

child. She caught a train at four thirty-five and actually trudged the five miles from the station to the farm...

Chapter IV

High Prairie swains failed to find Selina alluring. She was too small, too pale and fragile for their robust taste.

On her fifth Sunday in the district she accompanied the Pools to the morning service at the Dutch Reformed church.

Selina's appearance had made quite a stir of which she was entirely unaware. As the congregation entered by twos and threes she thought they resembled strolling woodcut in an old illustrated book she once had seen.

"Who's that?" whispered Selina to Maartje.

"Widow Paarenberg. She is rich like anything."

"Yes?" Selina was fascinated.

"Look once how she makes eyes at him."

"At him? Who? Who?"

"Pervus DeJong. By Gerrit Pon he is sitting with the blue shirt and sad looking so."

Selina craned, peered. "The-oh-he's very good looking, isn't he?"

"Sure. Widow Paarenberg is stuck on him. See how she—Sh-sh-sh—Reverend Dekker looks at us. I tell you after."

ders, the muscular powerful legs in their ill-fitting Sunday blacks. He shook his head, gathered up the reins, and drove away, leaving the Widow Paarenberg to carry off with such bravado as she could muster this public fouting in full sight of the Dutch Reformed congregation of High Prairie.

"Well!" exclaimed Selina, feeling as though she had witnessed the first act of an exciting play. And breathed deeply. So, too, did the watching congregation. So that the widow could be said to have driven off in quite a gust.

As they jogged home in the Pool farm wagon Maartje told her tale with a good deal of savor.

Pervus DeJong had been left a widow two years before. Within a month of that time Leendert Paarenberg had died, leaving to his widow the richest and most profitable farm in the whole community.

It was on this Pervus DeJong, then, that the Widow Paarenberg of the rich acres, the comfortable farmhouse, the gold neck chain, the silk gowns, the soft white hands and the cooking talents, had set her affections.

Feeling that the entire community was urging him toward this profitable match with the plump, rich, red-lipped widow, Pervus set his will like a stubborn steer and would have none of her.

The very first time that Pervus DeJong met Selina he had a chance to protect her. With such a start, the end was inevitable. Then, too, Selina and on the wine-colored cashmere and was trying hard to keep the tears back in full view of the whole of High Prairie.

The service ended, there was much talk of the weather, seedlings, stock, the approaching holiday season. Maartje, her Sunday dinner heavy on her mind, was elbowing her way up the aisle.

Maartje's own basket was of gigantic proportions and staggering content. Her sandwiches were cubic blocks; her pickles clubs of cucumber; her pies vast plateaus.

The basket provided for Selina, while not quite so large, still was of appalling size as Selina contemplated it. She decided, suddenly, that she would have none of it.

She had the kitchen to herself. Jakob was in the fields or out-houses. The house was deliciously quiet. Selina rummaged for the shoe box, lined it with a sheet of tissue paper, rolled up her sleeves, got out mixing bowl, flour, pans. Cup cakes were her ambition. She baked six of them.

They came out a beautiful brown but somewhat leaden. Still, anything was better than a wedge of soggy pie. She told herself. She boiled eggs very hard, halved them, devilled their yolks, filled the whites neatly with this mixture and clapped the halves together again, skewering them with a toothpick.

Selina, balancing her box carefully, opened the door that led to the wooden stairway. The hall was on the second floor. The clamor that struck her ears had the effect of a physical blow.

High and shrill came his voice. "What am I bid! What am I bid!"



What Am I Bid! Thirty Cent! Shame on You, Gentlemen!

Thirty cents! Thirty-five! Shame on you, gentlemen. What am I bid! Who'll make it forty?"

Selina felt a little thrill of excitement. She looked about for a place on which to lay her wraps, espied a cloth that appeared empty, rolled her cloak, muffler, and hood into a neat bundle, and about to cast it into the box, saw, returned to her from its depths, the round pink faces of the sleeping Kuyper twins, aged six months. Oh, dear!

In desperation Selina placed her bundle on the floor in a corner, smoothed down the red cashmere, snatched up her lunch box and made for the doorway with the childish eagerness of one out of the crowd to be in it. She wondered where Maartje and Klaas Pool were in this close-packed roomful; and Roelf. In the doorway she found that broad black-coated backs shut off sight and ingress. She had written her name neatly on her lunch box. Now she was at a loss to find a way to reach Adam Ooms. She eyed the great-shouldered expense just ahead of her. In desperation she decided to dig into it with a corner of her box. She dug, viciously. The back winced. Its owner turned. "Here! What—"

Selina looked up into the wrathful face of Pervus DeJong. Pervus DeJong looked down into the startled eyes of Selina Peake. Large enough eyes at any time; enormous now in her fright at what she had done.

"I'm sorry! I'm—sorry, I thought if I could—there's no way of getting my lunch box up there—such a crowd—"

A slim, appealing, lovely little figure in the wine-red cashmere, amidst all those boxom bosoms, and over-heated bodies, and flushed faces. His gaze left her reluctantly, settled on the lunch box, became, if possible, more bewildered. "That? Lunch box?"

"Yes. For the raffle. I'm the school teacher. Selina Peake."

He nodded. "I saw you in church Sunday."

"You did? I didn't think you. . . Did you?"

He took the shoe box. She waited. He plowed his way through the crowd like a juggernaut, reached Adam Ooms' platform and placed the box inconspicuously next a colossal hamper that was one of a dozen grouped awaiting Adam's attention. When he had made his way back to Selina he again said, "Wait," and plunged down the

wooden stairway. Selina waited. She had ceased to feel distressed at her inability to find the Pools in the crowd, despite though she was. When presently he came back he had in his hand an empty wooden soap box. This he up-ended in the doorway just behind the crowd stationed there. Selina mounted it; found her head a little above the level of his. She could survey the room from end to end. There were the Pools. She waved to Maartje; smiled at Roelf. He made as though to come toward her; did come part way, and was restrained by Maartje catching at his coat tail.

Adam Ooms gavel (a wooden potato masher) crashed for silence. "Ladies!" (Crash) "And gents!" (Crash) "Gents! Look what basket we've got here!"

Look indeed. A great hamper, grown so plithoric that it could no longer wear its cover. Its contents belled into a mound smoothly covered with a fine white cloth whose glistening surface proclaimed it damask. A Himalaya among hampers. You knew that under that snowy crust lay gold that was fowl done crisply, succulently; emeralds in the form of gherkins; rubies that melted into strawberry preserves; cakes frosted like diamonds; to say nothing of such semi-precious jewels as potato salad; cheeses; sour cream to be spread on rye bread and butter; coffee cakes; crullers.

Crash! "The Widow Paarenberg's basket, ladies—and gents: The Widow Paarenberg! I don't know what's in it. You don't know what's in it. We don't have to know what's in it. Who has eaten Widow Paarenberg's chicken once don't have to know. Who has eaten Widow Paarenberg's cake once don't have to know. What am I bid on Widow Paarenberg's basket! What am I bid! What's bid what's bid what's bid!" (Crash)!

The widow herself, very handsome in black silk, her gold neck chain rising and falling richly with the little flurry that now agitated her broad bosom, was seated in a chair against the wall not five feet from the auctioneer's stand. She bridled now, blushed, cast down her eyes, cast up her eyes, succeeded in looking as unconscious as a complaisant Turkish slave girl on the block.

Adam Ooms' glance swept the hall until it reached the tall figure towering in the doorway—reached it, and rested there. His gimlet eyes seemed to bore their way into Pervus DeJong's steady stare. He raised his right arm aloft, brandishing the potato masher. The whole room fixed its gaze on the blond head in the doorway. "Speak up! Young men of High Prairie! Heh, you, Pervus DeJong! What's bid what's bid what's bid!"

"Fifty cents!" The bid came from Gerrit Pon at the other end of the hall. A dash of effort, as a start, in this district where one dollar often represented the profits on a whole load of market truck brought to the city.

Crash! went the potato masher. "Fifty cents I'm bid. Who'll make it seventy-five? Who'll make it seventy-five?"

"Sixty!" Johannes Ambuhl, a widower, his age more than the sum of his bid.

"Seventy!" Gerrit Pon. Adam Ooms whispered it—blessed it. "Se-se-seventy. Ladies and gents, I wouldn't repeat out loud such a figger. I would be ashamed. Look at this basket, gents, and then you can say—se-se-seventy!"

"Seventy-five!" the cautious Ambuhl.

Scarlet, flooding her face, belied the widow's outward air of composure. Pervus DeJong, standing beside Selina, viewed the proceedings with an air of detachment. High Prairie was looking at him expectantly, openly. The widow bit her lip, tossed her head. Pervus DeJong returned the auctioneer's meaning smirk with the mild gaze of a disinterested outsider.

"Gents!" Adam Ooms' voice took on a fearful note—the tone of one who is more hurt than angry. "Gents!" Slowly, with infinite reverence, he lifted one corner of the damask cloth that concealed the hamper's contents—lifted it and peered within as at a treasure. At what he saw there he started back dramatically, at once rapturous, despairing, amazed. He rolled his eyes. He snatched his lips. He rubbed his stomach. The sort of dumb show that, since the days of the Greek drama, has been used to denote gastronomic delight.

"Eighty!" was wrenched suddenly from Goris Von Vuuren, the nineteen-year-old fat and gluttonous son of a prosperous New Haarlem farmer.

Adam Ooms rubbed brisk palms together. "Now then! A dollar! A dollar! It's an insult to this basket to make it less than a dollar." He leaned far forward over his improvised pulpit. "Did I hear you say a dollar, Pervus DeJong?" DeJong stared, immovable, unabashed. "Eighty-eighty-eighty-eighty—gents! I'm going to tell you something. I'm going to whisper a secret." His lean face was veined with craftiness. "Gents. Listen. It isn't chicken in this beautiful basket. It isn't chicken. It's—roast duck!" He eyed back, mopped his brow with his red handkerchief, held one hand high in the air. His last said.

"Eighty-five!" groaned the fat Goris Von Vuuren.

"Eighty-five! Eighty-five! Eighty-five! Eighty-five! Eighty-five! Eighty-five! Eighty-five! Eighty-five! Eighty-five! Eighty-five!" (Crash) "Gone to Goris Von Vuuren for eighty-five."

the doorway, bidding to teacher as if he had known each other for years was Pervus DeJong with his money in his pocket. It was as good as a play Adam Ooms was angry. His lean fox-like face became pinched with spite. He prided himself on his antics as auctioneer; and his chef d'oeuvre had brought a meager eighty-five cents, besides doubtless winning him the com- plicity of that profitable store customer, the Widow Paarenberg. Goris Von Vuuren came forward to claim his prize amidst shouting, clapping, laughter. The great hamper was handed down to him.

Adam Ooms scuffed about among the many baskets at his feet. His nostrils looked pinched and his skinning hands shook a little as he searched for one small object.

When he stood upright once more he was smiling. His little eyes gleamed. His wooden scepter pounded for silence. High in one hand, balanced daintly on his finger tips, he held Selina's little white shoe box, with its red ribbon binding it, and the plume of evergreen stuck in the ribbon. Affecting great solicitude he brought it down then to read the name written on it; held it aloft again, smiling.

"Ladies—and gents! Here's a dainty little tidbit. Here's something not only for the inner man, but a feast for the eyes. Well, boys, if the last lot was too much for you this lot ought to be just about right. If the food ain't quite enough for you, you can tie the ribbon in the lady's hair and put the pony in your bottomhole and there you are. There you are! What's more, the lady herself goes with it. You don't get a country girl with this here box, gents. A city girl, you can tell by looking at it, just. And who is she? Who did up this dainty little box just big enough for two?" He inspected it again, solemnly, and added, as an afterthought, "If you ain't feeling specially hungry. Who?" He looked about, apishly.

Selina's cheeks matched her gown. Her eyes were wide and dark with the effort she was making to force back the hot haze threatening them. Why had she mounted this wretched soap box! Why had she come to this hideous party! Why had she come to High Prairie! Why!

"Miss Selina Peake, that's who. Miss Selina Peake!"

A hundred balloon faces pulled by a single cord turned toward her as she stood there on the box for all to see. They swam toward her. She put up a hand to push them back.

"What'm I bid! What'm I bid! What'm I bid for this here lovely little toothful, gents! Start her up!"

"Five cents!" piped up old Johannes Ambuhl, with a snicker. The tittering crowd broke into a guffaw. Selina was conscious of a little sick feeling at the pit of her stomach. Through the haze she saw the widow's face, no longer sulky, but smiling now. She saw Roelf's dark dark head. His face was set, like a man's. He was coming toward her, or trying to, but the crowd wedged him in, small as he was among those great bodies. She lost sight of him. How hot it was! How hot. . . . An arm at her waist. Someone had mounted the little box and stood teetering there beside her, pressed against her slightly, reassuringly. Pervus DeJong. Her head was on a level with the doorway, on the soap box, for all High Prairie to see.

"Five cents I'm bid for this lovely little mouthful put up by the school teacher's own fair hands. Five cents! Five—"

"One dollar!" Pervus DeJong.

The balloon faces were suddenly punctured with holes. High Prairie's jaw dropped with astonishment. Its mouth stood open.

There was nothing plain about Selina now. Her dark head was held high, and his fair one beside it made a vivid foil. The purchase of the wine-colored cashmere was at last justified.

"And ten!" cackled old Johannes Ambuhl, his rheumy eyes on Selina. Art and human spitefulness struggled visibly for mastery in Adam Ooms' face—and art won. The auctioneer triumphed over the man. The terms "crowd psychology" was unknown to him, but he was artist enough to sense that some curious magic process, working through this roomful of people, had transformed the little white box, from a thing despised and ridiculed, into an object of beauty, of value, of infinite desirability. He now eyed it in a catalogue of admiration.

"One-ten I'm bid for this box all tied with a ribbon to match the gown of the girl who brought it. Gents, you get the ribbon, the lunch, and the girl. And only one-ten bid for all that. Gents! Gents! Remember, it ain't only a lunch—it's a picture. It pleases the eyes. Do I hear one—"

"Five bids!" Barend DeRoos, of Low Prairie, in the lists. A strapping young Dutchman, the Brom Bones of the district. He drove to the Haymarket with his load of produce and played cards all night on the wagon under the gas torches while the street girls of the neighborhood assailed him in vain. Six feet three, his red face shone now like a harvest moon above the crowd. A merry, mischievous eye that laughed at Pervus DeJong and his dollar bid.

"Dollar and a half!" A high clear voice—a boy's voice. Roelf.

"Oh, no!" said Selina aloud. But she was unheard in the gable. Roelf had once confided to her that he had saved three dollars and fifty cents in the last three years. Five dollars would purchase a set of tools that his mind had been fixed on for months past. Selina saw Klaas Pool's look of astonishment changing to anger. Saw Maartje Pool's quick hand on his arm, restraining him.

"Two dollars!" Pervus DeJong. "And ten." Johannes Ambuhl's cautious bid.

"Two and a quarter." Barend DeRoos.

"Two-fifty!" Pervus DeJong. "Three dollars!" The high voice of the boy. It cracked a little on the last syllable, and the crowd laughed.

"Three-three-three-three-three-three. Three ones—"

"And a half." Pervus DeJong. "Three sixty." Pervus DeJong. "Four!" DeRoos. "And ten."

The boy's voice was heard no more. "I wish they'd stop," whispered Selina.

"Five!" Pervus DeJong. "Six!" DeRoos, his face very red. "And ten."

"Seven!" "It's only jelly sandwiches," said Selina to DeJong, in a panic.

"Eight!" Johannes Ambuhl, gone mad. "Nine!" DeRoos. "Nine! Nine I'm bid! Nine-nine-nine! Who'll make it—"

"Let him have it. The cup cakes fell a little. Don't—"

"Ten!" said Pervus DeJong. Barend DeRoos shrugged his great shoulders.

"Ten-ten-ten. Do I hear eleven? Do I hear ten-fifty. Ten-ten-ten-ten-ten-ten-ten-ten! Gents! Ten once, Ten



Gone—for Ten Dollars to Pervus DeJong.

twice! Gone—for ten dollars to Pervus DeJong. And a bargain! Adam Ooms mopped his bald head and his cheeks and the damp spot under his chin.

Ten dollars. Adam Ooms knew, as did all the countryside, this was not the sum of ten dollars merely. No basket of food, though it contained nightingales' tongues, the golden apple of Atlantis, wines of rare vintage, could have been adequate recompense for these ten dollars. They represented sweat and blood; toil and hardship; hours under the burning prairie sun at midday; work doggedly carried on through the drenching showers of spring; nights of restless sleep snatched an hour at a time under the sky in the Chicago market place; miles of weary travel down the rude corduroy road between High Prairie and Chicago, now up to the hubs in mud, now blinded by dust and blowing sand.

A sale at Christie's, with a miniature going for a million, could not have met with a deeper hush, a more dramatic babble following the hush.

They ate their lunch together in one corner of Adam Ooms' hall. Selina opened the box and took out the devilled eggs, and the cup cakes that had fallen a little, and the apples, and the sandwiches sliced very, very thin. The coldly appraising eye of all High Prairie, Low Prairie, and New Haarlem watched this sparse provender emerge from the ribbon-tied shoe box. She offered him a sandwich. It looked infinitesimal in his great paw. Suddenly all Selina's agony of embarrassment was swept away, and she was laughing, not wildly or hysterically, but joyously and girlishly. She snatched her little white teeth into one of the absurd sandwiches and looked at him, expecting to find him laughing, too. But he wasn't laughing. He looked very earnest, and his blue eyes were fixed hard on the bit of bread in his hand, and his face was very red and clean-shaven. He bit into the sandwich and chewed it solemnly. And Selina thought: "Why, the dear thing! The great big dear thing! And he might have been eating bread of duck. . . . Ten dollars!" Aloud she said, "What made you do it?"

He seemed not to hear her; bit ruminantly into one of the cup cakes. Suddenly: "I can't hardly write at all, only to sign my name and like that."

"Read?"

"Only to spell out the words. Anyways I don't get time for reading. But figuring I wish I knew. Arithmetic. I can figger some, but those fellows in Haymarket they are too sharp for me. They do numbers in their head—like that, so quick."

"Read?"

"Only to spell out the words. Anyways I don't get time for reading. But figuring I wish I knew. Arithmetic. I can figger some, but those fellows in Haymarket they are too sharp for me. They do numbers in their head—like that, so quick."

(Continued next week)