

IX. Pa Sloane's Purchase

"I guess the molasses is getting low, ain't it?" said Pa Sloane insinuatingly. "S'pose I'd better drive up to Carmody this afternoon and get some more."

"There's a good half-gallon of molasses in the jug yet," said ma Sloane ruthlessly.

"That so? Well, I noticed the kerosene demijohn wasn't very hefty the last time I filled the can. Reckon it needs replenishing."

"We have kerosene enough to do for a fortnight yet." Ma continued to eat her dinner with an impassive face, but a twinkle made itself apparent in her eye. Lest Pa should see it, and feel encouraged thereby, she looked immovably at her plate.

Pa Sloane sighed. His invention was giving out.

"Didn't I hear you say day before yesterday that you were out of nutmegs?" he queried, after a few moments' severe reflection.

"I got a supply of them from the egg-pedlar yesterday," responded Ma, by a great effort preventing the twinkle from spreading over her entire face. She wondered if this third failure would squelch Pa. But Pa was

not to be squelched.

"Well, anyway," he said, brightening up under the influence of a sudden saving inspiration. "I'll have to go up to get the sorrel mare shod. So, if you've any little errands you want done at the store, Ma, just make a memo of them while I hitch up."

The matter of shoeing the sorrel mare was beyond Ma's province, although she had her own suspicions about the sorrel mare's need of shoes.

"Why can't you give up beating about the bush, Pa?" she demanded, with contemptuous pity. "You might as well own up what's taking you to Carmody. I can see through your design. You want to get away to the Garland auction. That is what is troubling you, Pa Sloane."

"I dunno but what I might step over, seeing it's so handy. But the sorrel mare really does need shoeing, Ma," protested Pa.

"There's always something needing to be done if it's convenient," retorted Ma. "Your mania for auctions will be the ruin of you yet, Pa. A man of fifty-five ought to have grown out of such a hankering. But the older you get the worse you get. Anyway, if I wanted to go to auctions, I'd select them as was something like, and not waste my time on little one-horse affairs like this of Garland's."

"One might pick up something real cheap at Garland's," said Pa

defensively.

"Well, you are not going to pick up anything, cheap or otherwise, Pa Sloane, because I'm going with you to see that you don't. I know I can't stop you from going. I might as well try to stop the wind from blowing. But I shall go, too, out of self-defence. This house is so full now of old clutter and truck that you've brought home from auctions that I feel as if I was made up out of pieces and left overs."

Pa Sloane sighed again. It was not exhilarating to attend an auction with Ma. She would never let him bid on anything. But he realized that Ma's mind was made up beyond the power of mortal man's persuasion to alter it, so he went out to hitch up.

Pa Sloane's dissipation was going to auctions and buying things that nobody else would buy. Ma Sloane's patient endeavours of over thirty years had been able to effect only a partial reform. Sometimes Pa heroically refrained from going to an auction for six months at a time; then he would break out worse than ever, go to all that took place for miles around, and come home with a wagonful of misfits. His last exploit had been to bid on an old dasher churn for five dollars--the boys "ran things up" on Pa Sloane for the fun of it--and bring it home to outraged Ma, who had made her butter for fifteen years in the very latest, most up-to-date barrel churn. To add insult to injury this was the second dasher churn Pa had bought at auction. That settled it. Ma decreed that henceforth she would chaperon Pa when he went to auctions.

But this was the day of Pa's good angel. When he drove up to the door where Ma was waiting, a breathless, hatless imp of ten flew into the yard, and hurled himself between Ma and the wagon-step.

"Oh, Mrs. Sloane, won't you come over to our house at once?" he gasped.

"The baby, he's got colic, and ma's just wild, and he's all black in the face."

Ma went, feeling that the stars in their courses fought against a woman who was trying to do her duty by her husband. But first she admonished Pa.

"I shall have to let you go alone. But I charge you, Pa, not to bid on anything--on ANYTHING, do you hear?"

Pa heard and promised to heed, with every intention of keeping his promise. Then he drove away joyfully. On any other occasion Ma would have been a welcome companion. But she certainly spoiled the flavour of an auction.

When Pa arrived at the Carmody store, he saw that the little yard of the Garland place below the hill was already full of people. The auction had evidently begun; so, not to miss any more of it, Pa hurried down. The sorrel mare could wait for her shoes until afterwards.

Ma had been within bounds when she called the Garland auction a "one-horse affair." It certainly was very paltry, especially when compared to the big Donaldson auction of a month ago, which Pa still lived over in happy dreams.

Horace Garland and his wife had been poor. When they died within six weeks of each other, one of consumption and one of pneumonia, they left nothing but debts and a little furniture. The house had been a rented one.

The bidding on the various poor articles of household gear put up for sale was not brisk, but had an element of resigned determination. Carmody people knew that these things had to be sold to pay the debts, and they could not be sold unless they were bought. Still, it was a very tame affair.

A woman came out of the house carrying a baby of about eighteen months in her arms, and sat down on the bench beneath the window.

"There's Marthy Blair with the Garland Baby," said Robert Lawson to Pa.

"I'd like to know what's to become of that poor young one!"

"Ain't there any of the father's or mother's folks to take him?" asked

Pa.

"No. Horace had no relatives that anybody ever heard of. Mrs. Horace had

a brother; but he went to Mantioba years ago, and nobody knows where he is now. Somebody'll have to take the baby and nobody seems anxious to. I've got eight myself, or I'd think about it. He's a fine little chap."

Pa, with Ma's parting admonition ringing in his ears, did not bid on anything, although it will never be known how great was the heroic self-restraint he put on himself, until just at the last, when he did bid on a collection of flower-pots, thinking he might indulge himself to that small extent. But Josiah Sloane had been commissioned by his wife to bring those flower-pots home to her; so Pa lost them.

"There, that's all," said the auctioneer, wiping his face, for the day was very warm for October.

"There's nothing more unless we sell the baby."

A laugh went through the crowd. The sale had been a dull affair, and they were ready for some fun. Someone called out, "Put him up, Jacob." The joke found favour and the call was repeated hilariously.

Jacob Blair took little Teddy Garland out of Martha's arms and stood him up on the table by the door, steadying the small chap with one big brown hand. The baby had a mop of yellow curls, and a pink and white face, and big blue eyes. He laughed out at the men before him and waved his hands in delight. Pa Sloane thought he had never seen so pretty a baby.

"Here's a baby for sale," shouted the auctioneer. "A genuine article, pretty near as good as brand-new. A real live baby, warranted to walk and talk a little. Who bids? A dollar? Did I hear anyone mean enough to bid a dollar? No, sir, babies don't come as cheap as that, especially the curly-headed brand."

The crowd laughed again. Pa Sloane, by way of keeping on the joke, cried, "Four dollars!"

Everybody looked at him. The impression flashed through the crowd that Pa was in earnest, and meant thus to signify his intention of giving the baby a home. He was well-to-do, and his only son was grown up and married.

"Six," cried out John Clarke from the other side of the yard. John Clarke lived at White Sands and he and his wife were childless.

That bid of John Clarke's was Pa's undoing. Pa Sloane could not have an enemy; but a rival he had, and that rival was John Clarke. Everywhere at auctions John Clarke was wont to bid against Pa. At the last auction he had outbid Pa in everything, not having the fear of his wife before his eyes. Pa's fighting blood was up in a moment; he forgot Ma Sloane; he forgot what he was bidding for; he forgot everything except a determination that John Clarke should not be victor again.

"Ten," he called shrilly.

"Fifteen," shouted Clarke.

"Twenty," vociferated Pa.

"Twenty-five," bellowed Clarke.

"Thirty," shrieked Pa. He nearly bust a blood-vessel in his shrieking, but he had won. Clarke turned off with a laugh and a shrug, and the baby was knocked down to Pa Sloane by the auctioneer, who had meanwhile been keeping the crowd in roars of laughter by a quick fire of witticisms. There had not been such fun at an auction in Carmody for many a long day.

Pa Sloane came, or was pushed, forward. The baby was put into his arms; he realized that he was expected to keep it, and he was too dazed to refuse; besides, his heart went out to the child.

The auctioneer looked doubtfully at the money which Pa laid mutely down.

"I s'pose that part was only a joke," he said.

"Not a bit of it," said Robert Lawson. "All the money won't bee too much to pay the debts. There's a doctor's bill, and this will just about pay it."

Pa Sloane drove back home, with the sorrel mare still unshod, the baby, and the baby's meager bundle of clothes. The baby did not trouble him much; it had become well used to strangers in the past two months, and promptly fell asleep on his arm; but Pa Sloane did not enjoy that drive; at the end of it; he mentally saw Ma Sloane.

Ma was there, too, waiting for him on the back door-step as he drove into the yard at sunset. Her face, when she saw the baby, expressed the last degree of amazement.

"Pa Sloane," she demanded, "whose is that young one, and there did you get it?"

"I--I--bought it at the auction, Ma," said Pa feebly. Then he waited for the explosion. None came. This last exploit of Pa's was too much for Ma.

With a gasp she snatched the baby from Pa's arms, and ordered him to go out and put the mare in. When Pa returned to the kitchen Ma had set the baby on the sofa, fenced him around with chairs so that he couldn't fall off and given him a molassed cookie.

"Now, Pa Sloane, you can explain," she said.

Pa explained. Ma listened in grim silence until he had finished. Then she said sternly:

"Do you reckon we're going to keep this baby?"

"I--I--dunno," said Pa. And he didn't.

"Well, we're NOT. I brought up one boy and that's enough. I don't calculate to be pestered with any more. I never was much struck on children as children, anyhow. You say that Mary Garland had a brother out in Mantioba? Well, we shall just write to him and tell him he's got to look out for his nephew."

"But how can you do that, Ma, when nobody knows his address?" objected Pa, with a wistful look at that delicious, laughing baby.

"I'll find out his address if I have to advertise in the papers for him," retorted Ma. "As for you, Pa Sloane, you're not fit to be out of a lunatic asylum. The next auction you'll be buying a wife, I s'pose?"

Pa, quite crushed by Ma's sarcasm, pulled his chair in to supper. Ma picked up the baby and sat down at the head of the table. Little Teddy laughed and pinched her face--Ma's face! Ma looked very grim, but she fed him his supper as skilfully as if it had not been thirty years since she had done such a thing. But then, the woman who once learns the mother knack never forgets it.

After tea Ma despatched Pa over to William Alexander's to borrow a high chair. When Pa returned in the twilight, the baby was fenced in on

the sofa again, and Ma was stepping briskly about the garret. She was bringing down the little cot bed her own boy had once occupied, and setting it up in their room for Teddy. Then she undressed the baby and rocked him to sleep, crooning an old lullaby over him. Pa Sloane sat quietly and listened, with very sweet memories of the long ago, when he and Ma had been young and proud, and the bewhiskered William Alexander had been a curly-headed little fellow like this one.

Ma was not driven to advertising for Mrs. Garland's brother. That personage saw the notice of his sister's death in a home paper and wrote to the Carmody postmaster for full information. The letter was referred to Ma and Ma answered it.

She wrote that they had taken in the baby, pending further arrangements, but had no intention of keeping it; and she calmly demanded of its uncle what was to be done with it. Then she sealed and addressed the letter with an unfaltering hand; but, when it was done, she looked across the table at Pa Sloane, who was sitting in the armchair with the baby on his knee. They were having a royal good time together. Pa had always been dreadfully foolish about babies. He looked ten years younger. Ma's keen eyes softened a little as she watched them.

A prompt answer came to her letter. Teddy's uncle wrote that he had six children of his own, but was nevertheless willing and glad to give his little nephew a home. But he could not come after him. Josiah Spencer, of White Sands, was going out to Manitoba in the spring. If Mr. and Mrs.

Sloane could only keep the baby till then he could be sent out with the Spencers. Perhaps they would see a chance sooner.

"There'll be no chance sooner," said Pa Sloane in a tone of satisfaction.

"No, worse luck!" retorted Ma crisply.

The winter passed by. Little Teddy grew and throve, and Pa Sloane worshipped him. Ma was very good to him, too, and Teddy was just as fond of her as of Pa.

Nevertheless, as the spring drew near, Pa became depressed. Sometimes he sighed heavily, especially when he heard casual references to the Josiah Spencer emigration.

One warm afternoon in early May Josiah Spencer arrived. He found Ma knitting placidly in the kitchen, while Pa nodded over his newspaper and the baby played with the cat on the floor.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Sloane," said Josiah with a flourish. "I just dropped in to see about this young man here. We are going to leave next Wednesday; so you'd better send him down to our place Monday or Tuesday, so that he can get used to us, and--"

"Oh, Ma," began Pa, rising imploringly to his feet.

Ma transfixed him with her eye.

"Sit down, Pa," she commanded.

Unhappy Pa sat.

Then Ma glared at the smiling Josiah, who instantly felt as guilty as if he had been caught stealing sheep red-handed.

"We are much obliged to you, Mr. Spencer," said Ma icily, "but this baby is OURS. We bought him, and we paid for him. A bargain is a bargain. When I pay cash down for babies, I propose to get my money's worth. We are going to keep this baby in spite of any number of uncles in Manitoba. Have I made this sufficiently clear to your understanding, Mr. Spencer?"

"Certainly, certainly," stammered the unfortunate man, feeling guiltier than ever, "but I thought you didn't want him--I thought you'd written to his uncle--I thought--"

"I really wouldn't think quite so much if I were you," said Ma kindly.

"It must be hard on you. Won't you stay and have tea with us?"

But, no, Josiah would not stay. He was thankful to make his escape with such rags of self-respect as remained to him.

Pa Sloane arose and came around to Ma's chair. He laid a trembling hand on her shoulder.

"Ma, you're a good woman," he said softly.

"Go 'long, Pa," said Ma.