since she would have it, that I would make her a present of it.

Finding that she could not get me to take pay for it, she ran into the house, got her hat, and started off with the gourd as fast as she could walk. I also started from that locality at once, and drove as fast as I dared. Still, I hoped that perhaps the girl only wanted the liquor for her folks, or to gratify some whim, though I might have known better.

I had not gone more than three miles from the “Corners” when a wagon in which there were three men came driving up behind my cart at a great pace. A constable jumped from the wagon and arrested me for violating the “law.”

Well, they soon had me under lock and key; and a search of my cart revealed anything save a good condition for me. They captured every gourd—five full ones.

What they did with them I never knew; I know I never saw them again.

At my trial they failed to prove—though my charming young lady acquaintance tried very hard to do so, she being a member of a “Band of Temperance”—that I had actually *sold* liquor.

There was a great deal of fun and laughter about the gourds, and I barely escaped sentence to jail, but had a *fine* to pay, and lost about a week's time besides.

That broke up the gourd business. I used sometimes to meet the young lady afterwards, and always lifted my hat to her. I really never felt angry with her. – *Youth's Companion*.

*The Stevens Point Journal*, August 11, 1883