



The Rogue, McCullough, and Molly

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There was once a rogue named Tom Devlin who made his living by his wits, and this was the way of it. He would pull up his horse and cart outside a village inn, and over a mug of ale would ask the innkeeper who was the richest farmer in the region. Next, Tom would find that farmer's land and sketch a rough map of it – with an X and the word “treasure” marked in one corner. Then up the lane he'd ride and rap on the farmhouse door.

“Good day to you, good wife,” Tom would say when the farmer's wife opened the door. “I'm a traveler with an empty stomach and tales to tell. Can you spare me a bite?” A merry grin went with his greeting, and soon Tom would be seated in the kitchen, eating cold pie and telling of curious sights he had seen.

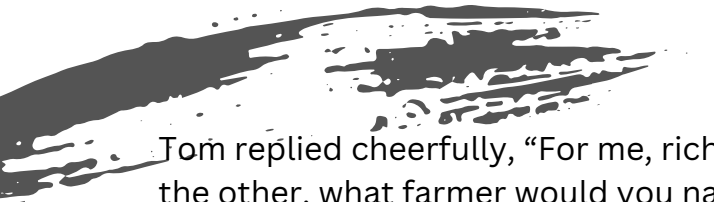
“It's a weary life, this wandering,” Tom would finish. “I'm tired of uphill and down dale. I'm ready to build a snug cottage and raise turnips for a living.”

Charmed by his sweet manners and fine stories, the farmer's wife would urge her husband to sell Tom a bit of land where he could settle down. When Tom jingled the bag of coins in his pocket, the farmer was ready to strike a bargain. Later, as the wife showed Tom up the stairway to the bed in the loft, the map with an X marked on the bit of land Tom had just connived to buy would fall from Tom's pocket. Never once did any farmer call to tell Tom he'd lost something. But as Tom lay on his straw-filled mattress, he would hear the farmer and his wife whispering downstairs. And next morning the farmer would tell Tom he had changed his mind. The land was not for sale and here was Tom's money back.

Tom always acted indignant. Such hardship to give up the land! What would the farmer's neighbors think when they learned he was a man who went back on his word? Perhaps Tom should call in the constable to settle matters.

Tom would carry on until the farmer agreed to soften Tom's loss by filling his cart with vegetables or fruit. Then Tom would drive to market and exchange the produce for a handful of silver while the greedy farmer rushed out to dig for a treasure that wasn't there.

One day Tom pulled up at an inn called the Three Crowns. When he asked the innkeeper who was the richest farmer around, the innkeeper squinted at him. “Rich with land, or rich with happiness?”



Tom replied cheerfully, "For me, rich is pleasure in living. But supposing I meant the other, what farmer would you name?"

"If it's wealth of land you mean, McCullough's your man. He's a sour fellow with grasping ways. Small wonder, living with that daughter of his. Molly McCullough is as sharp of tongue as she is plain of face. Many's the lad who wished for McCullough's fields but balked at the thought of marrying Molly."

Within the hour, Tom and his cart were topping the hill above the McCullough farm. The sweet smell of growing things rose on the heat of the afternoon, and for a moment Tom thought of the roots growing down into the soil while he was always moving on. But then he shrugged and began to sketch his map.

Soon he was knocking at the farmhouse door, ready with his smile and his stories. The woman who opened the door gave him no answering smile. "Plain as a post," thought Tom.

"If you're hungry, you can split wood for your supper," Molly McCullough said, and closed the door in his face.

"That answer would sour milk," thought Tom. "If McCullough's wits are as sharp as his daughter's tongue, I must be on my mettle." He unhitched his horse and hid the cart behind the barn. Then he turned to the woodpile. When McCullough arrived, Tom greeted him. "Your daughter has offered me dinner in exchange for a pile of kindling."

McCullough grunted and went in the door with Tom close at his heels. "It's gay as a county fair around here," thought Tom, pulling out a chair at the table. "Lovely farm you've got, McCullough."

"When the locusts don't eat the crops."

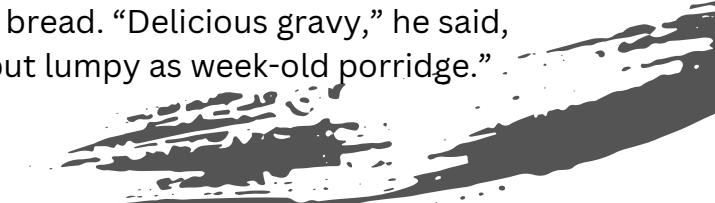
"Beautiful view from the hill."

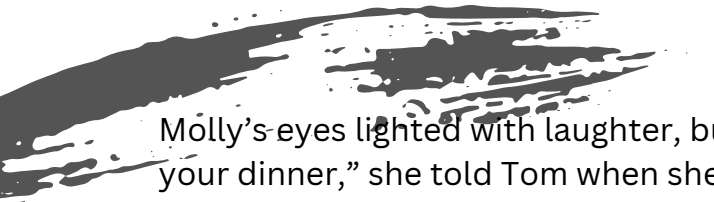
"Till the fog rolls in off the river."

"Tallest corn I've ever seen."

"Dried up inside from the drought."

Thoughtfully, Tom wiped his plate with a bit of bread. "Delicious gravy," he said, and before McCullough could speak, added, "but lumpy as week-old porridge."





Molly's eyes lighted with laughter, but her mouth stayed firmly shut. "You've had your dinner," she told Tom when she cleared away the plates.

"So I have, but I thought some tales of the lands I've traveled might win me a bed for the night."

Molly shook her head. "Words are worth nothing, and that's what you'll get for them. You can wash dishes for a night in the barn."

"Handsome offer," said Tom. "I'll wipe plates for a bed and tell stories for pleasure. My own," he added quickly.

So Molly darned socks and McCullough smoked his pipe while Tom scrubbed plates and wove tales of his travels. "It's a grand life but a weary one," he finished. "I'm thinking how fine it must be to settle down and work the soil. Perhaps, McCullough, you'd have a bit of land to sell where I could build a cottage and raise crops? By a bend in the river, maybe, with a willow to shade my front door."

McCullough took his pipe from his mouth. "How much?"

Tom reached into his pocket. As he pulled out the pouch of coins, the map fluttered to the floor. McCullough's eyes narrowed, but he never mentioned it. He weighed the pouch and agreed to sell Tom the land he'd just described.

"Now it's off to the barn with you," Molly said.

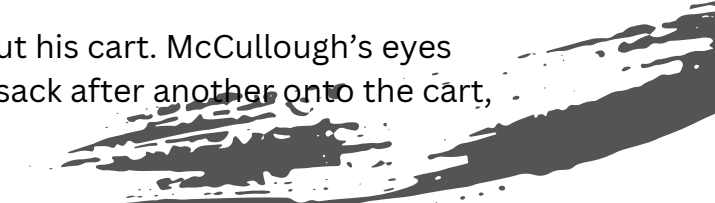
As he left, Tom saw McCullough scoop up the map. Walking through the moonlight to the barn, Tom sang to himself, "Hey down derry! Tomorrow McCullough's vegetables will line my pockets with silver."

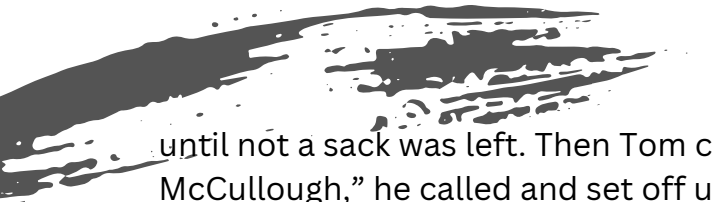
The next morning, Molly was nowhere in sight. But sure enough, McCullough wanted his land back. "I'll give you a sack of cabbages," he told Tom, "to make up for your disappointment."

"One sack? For the loss of a man's dream? Tom shook his head.

Long they haggled, with Tom determined to drive a hard bargain and McCullough not giving an inch. Finally McCullough said, "Here's my last offer. The sacks filled with cabbages are piled inside the corncrib. You can have as many as you can carry away."

"Done!" Tom ran behind the barn and pulled out his cart. McCullough's eyes widened as he watched Tom swing one lumpy sack after another onto the cart,





until not a sack was left. Then Tom climbed into the cart. “Good day to you, McCullough,” he called and set off up the lane.

From the hilltop, Tom looked back to see McCullough headed for the river with a shovel. Tom shook his head. “Oh, McCullough, if you only knew the ground of your farm is filled with treasure richer than any map could bring you. That’s a lovely bit of land down by the willow. I wonder if I made a mistake giving it up for a heap of cabbages.”

“Especially these cabbages,” came a voice from the back of the cart.

“What?” cried Tom. “Cabbages that talk?” He ripped open the nearest sack to reveal a heap of straw and stones. “I’ve been cheated!”

“And why not?” said the same voice. “One good trick deserves another.”

“Straw and stones talk no more than cabbages. Whose voice speaks from these sacks?”

“Tear out the cord, and you’ll see.” One sack began to move, and when Tom opened the stitches that closed it, up rose Molly McCullough.

Tom’s face reddened. “I’ve been played the fool. McCullough promised me cabbages and instead he gave me straw and a woman prickly as a hedgehog.”

“You gave him a map for a treasure that does not exist. The bargain was evenly matched.” Molly planted her hands on her hips. “But you can still get a piece of his farm now and all of it later.”

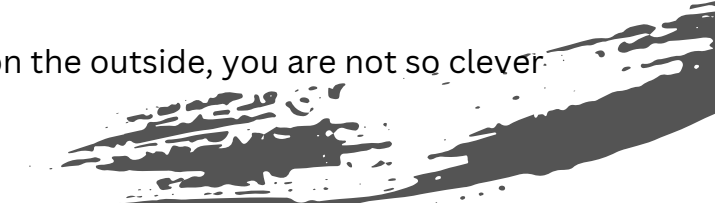
Tom threw back his head in laughter. “The only way to do that is to marry his daughter, a shrew with a tongue sharp as a sickle!”


Now it was Molly who flushed with anger. Tom held up his hand. “I only repeat what they say in the Three Crowns.”

“Stupid men deserve sharp tongues,” snapped Molly. “I’ve saved my soft words for a man clever enough to deserve them.”

“There’s another problem,” said Tom. “No man happily chooses a woman without beauty.”

“If your eyes are so dull they see beauty only on the outside, you are not so clever as I thought.”





Tom scratched his chin. “Well, I’ve long been a wandering man, living by my wits.”

“Cheating honest farmers!” Molly chimed in.

“Not so honest that they ever told me of the map I dropped on the floor,” Tom retorted. “Nevertheless, I like the idea of putting down roots and using my back along with my brains. I will go to McCullough and ask for the hand of his daughter.”

A smile stole across Molly’s face. “Ah,” thought Tom. “My eyes were dull indeed when they failed to see what a smile could work in that face!”

Molly sat beside him, and Tom turned the cart around. “McCullough will be angry with me after digging all this time and finding nothing. On the other hand, I have a right to a bit of temper over the stones he gave me.”

Molly said, “My father thinks he gave you cabbages. It was I who put straw and stones in the sacks.”

Tom roared with laughter. “Then you’re a bigger rogue than both of us, lass. To think that McCullough and I have been outsmarted by a woman!”

Smooth as fresh cream came the voice of Molly McCullough. “Perhaps for the first time, my Thomas, but certainly not the last!”