

The Deacon's Painkiller

Lucy Maud Montgomery

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L. M. Montgomery

Andrew was a terrible set man. When he put his foot down, something always squashed—and stayed squashed. In this particular instance, it was poor Amy's love affair.

"No, my daughter," he said solemnly (the deacon always spoke solemnly and called Amy "my daughter" when he was going to be contrary), "I—ah, shall never consent to your marrying Dr. Boyd. He is not worthy of you."

"I'm sure a Boyd is as good as a Poultney any day," sobbed Amy. "And nobody can say a word against Frank."

"He used to drink, my daughter," said the deacon more solemnly than ever.

"He never touches a drop now," said Amy, firing up. Amy has a spice of the Barry temper. But the deacon did not get angry. There would have been more hope if he had. You can generally do something with a man who loses his temper, especially when it comes to repenting time. But Andrew never lost his temper; he just remained placid and aggravating.

"Don't you know, my poor child," he said sorrowfully, "that a man who has once been addicted to drink is liable to break out again any time? I—ah, have no faith in Dr. Boyd's reformation. Look at his father."

Amy couldn't very well look at Dr. Boyd's father, seeing that he had drunk himself to death and been safely buried in Brunswick churchyard for over fifteen years. But she knew the reference clinched the matter in the deacon's estimation. Amy had not lived with her pa for twenty years without discovering that when he began dragging people's ancestors from their tombs and hurling them at your head, you might as well stop arguing.

Amy stopped and came upstairs to me and cried instead. I couldn't do a great deal to comfort her, knowing Andrew as I did. I'd kept house for him ever since his wife, who was my sister, died; he was as fine a man as ever lived in most respects—very generous, never given to nagging; but when he'd once made up his mind on any point, you might as well try to soften the nether millstone.

For one thing, there was nothing you could use as a lever, because the deacon was such a moral man. If he'd had any little vices or foibles, he might have been vulnerable on some point. But he was so godly as to be almost painful. It's a blessing that he had no sons or they would certainly have gone to

the bad by way of keeping the family to a natural average.

Before going any further with this story, I might as well clear up matters in regard to Dr. Boyd. From Andrew's statement, you might suppose that he had once been a confirmed toper. The fact was that young Frank, in spite of his father, was as sober and steady a lad as you could wish to see; but one summer, just before he went to college, he fell in with a wild set of fellows from town who were out at the beach hotel; they went somewhere to a political meeting one night and all got drunk, young Frank included, and made fearful fools of themselves; the deacon was there, representing the temperance interest, and saw them. After that he never had any use for Frank Boyd. It didn't make a mite of difference that Frank was terribly ashamed and sorry and never went with those fellows afterwards nor ever was known to taste liquor again. He got through college splendidly and came home and settled in Brunswick and worked up a fine practice. It was of no use, as far as the deacon was concerned. He persisted in regarding Dr. Frank as a reformed rake who might relapse into his evil ways at any moment. And Andrew would have excused a man for murder before he would have excused him for getting drunk.

The deacon was what his enemies—for he had plenty of enemies in spite of, or maybe because of, his goodness—called a temperance fanatic. Now, I'm not going to decry temperance. It's the right thing, and I'm a white ribboner myself and never touch even homemade currant wine; and a little fanaticism always greases the wheels of any movement. But I'm bound to say that Andrew carried things too far. He was fairly rabid for the temperance cause; and the only man in the world he wouldn't speak to was Deacon Millar, because Deacon Millar opposed the introduction of unfermented wine for the communion and used whiskey to break up a cold.

So, all these things considered, I thought poor Amy's prospects for marrying her man were very faint indeed, and I felt nearly as bad over it as she did. I knew that Frank Boyd was her choice, once and forever. Amy is a Barry by nature, even if she is a Poultney by birth, and the Barrys never change—as I could testify; but this isn't my story. If they can't marry the one they set their hearts on, they never marry. And Frank Boyd was such a fine young fellow, and everybody liked and respected him. Any man in the world but Andrew would have been delighted at the thought of having him for a son-in-law.

However, I comforted Amy as well as I could and I even agreed to go and argue with her pa, although I knew I should have nothing to show for my waste of breath. And I hadn't, although I did all that mortal woman could do. I cooked a magnificent dinner with all the deacon's favourite dishes; and after he had eaten all he possibly could and twice as much as was good for him, I tackled him—and failed. And when a woman fails under *those* circumstances,

she may as well fold her hands and hold her tongue.

Andrew heard all I had to say politely, as he always did, for he prided himself on his good manners; but I saw right along that it wasn't sinking in any deeper than the skin.

"No, Juliana," he said patiently, "I—ah, can never give my daughter to a reformed drunkard. I—ah, should tremble for her happiness. Besides, think how it would look if I—ah, were to allow my daughter to marry a man addicted to drink, I—ah, who am noted for my sound temperance principles. Why, it would be a handle for the liquor people to use against me. I—ah, beg of you, dear Juliana, not to refer to this painful subject again and *not* to encourage my daughter in her foolish and unfilial conduct. It will only make an unpleasantness in our peaceful home—an unpleasantness that can in no way further any wishes she or you may have unwisely formed on this subject. I—ah, feel sure that a woman of your prudence and good sense must see this clearly."

I was seeing red just then, for Andrew's "I—ah's" had put me in a regular Barry temper. But I had sense enough to hold my tongue, although I could have cried out for very rage. I took my revenge by feeding the deacon on salt codfish and scraps for a week. He never knew why, but he suffered. However, I'm bound to say he suffered meekly, with the air of a man who knew women-folk take queer spells and have to be humoured.

For the following month the deacon's "peaceful home" had a rather uncomfortable atmosphere. Amy cried and moped and fretted, and Dr. Boyd didn't dare come near the place. Just what would have finally happened, if it hadn't been for the interposition of Providence, nobody knows. I suppose Amy would either have fretted herself to death and gone into consumption like her ma, or she would have run away with Frank and never been forgiven by her pa to the day of her death. And that would have almost killed her too, for Amy loved her pa—and with good reason, for he had always been an excellent pa to her and never before refused her anything in reason.

Meanwhile, the deacon was having troubles of his own. His party wanted to bring him out as a candidate at the next local election, and the deacon wanted to be brought out. But of course the liquor interest was dead against him, and he had some personal foes even on the temperance side; and altogether it was doubtful if he would get the nomination. But he was working hard for it, and his chances were at least as good as any other man's until the first Sunday in August came round.

The deacon felt a bit offish that morning when he got up; I could tell so much by his prayer even if I hadn't known he had a bad cold. The deacon's prayers are an infallible index to his state of health. When he is feeling well

they are cheerful, and you can tell he has his own doubts about the doctrine of reprobation; but when he is a little under the weather his prayers are just like the old lady who said, “The Universalists think all the world is going to be saved, but we Presbyterians hope for better things.”

There was a strong tinge of this in the deacon’s prayer that Sunday morning, but that didn’t prevent him from eating a big breakfast of ham and eggs and hot muffins, topping off with marmalade and cheese. The deacon *will* eat cheese, although he knows it never agrees with him; and shortly before church time it began to make trouble for the poor man.

When I came downstairs—Amy did not go to church that day, which, in the light of what came afterwards, was a fortunate thing—I found the deacon in his best black suit, sitting on the kitchen sofa with his hands clasped over his stomach and a most mournful expression of countenance.

“I—ah, have a bad attack of cramps, Juliana,” he said with a groan. “They come on just as sudden. I—ah, wish you would fix me up a dose of ginger tea.”

“There isn’t a drop of hot water in the house,” I said, “but I’ll see what I can get you.”

The deacon, with sundry dismal groans, followed me into the pantry. While I was measuring out the ginger, he spied a big black bottle away upon the top shelf.

“Why, there is the very thing!” he exclaimed joyfully. “Mr. Johnson’s painkiller! Why didn’t I think of it before?”

I felt dubious about the painkiller, for I don’t believe in messing with medicines you don’t know anything about, though goodness knows Mr. Johnson used enough of it, and it seemed to agree with him fine. He was a young artist who had boarded with us the summer before, and a real nice, jolly, offhanded young fellow he was. We all liked him, and he got on extra well with the deacon, agreeing with him in everything, especially as regards temperance. He wasn’t strong though, poor young man, and soon after he came he told us he was subject to stomach trouble and had to take a dose of painkiller after every meal and sometimes between meals. He kept his bottle of it in the pantry, and I thought him a real good hand to take medicine, for he never made any faces swallowing that painkiller. He said it was a special mixture, tonic and painkiller combined, that his doctor had ordered for him, and it wasn’t hard to take. He went away in a hurry one day in consequence of a telegram saying his mother was ill, and he forgot his bottle of tonic—a new one he had just begun on. It had been standing there on the pantry shelf ever since.

The deacon climbed up on a chair, got it down, opened it, and sniffed at it.

“I kind of like the smell,” he said, as he poured out a glassful, same as he’d

seen Mr. Johnson do.

“I wouldn’t take too much of it,” I said warningly. “You don’t know how it might agree with you.”

But the deacon thought he knew, and he drank it all down and smacked his lips.

“That is the nicest kind of painkiller I—ah, ever tasted, Juliana,” he said. “It has a real appetizing flavour. I—ah, believe I’ll take another glass; I—ah, have seen Mr. Johnson take two. Maybe it has lost its strength, standing there so long, and I—ah, do not want to risk another attack of cramp in church. It is best to make sure. I—ah, feel better already.”

So went the second glass and, when I came back with my bonnet on, that misguided man was just drinking a third.

“The cramp is all gone, Juliana,” he said joyfully. “That painkiller is the right kind of medicine and no mistake. I—ah, feel fine. Come on, let’s go to church.”

He said it in a light, hilarious sort of tone as if he’d been saying, “Let’s go to a picnic.” We walked to the church—it wasn’t more than half a mile—and Andrew stepped along jauntily and talked about various worldly subjects. He was especially eloquent about the election and discoursed as if he were sure of the nomination. He seemed so excited that I felt real uneasy, thinking he must be feverish.

We were late as usual, for our clock is always slow; Andrew will never have it meddled with because it was his grandfather’s. The minister was just giving out his text when we got there. Our pew is right at the top of the church. The Boyd pew is just behind and Dr. Frank was sitting in it all alone. I saw his face fall as I went into our pew, and I knew he was feeling disappointed because Amy hadn’t come. Almost everybody else in Brunswick was there, though, and the church was full. Andrew sat down in his place with a loud, cheerful “hem,” and looked beamingly around on the congregation, smiling all across his face. I’d never seen Andrew smile in church before—he was usually as grave and solemn as if he were at a funeral—and there seemed something uncanny about it. I felt real relieved when he stopped looking around and concentrated his attention on the minister, who was just warming up to his subject.

Mr. Stanley is a real fine preacher. We’ve had him for three years and everybody likes him. In two minutes I was lost to all worldly things, listening to his eloquence. But suddenly—all too suddenly—my thoughts were recalled to earth.

I heard the deacon make a queer sort of noise, something between a growl and a sniff, and I looked around just in time to see him jump to his feet. He was scowling and his face was purple. I’d never seen Andrew in a temper

before, but now he was just mad clean through.

“I tell you, preacher, that isn’t true,” he shouted. “It’s heresy—rank heresy—that is what it is—and as a deacon of this church I shall not let it pass unchallenged. Preacher, you’ve got to take that back. It ain’t true and what’s more, it ain’t sound doctrine.”

And here the deacon gave the pew back in front of him such a resounding thwack that deaf old Mrs. Prott, who sat before him and hadn’t heard a word of his outburst, felt the jar and jumped up as if she had been shot. But Mrs. Prott was the only person in church who hadn’t heard him, and the sensation was something I can’t describe. Mr. Stanley had stopped short, with his hand outstretched, as if he were turned to stone, and his eyes were fairly sticking out of his head. They are goggle eyes at the best of times, for Mr. Stanley is no beauty with all his brains. I shall never forget the look of him at that moment.

I suppose I should have tried to calm the deacon or do something, but I was simply too thunderstruck to move or speak. The plain truth is, I thought Andrew had suddenly gone out of his mind and the horror of it froze me.

Meanwhile, the deacon, having got his second wind, went on, punctuating his remarks with thumps on the pew back.

“Never since I was a deacon have I heard such doctrine preached from this pulpit. The idea of saying that maybe all the heathen won’t be lost! You know they will be, for if they wouldn’t, all the money we’ve been giving foreign missions would be clean wasted. You’re unsound, that’s what you are! We ask for bread and you give us a stone.” A tremendous thwack!

Just then Dr. Boyd got up behind us. He leaned forward and tapped the deacon on the shoulder.

“Let us go out and talk it over outside, Mr. Poultney,” he said quietly, as if it was all a regular part of the performance.

I expected to see the deacon fly at him, but instead, Andrew just flung his arms around Frank’s neck and burst into tears.

“Yesh, lesh go out, m’ dear boy,” he sobbed. “Lesh leave this ungodly plache. Blesh you, m’ boy! Always loved you like a son—yesh. So doesh Amy.”

Dr. Boyd piloted him down the aisle. The deacon insisted on walking with his arms around Franks neck and he sobbed all the way out. Just by the door he came to a dead stop and looked at Selena Cotton, who was sitting past the door in the first raised pew. Like myself, Selena isn’t as young as she used to be; but, unlike myself, she hasn’t quite given up thinking about marriage, and everybody in Brunswick knew that she had been setting her cap for the deacon ever since his wife died. The deacon knew it himself.

Dr. Boyd tried to get him to move on, but Andrew wouldn’t budge until he had had his say. “Jesh in a moment, m’ dear boy. Don’ be in such a hurry—

never be in a hurry going out of church—go slow and dignified—always. Look at that lady. Bless me, she’s a fine woman—finest woman in Brunswick. But I never encouraged her, Frank, ’pon my word. I’d scorn to trifle with a lady’s affections. Yesh, yesh, I’m coming, m’ dear boy.”

With that, the deacon threw a kiss at the outraged Selena and walked out.

Of course I had followed them, and now Frank said to me in a low voice, “I’ll drive him home—but my buggy is very narrow. Would you mind walking, Miss Barry?”

“I’ll walk, of course, but tell me,” I whispered anxiously, “do you think this attack is serious?”

“Not at all. I think he will soon recover and be all right,” said the doctor. His face was as grave as a judge’s, but I was sure I saw his eyes twinkle and I resented it. Here was Andrew either gone crazy or sickening from some dreadful disease and Dr. Boyd was laughing internally over it. I walked home in a state of mingled alarm and indignation. When I got there the doctor’s buggy was tied at the gate, the doctor and Amy were sitting together on the kitchen sofa, and the deacon was nowhere to be seen.

“Where’s Andrew?” I exclaimed.

“In there, sound asleep,” said Frank, nodding at the door of the deacon’s bedroom.

“What is the matter with him?” I persisted. I was sure that Amy had been laughing, and I wondered if I was dreaming or if everybody had gone stark mad.

“Well,” said the doctor, “in plain English, he is—drunk!”

I sat down; fortunately there was a chair behind me. I don’t know whether I felt more relieved or indignant.

“It’s impossible!” I said. “Impossible! The deacon never—there isn’t a drop—he didn’t taste a thing—why—why—”

In a flash I remembered the painkiller. I flew to the pantry, snatched the bottle, and rushed to Frank.

“It’s the painkiller—Mr. Johnson’s painkiller—he took an overdose of it—and maybe he’s poisoned. Oh, do something for him quick! He may be dying this minute.”

Dr. Frank didn’t get excited. He uncorked the bottle, smelled it, and then took a swig of its contents.

“Don’t be alarmed, Miss Barry,” he said, smiling. “This happens to be wine; I don’t know what particular kind, but it is pretty strong.”

“Drunk!” I said—and then I began to laugh, though I’ve been ashamed of it ever since.

“The deacon will sleep it off,” said the doctor, “and be no worse when he wakens, except that he will probably have a bad headache. The thing for us to

do is to hold a consultation and decide how this incident may be turned to the best advantage.”

The deacon slept until after supper. Then we heard a feeble groan proceeding from the bedroom. I went in and Frank followed me, his face solemn in the extreme. The deacon was sitting on the side of the bed, looking woebegone and dissipated.

“How are you feeling now, Andrew?” I asked.

“I don’t feel well,” said the deacon. “My head is splitting. Have I been sick? I thought I was in church. I don’t remember coming home. What is the matter with me, doctor?”

“The plain truth, Mr. Poultney,” said young Frank deliberately, “is that you were drunk. No, sit still!”—for the deacon had bounced up alarmingly—“I am not trying to insult you. You took three doses of what you supposed to be painkiller, but which was really a very strong wine. Then you went to church and made a scene; that is all.”

“All! Gracious Providence!” groaned the poor deacon, sitting dazedly down again. “You can’t mean it—yes, you do. Juliana, for pity’s sake, tell me what I said and did. I have dim recollections—I thought they were just bad dreams.”

I told him the truth. When I got to where he had thrown a kiss at Selena Cotton, he flung up his hands in despair.

“I’m a ruined man—utterly ruined! My standing in the community is gone forever and I’ve lost every chance of the nomination and Selena Cotton will marry me in spite of myself with this for a handle. Oh, if I only had that Johnson here!”

“Don’t worry, Deacon,” said Frank soothingly. “I think you can hush the matter up with my assistance. For instance, I might gravely state to all and sundry that you had a feverish cold and took a bad attack of cramp with it; that to relieve it you imprudently took a dose of very strong painkiller left here by a boarder, which painkiller, not being suited to your ailment, went straight to your head and rendered you delirious for the time being and entirely unaccountable for your words and actions. That is all quite true, and I think people will believe me.”

“That will be the very thing,” said the deacon eagerly. “You’ll do it, won’t you, Frank?”

“I don’t know,” said Frank gravely. “I might do it—for my future father-in-law.”

The deacon never blinked.

“Of course, of course,” he declared. “You can have Amy. I’ve been an old idiot. But if you can get me out of this scrape, I’ll agree to anything you ask.”

Dr. Frank got him out of it. There was a fearful lot of gossip and clatter at first, but Frank had the same story for everyone and they finally believed him, especially as the deacon stayed meekly in bed and had any amount of medicines sent over under Frank's prescription from the drugstore. Nobody was allowed to see him. When people called to inquire for him, we told them that the doctor's orders were that he was to be kept perfectly quiet, lest any excitement might set up the brain disturbance again.

"It's *very* strange," said Selena Cotton. "If it had been anyone but Deacon Poultney, people would really have supposed that he was intoxicated."

"Yes," I assented calmly, "the doctor says there was a drug in the painkiller that is apt to have the same effect as liquor. However, I guess it has taught Andrew a lesson. He won't go drinking strange medicines again without knowing what is in them. He is thankful he has escaped as well as he has. It might have been poison."

In the long run the deacon got his nomination and won his election, and Frank got Amy. But nowadays, when the deacon has the cramp, I brew him up a good hot jorum of ginger tea. I never mention the word "painkiller" to him.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

[The end of *The Deacon's Painkiller* by L. M. (Lucy Maud) Montgomery]