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Mrs. Norris and the T Model Ford

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Abstract

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Mrs. Norris and the T Model Ford

I'M GOING to tell you a story I saw once in my travels around. I'm telling it to you because I am an Arkansas man myself and don't hold much with Missouri men, and I want to show you why. I seen a lot of Missouri men in my travels around and I never seen one yet that wasn't ornery. They ain't only ornery but they don't know sic 'em to boot. I'll show you what I mean and maybe you'll believe me.

I was up in southern Missouri a few years ago just looking around and seeing the land. I was just going along the edge of the hills, hiking and taking my time, hiring out here and there and having a good time with my pay when I come to a town. I wasn't in any hurry and I got along all right. I'll give them hills one thing, come spring and they are pretty as can be, what with all the bluebells on the cutbanks and the new scrub oak leafing out. The laurels are always full of catbirds and Missouri gals that are cuter than spotted pups.

I would sleep on the ridges and in the haystacks and when I wanted to poke along, well, I would. I washed in the crick branches and didn't hurry none and there was always enough work to keep some money and tobacco in my overalls. There wasn't no hurry to get home; I wasn't married then, and never had to hurry.

It was a good life, like I said, until I walked up to a farm just south of a place folks call Protem. I was running low on eating tobacco, so when I saw this good-sized farm I figured to shut down for awhile and hire out as a hand.

It was a good clean farm with a barn bigger than you usual see on the edge of the hills, and I could see what looked like to me dandy dairy stock in the back timber. I said to myself, "Harry, where there's a farm as cozy as that, there's a good cook somewhere's around. Let's have a look," so I turned into the lane. I hadn't walked two rods up that lane when a pack of the biggest red-bone hounds I ever seen came busting down to meet me. I stood in my tracks, let me tell you, and they just

walked around me stiff-legged showing me the whites of their eyes. Well, I wasn't getting any place doing that, so I hailed the house, kinda nervous.

"Anybody home?"

When I said that, the biggest dog of all sort of reached out and grabbed a mouthful of leg. Huh! I was shaking around trying to get my leg back and be peaceful and he was hanging on like he hadn't et, and we were having a big time.

"Turn loose of my dog!" somebody yelled.

"Turn loose yourself," I said, and looked up the lane. There was an old gaffer in patched overhalls covered with axle grease. He had a mess of white hair that was flying ever whichway and he looked as nasty as a Missouri man can get.

"What are you doing on my land?" he says. "What do you want?"

I was getting mad. "I want to hire on as a hand," I said. "Call off these damn dogs." The old man chirped and dog spit out my leg and sat back to watch me in case I moved or something.

"Know anything about T Model Fords?" says the old gaffer.

Well, I ain't one to brag, but I know more about T Model Fords than the man that wrote the book, and I told him so.

"Don't want no big talk or sass," says the old gaffer. "Just want to know if you can fix a T Model Ford. Can you put in gear bands?"

I allowed as how I could, so me and the old man and the fox hounds all went up the lane and back to the barn. By this time I was beginning to figure that the old man had all his button-holes all right, but not quite all his buttons. He acted crazier than a pet coon. He was talking about that damn Ford like it was his baby or something, and how tired it acted since the bands had wore out. We walked around back of the barn to where the Ford was and I looked it over.

"Can you fix it?" he said.

"You keep them damn dogs on the other side of that damn barn and I can fix it," I said. That's the only way you can handle a Missouri man. You got to show him he ain't the only hard shell crawdad in the pond.

"Get me a chunk of old carpet and a crescent wrench and she's as good as new." Well, he did, and I took off my clean hickory shirt and pitched in. I cut new bands out of the old

carpet and fixed that Ford as easy as pie, and as good as new, like I said. It tickled the old man just some, let me tell you, but he never let on a bit. He probably thought as much of that Ford as he did his dogs, and for a hill man that is considerable.

Well, we sat down right there and talked business and it was easy to see that the old man was taken with me. By the time our pipes had gone out I had dickered him into a job clearing scrub; board, room, and twelve dollars a week. Yes, me and the old man was as thick as sorghum, and just because I knew something about T Model Fords.

We went up to the house where I met his missus and had supper. I found out that his name was Billy Norris, that he had ten head of fine milking cows and that his wife set the finest table that I ever slid my feet under. She was a talking woman with a big mole on her chin and was as much like old Billy as old Billy was like them mean dogs of his. I never did get used to them dogs; they was always watching me like I was something good to eat.

It was a pretty good job of work, as jobs in Missouri go. I had a good bunk in the barn and Billy kept the dogs away from me. The work was hard but it was good work, and being a good man with an axe I didn't mind it a bit. It ain't the first time I cleared out scrub oak and osage orange. In spite of being crazy, Billy Norris wasn't such a bad boss, and like anybody knows, the main thing when you're a hand is the rations, and they suited me just some.

I could have gone into Protem and had a time, but I figured to save my pay and do all my romping and stomping when I got back to Arkansas. So, come sundown and I would just sit around by the barn and watch Billy Norris whipping up and down the road in his Ford. No matter haw hard we worked in the back timber all day, come sundown and old Billy would get up from the table, go out and crank the Ford, and drive up and down the road in front of the farm. That was a sight for you. Billy and his T Model bouncing around in the ruts and rocks, his white hair flying and a pack of red-bone fox hounds all strung out behind him. He'd drive up the road a piece and turn around and come raring back, the Ford putting, Billy yelling, and all the fox hounds a bellering. Crazy as bedbugs, ever one of them. Old Billy was a salty dog with that Ford, though. If

he had a chance to drive on some of the hard roads I've seen in my travels around, he'd have killed himself this side of two days. He knew more ways to drive that car than a country boy knows to ride a mule.

Well, everthing went along as smooth as cream for quite a time. We were getting the back section cleared nice and the rations were as good as ever. Then one morning Missus Norris got an idea into her head like women will and me and the old man never knew peace from then on.

She was bound and determined she was going to learn to drive old Billy's T Model.

Well, you can see how this would hit the old man. He'd blow up a storm cloud ever time his wife would say something about it.

"Not on your tintype!" he'd yell. "That's my T Model and I'm the one to drive it. Shut up and leave me be!" But she wouldn't leave him be, or me neither. She was a set woman, as what woman ain't when she gets a notion. She gave us to know that if she didn't drive, we wouldn't eat. That sort of swung me over to her way of thinking. I didn't scheme to go hungry just because Billy Norris was crazy. I hadn't give two hoots either way but when she started talking about rations she was talking right to me, and I decided to do something about it.

Through the day I wouldn't give Billy no peace in the back timber, and at night the missus would take over. We was relayin' him, so to speak. No man can hold out long under something like that, so what with me whittling at him in the daytime and his wife whittling him in the evening, in about a week old Billy came around to our way of thinking. He allowed that his wife would learn to drive the T Model Ford.

Billy vowed he wouldn't touch the whole business with a ten foot pole, so it was up to me to learn her from the first. I should have known better. You know how women are. When I would crank and tell her to crack the gas so the engine would take hold in good shape, she would crack the spark lever instead. Damn near kick me into the next county ever time. After a couple of days of that I couldn't hardly heft my axe, but Missus Norris was as chipper as ever.

She never run over me after she knocked me down; I'll say that for her. She always pushed in on the reverse pedal first. I

never knew her to start right off in low; she always had to back up before she got it right. If she couldn't pull levers or push pedals, she sure as hell couldn't steer. Seemed like she got that farm by the tail and turned it everywhere but loose. Hard as it was on me and the old man, it was even harder on the farm. The third night she knocked off the corner of the cowshed and killed two chickens. A while later she tore off the left front fender against the elling tree and sort of sashayed off through the gate into the piglot.

It finally got so the chickens were quit laying and the dogs stayed back of the barn and didn't carry their tails up straight no more. Old Billy was drooping, too. Got so he didn't argue and he let his pipe go out all the time. He acted like a horse that has been broke too hard and too old. I'd of felt sorry for him if he hadn't been so mean and crazy. The old lady would go roaring around the barnyard busting things up and Billy Norris would sort of just sit on the back stoop and brood. I figured this couldn't go on much longer, and it didn't. It come to a head one night when both my arm and Billy was sorer than usual. It come to a head and I reckon it's still to a head. I don't know or care.

We finished supper this night and went out in back like we always did. Billy sat down on the back stoop and put his cold pipe in his mouth, not saying nothing. Like always, I got around in front of the Ford to crank and Missus Norris got up in the seat and grabbed the spark lever, and like always I got knocked flatter than a parson's joke. This time when the old lady crammed down on the reverse pedal she pulled away down on the gas too, because she though she was quite a driver by now. What with good gear bands and the gas down, that T Model went sailing by the back stoop like a scalded cat. She didn't get far, though. There was a smash and a rattle and everything stopped. Missus Norris had hung the whole rear end of the T Model up on the granddaddy of all big lilac bushes. There ain't nothing tougher than an old lilac, and that tough old stem was holding up the rear end of that Ford high and dry. There she set. Hind wheels up off the dirt and spinning like a five-dollar grindstone. Wouldn't that jar you? Me and Billy was sitting there with our mouths open enough to catch flies. We started laughing like we were silly.

"Billy Norris, get me and this car out of this!" the missus yelled. Never heard a madder woman before or since.

I didn't dare say nothing right there so I sneaked out down behind the barn where the dogs were and laughed myself sick. Whenever I had to stop for breath I could hear old Billy up on the back stoop screaming. I wasn't even chuckling to what old Billy was doing. I never heard a man laugh so hard. I figured he would hurt himself. He screamed and he bellered, he roared and he whooped, and through it all I could hear the old woman giving him what the jaybird gave the owl.

"Billy Norris, get this car off this lilac bush! Get it off, I say! Do you hear me, you old fool?"

"Get it off yourself!" said Billy. "You're the big old automobile driver in the family. Drive the damn thing off yourself. I don't know nothing about driving Fords; you get it off!" And then he would start screaming again.

"Howl your head off, you blamed old fool, but get this car off here!"

"Don't know nothing about T Models. You know all about T Models. . . you drive 'em all around and think you're so damn smart, woman. Well, drive it off that damn lilac bush. She'll rot to rust before I'll show you how."

Missus Norris was so riled and mad that she couldn't even talk; she just set there making a noise like a slow fuse. By this time I had come out from behind the barn and took a look. The old folks was just setting there glaring at each other. Then old Billy lit his pipe and I knew he was still the head coon. . .

All I hung around was another ten days or so. The rations was falling off worse ever day and the old folks wouldn't talk. The Model was hung up on the big old lilac yet and grass was beginning to grow up through the spokes in the front wheels. Chickens was beginning to lay eggs in the front seat and the tires needed air. Like a couple of Missourians, old Billy and his wife just let her set, and that Ford wasn't a bit more set than they was. The old man would set out on the back stoop with his pipe and fox hounds, and Missus Norris would set on the front stoop with her patchwork, and Ford just set.

Along about that time I figured that if I was going to have any truck with mules, I'd just as lief they were Arkansas mules, so one morning I packed my bundle and lit out. I walked down