

Mina Lowry, 'Peddler Doll',
c.1936. Index of American Design
at the National Gallery of Art.



The Peddler

Garrett Bliss

Once upon a time a most unusual peddler travelled the Penacook Valley. This peddler did not trade in the customary merchandise – pots and pans still holding a few years of useful life, toys discarded in the reckless rush from childhood, or gadgets needing a half-hour's tinkering to work once again. She traded in woes, miseries, and burdens.

All who came to the peddler brought personal affliction from which they wished to be free. A young couple unable to have a child. An exhausted old man cursed with insomnia. A young woman, unable to escape the guilt of betraying a confidence. A schoolboy taunted for his stutter. In exchange for a few pieces of silver, each left relieved of what they had brought, but they also took with them the unknown burden of another.

"For modest compensation, I facilitate a trade," the peddler explained. "I do not remove miseries from the world. They continue to circulate. Life is not free of woe, but sometimes life brings what people think they cannot bear. It is not for me to judge."

The peddler appeared twice a month – in the dark of a new moon and in the light of a full moon – beneath a giant beech tree.

One night, when the moon was dark, a man slipped out of bed quietly, careful not to wake his wife.

He found the peddler, an old but strong woman, sitting on a stool beneath a birch poking a slow-burning fire. Behind her was an enclosed wagon on two wheels, an old horse nibbling on the grass.

"What brings you here?" the peddler asked without looking up.

"I'm a cobbler and I have no apprentice. I am getting old and my hands are sore," he explained.

"I do not grant wishes. I offer a trade."

"I will accept what someone else has brought on a night like this in return for relieving me of this misery," said the cobbler as he pulled coins from his leather sack.

"Is there anything more you need to tell me?" the peddler asked. The cobbler appeared about to speak but said nothing. "Answer me now before it is too late."

"Nothing else," he said.

"If you say so," replied the peddler, stepping into her wagon in search of the proper trade.

"Take this," she said, handing a small bottle to the cobbler. "Tomorrow morning, at sunrise, drink. Before the noonday sun, an apprentice will appear at your door and the trade

you have made here tonight," said the peddler, taking the cobbler's money in her hand, "will also be revealed to you."

The man returned to his cottage and sat outside, contemplating the security he and his wife would now enjoy. At the first sign of the rising sun, he uncorked the bottle and drank. The bitter liquid stung and made his eyes tear. He felt a little dizzy but wrote that off to a lack of sleep.

Inside, he greeted his wife, "Good morning my dear. I have a feeling today is going to be special."

"Just another day for work," she answered.

When time came for his mid-morning break, he ventured to the kitchen. His hands were already sore and swollen from cutting and sewing leather. His wife laid out bread and cheese and a cup of hot tea.

There was a knock on the door – the apprentice. His wife opened the door. Two figures were silhouetted against the sun. The cobbler could not see their faces, but the cries of joy from his wife told him all he needed to know.

"Henry, my child, you've come back. Elizabeth, dear girl, you're back!"

Hot rage filled the cobbler's cold heart. How could the peddler do this to him? He had asked for an apprentice, not for the return of his son and his tramp of a wife. He rose to tell his son to leave and to take this woman with him, just as he had sent him away years before, but when he opened his mouth to speak, no sound came out, just an impotent gasp for air.

"Look at the old man," his son said. "Mother, if I had known this, we would have returned sooner."

Henry explained that when he woke up that day, shortly after the sun rose, he had been overcome with a feeling that he and his wife could return home and not suffer as they had when his father had banished them.

"Your father did what?" his mother asked, falling onto the bench beside the fire.

Henry explained how his father had forbidden him to marry Elizabeth and if he did so, it would be as if he were no more his father's son. The cobbler's wife fixed her husband with a fiery stare that would melt ice on the darkest of winter nights.

The cobbler ran in search of the peddler. This was not what he had bargained for. The cobbler found the peddler on the road that led from town.

Before he could even try to speak, the peddler said, "I told you, I do not grant wishes. You were without an apprentice. You banished him. Now he's back!"

The cobbler pointed to his throat.

"Thank me. What I arranged would not work if you still had your voice."

The cobbler kicked the stones in the road.

"Remember, I asked if there was anything more you needed to tell me. You said nothing!"

In the days that followed, the cobbler's son made the shop thrive. In time, he and his wife had children of their own and the house was filled with the sound of laughter and play

day and night. But every day, the old cobbler sat alone. He never spoke again, but his family came to recognise the familiar sight of lips silently saying, "Thank you."

Nearby lived a farmer, Thomas, who had gone years frustrated and ashamed of the crop his land would yield. While it was sufficient to sustain himself and his wife, his harvests paled in comparison to those of his brother, Edward, on the other side of the stream running between their land, and it was certainly less than what the land yielded in their father's day.

Thomas longed for a harvest he could take to market and display, drawing customers from neighbouring stalls, and then capping his triumph by buying two rounds of drinks at the tavern – not one, like his brother and their father before.

One winter, Thomas hatched a plan to change things. Each morning, in the hours before the sun called others to work, he snuck out of the house to carry out his plan. When spring approached, Thomas decided to visit the peddler to guarantee the success of his hours of secret labour.

"My land is weak," Thomas said to the peddler. "In my father's day it produced a bountiful harvest. I want the land to be as it was before."

"Is there anything more you'd like to tell me?"

"Nothing," he answered.

"As it was before," the peddler repeated. "As you wish, I will take this burden from you."

The peddler handed a bottle to Thomas. "Tomorrow morning, when the cock crows, open this and drink it. Your fields will produce a crop like those of old. In time the burden you have taken on in exchange will reveal itself."

Thomas did as he was told, and the peddler's prophecy came true. All the while, the other side of the bargain remained a mystery.

When time came to sell his harvest, Thomas loaded his wagon. As he rolled into the market square, his heart began to race and he wiped sweat from his brow, in spite of the clouds above and the chill in the air. He shrugged this off and carried on.

When his first customers approached, Thomas felt faint. He steadied himself against the side of his wagon. Customers called to him, "How much for this?" "Can I have a dozen?" And the words he had dreamed of: "Tom, how did you produce such a great harvest?" But he heard none of this, just a wave of formless noise lost in dizzy confusion.

Thomas stepped behind the wagon, away from the customers, rubbing the pain that gripped his chest. When he felt strong enough, he ran into a nearby copse of trees and remained there until the sun set and the streets were empty.

Returning to the market, most of what he had brought had rotted in the sun. Rabbits nibbled on what remained. He shooed the animals away and returned to his farm.

Seeing his cart approach, Thomas's wife ran out to celebrate her husband's good fortune. When she saw the unsold goods, she asked what had happened. She helped unload the wagon and said the next day would be different.

But the next day, as he drove to the market, Thomas was struck in the same way. He returned home and broke the news to his wife, crying in shame and frustration.

"There is only one thing to do," she said. "Your brother will help."

Now Thomas and his brother had not spoken in years even though their lands – once one farm in their father's day – stood opposite each other.

Within half an hour, Thomas's brother Edward stood before him.

"It makes sense I should sell this crop, doesn't it, brother?"

"Look, you've won. I can't do this alone. Isn't that enough for you? All I ask is enough to live on."

"Thomas, don't go giving away the product of your hard work," his wife said. "He's your brother. He'll help you like a brother should, but ..."

"Help him like a brother should?" said Edward. "Was he helping me like a brother should when he rose early every morning to divert the stream, so my land would go dry? But your big plans, brother, never leave room for anyone else. You couldn't imagine I would discover what you did and find a way around it. After all these years, you're the same little boy who always lost to me in draughts because you couldn't think two moves ahead." As he stepped outside, Edward turned to his brother's wife, "'Just 'enough to live on' – that's his guilt speaking."

Thomas's wife rose from beside her husband, never to sit with him again.

From that day on, the harvest was sold as it had been in their father's day – as the product of one farm, with Thomas working his land and Edward his. Thomas and his wife were always given enough to get by, but only after she thanked her brother-in-law for his generosity.

One night, under the light of a full moon, Thomas set out to find the peddler. He came across a scene like the one from that fateful night – as if time had not passed at all.

"I did ask if there was more you wanted to tell me," she said before Thomas even spoke a word. It was as if she had been waiting for him to return. "You could have shared that you had diverted water from your brother's land."

"I just wanted my land to grow a decent harvest."

"You knew what I offered was a trade. You said you wanted the land to yield a harvest *like it used to*, and now it does," replied the peddler. "And now you live with the fear of the busy marketplace, a terror that once crippled another man. With your pride no longer a thing you can satisfy, your land – as it did before – now yields a strong harvest. Go. You have what you bargained for."

Thomas returned to the farm, picked up his tools, crossed the river, and began working beside his brother – just as he had in their father's day.

In this same village, in a cottage surrounded by flowers, lived two sisters, Emily and Alice, both of keen mind and sweet disposition. The two sisters had lived together happily for years, but one spring that air of sweet bliss came to be replaced with one of quiet sadness. Emily was forever mourning the love she had lost. Alice carried a secret whose burden grew with each passing day.

One night, in the dark of a new moon, Alice snuck out of the house in search of the peddler.

"I hope you can help me," said Alice.

"I don't help. I offer a trade. Make of that what you will."

"It is my sister, Emily. I cannot live another day watching her sad and lonely."

"Is there anything more you'd like to —"

Alice interrupted. "It is all my fault. Nothing but petty jealousy on my part."

"Go on," said the peddler.

"Last spring, I found a note to Emily from the young farmer down the road. He was being called away to serve as a soldier. He asked my sister to remain true to him while he was gone, and when he returned, he would ask for her hand in marriage. As a sign of her commitment, he asked Emily to tie a red kerchief to the gate of our cottage. He would see this as he marched away with his regiment and know her love would stay as strong as his."

"And?"

"I burned that note in the fire. Emily thinks he left without giving her a thought in the world," Alice paused to catch her breath and dry her eyes. "I haven't had a day of peace since, but it is my sister's misery that must end. I'll take any suffering you give me just for her to get her true love back."

"That was a cruel and selfish thing to do," said the peddler.

"I knew it was wrong, but I was afraid of losing my sister. We only have each other, and I feared being alone. But I would rather live without her — and she be happy — than carry on like this."

The peddler went inside her wagon and returned with a silver vial.

"Drink this," said the peddler.

The liquid was thick and sweet. It warmed Alice like a blanket on a cold night.

"Tomorrow morning, rise early and tie a red kerchief to the gate," the peddler said.

"I don't understand," said Alice.

"Be gone. You have all you need," said the peddler.

The next morning, Alice rose early and tied a red kerchief to the gate, just as the peddler had directed.

Over breakfast the two sisters talked about the chores that lay ahead. When they were done with their tea and toast, Emily set out for the market but stopped in the doorway.

"Sister, why is a red kerchief tied round the gate?"

Just then, a figure appeared at the bend in the road and called out to Emily. Emily dropped her basket as Robert ran towards her.

After tears of happiness and much excited chatter, Emily learned of Robert's note and Robert learned Emily had never received it. Before the morning was over, Emily and Robert set a day, one month hence, for their wedding.

In the weeks that followed, Emily awoke with a song in her heart and a tune upon her lips. Alice remained quiet and withdrawn. Perhaps, Alice wondered, this inescapable guilt was the burden she was destined to endure.

"Is something wrong?" Emily asked one morning. "I feel guilty carrying on as I do when I can tell there is sadness in your heart."

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to diminish your happiness in any way," Alice said. She collected her thoughts, ready to confess. "It is just that —"

Emily held her sister's hand. "I know what it is," she declared.

"You do?" said Alice, pulling her hands back with a start.

"You are afraid we will lose the love between us. For so long we have only had each other. You will always be my dear sister, and nothing could ever change that special bond."

Hearing this, Alice was even more ashamed than before. "Yes," she said, "that must be it. How silly and selfish of me. Now, go along. You have an appointment with the dressmaker. I will clean up."

In the days that followed, Alice feigned a happiness she did not feel, a joy her guilt could not allow.

The wedding was a glorious event followed by a party along the banks of the river.

While the band played, Alice sat beneath the shade of a tree. In the distance the peddler passed by — that night would be a full moon. Alice ran to her:

"This guilt, is this the burden you gave to me?" Alice asked.

"I gave nothing to you," replied the peddler.

"But that elixir? The return of my sister's lover?"

"Nothing but sugar water. You came, not for yourself but for the sake of another. You did not hide the truth, and with that comes the grace of forgiveness," explained the peddler. "And as for the soldier, I passed their camp on my way. I knew they were a day away. The power to correct what was wrong — what is wrong — has always been in your hands, not mine."

Alice returned to the celebration, pondering what the peddler had said. During a break in the dancing, Emily joined Alice on the bench beneath the tree.

Before Emily could say a word, Alice spoke. "Sister, I have a confession," she began. Alice shared everything with Emily — her fear of being alone, how she had burned the note from Robert, about her trip to the peddler, and the guilt she knew would forever be hers.

"My dear, rid yourself of that. Look at me now. See how happy I am," said Emily.

"But I was so selfish, I almost destroyed your happiness . . ."

“Not at all. You probably saved it.”

“I don’t understand.”

“The truth is, if I had received Robert’s note, I too would have thrown it in the fire. We had a horrible row the day before. I never would have tied a kerchief to the gate given the state I was in. No, I needed that time when I thought I had lost him to realise how much I loved him.”

At this, the sisters embraced until they heard a forced cough, Robert announcing he was standing by.

“Emily, I see you have shared our news,” he said.

“What news?” asked Alice.

“If you will have us, we want to live with you in our little cottage, our home,” said Emily.

“You have made me the happiest – well, the second happiest – girl in all of Penacook Valley,” said Alice.

As the three of them stood, holding hands, Alice spotted the peddler watching from the road. Her lips moved and Alice heard her whisper: “The power was always in your hands.”

And from that day on, the little cottage surrounded by flowers was filled with love and happiness.



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