

Babe's Last Prayer

By P. J. Cooney.

BABE was a bear—a round, plump bundle of brown fur; soft, padded paws; twinkling, mischievous eyes, and an inquisitive nose that was forever getting him into trouble.

Since the day, a year ago, when Farmer John Clayton had carried him home beside the body of his slaughtered dam, Babe had been the pet and playing of the boys at the Clayton Farm. He followed them about like a dog, wrestled with them on the grass in the shadows of the old orchard, fussed with the cat and squabbled with the old hound whenever he could tease that dignified dog into a recognition of his existence. But for Mrs. Clayton and her broom he had a wholesome respect, remembering the many times his explorations among her pots and pans had ended in his own hurried and ignominious exit from the kitchen door.

But today Babe was ill at ease. It was the first day of the fall school term; the boys had mysteriously disappeared, and he was lonesome. There were no shouting lads in the shadows of the old orchard, and the great barn was silent and empty.

Restlessly he sniffed along the path, waddled out the open gate, and, raising himself erect, gazed wistfully down the road. There was no one in sight. He slapped at a butterfly flitting above his head, lurched after it a few steps, then promptly forgot about it to inspect the end of a grass-grown log. For half an hour he loitered lazily along the sunlit road nosing at numerous anthills and pausing to nibble at the raspberries that grew ripe and luscious along the rail fence.

Suddenly he stood erect. To his nostrils had come the familiar and not unwelcome scent of man; he could hear the low murmur of voices. His shrewd little eyes were scanning the verandaed front of the log school house. The open door invited investigation. Quietly he drew himself up the steps and into the lobby. For a space he stood staring up at the long row of caps and lunch baskets, on the pegs above his head. Odors of bread, cooked meats and other desirable eatables drifted down to his uplifted nose. Rising on his haunches, he tore a package from its fastening and was greedily devouring its contents, when a young woman, book in hand, stepped into the lobby. Her startled scream brought a rush of feet, then a simultaneous burst of laughter.

"Why teacher," said 12-year-old George Clayton, "it's only Babe, my tame bear. He won't hurt anyone. I'll take him home. Come, Babe, you rascal. Come home."

Obediently, but reluctantly, the bear abandoned the feast and followed the boy out the door and down the road.

It was Babe's first visit to the school house, but by no means his last. The tempting array of goodies in the lunch baskets was too pleasant a prospect to be readily relinquished. Hardly a week thereafter but he was unceremoniously ejected from the lobby, repeated experiences which taught him guile. He soon learned to steal noiselessly up the steps, slip through the door, snatch a lunch from the pegs and disappear unnoticed into the shrubbery.

II.

"You will have to do something about the bear, father," protested Mrs. Clayton. "For three years now the teachers at the school have been complaining about him. He is always getting out of the barn, and they can't keep the door at the school closed these hot days. Mike Dolan, one of the trustees, called today to see you about it."

"Yes, I'm afraid so," agreed her husband. "He is three years old now, and I notice that he is losing his playfulness. A cub is all right, but a full-grown bear— Oh, well, I suppose we can sell him for a good price to the butcher. Bear steaks are getting to be something of a rarity."

"Dad! Oh-h-h-h, dad," gasped George Clayton in indignant amazement, "sell old Babe to the butcher! Oh, you wouldn't, dad, you wouldn't."

"I'm afraid so, my boy," said the father thoughtfully. "You see, he's

almost full grown now, and he'll soon be getting cross and mean."

"Babe mean?" protested the lad. "Why, dad, he's just that gentle he'll do anything I tell him. Look here."

"Babe—come Babe," he called into the dusk.

Babe, grown larger and heavier now, came swinging into the room, his nose expectantly erect.

"Roll over, Babe—roll over," the boy commanded.

The animal shuffled uncertainly, his little eyes fixed on the piece of bread in George's hand, then he sank to the floor, and, with a grumbled whine, accomplished the feat.

"Now, I'll show you his best trick," announced the boy. "Now, Babe, say your prayers—say your prayers." He held out a piece of meat at arm's length.

The bear rocked back and forth for a moment, then with an impatient "woof" he sat himself erect. His head sank on his chest and he covered his eyes with his paws.

"Woof, woof," he grunted.

The father laughed outright. "Well, George, we'll see. It does seem a pity. Perhaps we can sell him to a circus. At any rate," he concluded, "we'll sleep over it."

That night, long after the lights in the Clayton home were extinguished the shadowy silence was disturbed by the slow pad, pad of footsteps on the soft grass, as the shambling figure of Babe shuffled around the corner of the building. Nose low, head swinging, he wandered to the brow of the hill overlooking the railroad track and the river road.

Across the wide moonlit world breathed a warm wind laden with the mysterious alluring message of the springtime. Babe stood erect, his paws drooping, his gaze fastened on the black stretch of piney woods across the stream, his nostrils quivering to every vagrant gust. Then he dropped to all fours, whined pathetically, shuffled about restlessly for a moment, and again rose on his haunches.

Above the ceaseless song of the river came the hoot of an owl and the long-drawn howl of a far-distant wolf. Babe's throat rumbled a low response. Something away far off in the depths of the dark woods was calling—calling to him. It was the voice of the wilderness, the wilderness but dimly remembered—the racial memory of wide untrodden spaces, of dark retreats, where the shadows and sunspots played on carpets of crumpled leaves, where cool streams loitered lazily between moss-grown banks and ancient tree trunks. The wilderness was calling its own.

"Woof, woof," he grunted gently with uplifted nose.

Uncertainly he shambled down the slope, climbed the fence, swung across the road and the railway track and into the pines by the river edge. He paused for a moment to drink, then stood staring longingly at the farm house standing darkly silhouetted against the starlit sky.

Five minutes later, wet and dripping, he clambered out of the water on the opposite shore, and, striking a woodland path, cantered away. No hesitation, no uncertainty now as the miles fell away behind him. But into his movements had come something of furtiveness. The rumble of a wagon on a corduroy road caused him to sink behind a bush and await its passing. He gave clearings and homesteads a wide berth and before morning had crept into a cleft of rocks, eighteen miles distant on the edge of the untrodden wilderness that swept in billows of misty blue away to the Laurentian Hills.

He awoke with the dawn, ravenously hungry. Tearing apart a rotting log, he was busy feasting on the white grubs, when he raised his head and stood stark still, his body quivering, every nerve alert.

From the bushes to the right came a rustling and a loud grunt. The shrubbery parted, and another bear, smaller than Babe and lighter in color, emerged into the open. For a brief space the two animals eyed each other, then they drifted together, and their

muzzles met with soft whimpering grunts of pleasure.

Deliberately, masterfully Babe started away. He paused and glanced back with a pre-emptory grunt. The other obediently followed, and the two set out at a steady pace towards the deeper recesses of the forest.

The wilderness had claimed its own again.

III.

Ten years had passed; Old Babe and his mischievous pranks were but a half-forgotten memory.

John Clayton, older and grayer now, stepped out on the kitchen porch, and, shading his eyes with his hand, gazed anxiously to the northward, where a gray pall mounting high to the firmament told of a forest fire. The acrid smell of smoke was heavy on the morning air.

"If the breeze from the north holds, it will be into the settlements in 24 hours," he commented to his wife. "Have you heard anything of the fire, George," he inquired of his eldest son, who, burdened with two milk pails, came striding up to the door. The lanky school boy was now a lithe young man of 25.

"Looks bad, dad," he responded. "Fire jumped the Waba Creek last night. Woods are full of bob cats and game clearing out before it. Frank Hawkins, they say, shot a deer in his clearing this morning. Good thing it's the open season."

"Better take the pony," suggested his father, "and ride down the road to McNab's and find out if he has heard anything."

"Believe I will. I'll just take the gun along in case I should meet some venison on the hoof."

He stepped to the wall, took down the rifle from the pegs and hurried toward the stables.

IV.

Ten years had brought no change to the gray weather-beaten log school house, save that other children filled the long benches and another teacher, a tired, sharp-faced woman, sat at the desk. She rapped loudly for order. All day the children had been strangely restless.

"Can't you sit quietly in your seats? You seem to be all upset about the forest fire. Sarah, see what is making that noise in the lobby."

A big girl left her place and glanced through the doorway. Her instantaneous scream, "It's a bear—a big bear," brought twenty startled children to their feet.

"Nonsense, Sarah—"

A loud shuffling drowned the teacher's voice. Then the doorway framed a frightful apparition. Erect to his full height of over five feet stood a monstrous bear, shaggy of coat, grizzled with years. His mouth was slightly open, showing his red tongue, his sharp white teeth. His little eyes were twinkling merrily.

A silent moment of awe-struck horror, and then, with screams of terror, teacher and pupils rushed for the open windows and scrambled to outer safety.

The animal dropped to the floor, sniffed curiously along the row of empty benches, then lumbered back to the lobby, seized a paper-covered package and plodded on down the roadway. A moment later he was hidden in a low-lying clump of cedars.

V.

George Clayton, cantering down the road, suddenly reined his horse. From the cedars to the right came the sound of voices.

Dropping from the saddle, he broke through the first of the shrubbery to meet an excited assemblage of men armed with guns and pitchforks.

"It's a bear, George—he's in there," explained an elderly man. "Come on, you and I will go in and drive him out."

With guns at hip, the two cautiously advanced through a narrow lane-like opening in the cedars, ears and eyes alert for sign or sound of the quarry.

As he caught sight of the two men the bear raised his head from the scattered papers at his feet. There was no sign of fear in his steady scrutiny, only eager, curious interest. He advanced a step towards them and grunted questioningly. Then Clayton's rifle spoke.

The bear lurched sidewise, turned and snapped at his side, then tumbled over, clutching and clawing at the

grass. At the sound of the shot the others came plunging through the bushes.

"Keep back—keep back there," warned George's companion. "He may make a rush. Say, he's a big fellow."

But from the bear came no motion. He lay on his side, gurgling weakly, a trickle of blood flowing from his mouth. One of the men raised his gun.

"Better give him another."

"No, no; he's done for."

George Clayton stepped nearer. "Lord, what a whopper! I haven't seen a bear," he said reminiscently, "since our Babe ran away. That was some smart bear. He'd do all sorts of tricks. Roll over, and stand up, and say his prayers."

At the sound of Clayton's voice the animal stirred uneasily, opened his eyes and raised his head inquiringly. Then he slowly scrambled to his feet. Shouts of warning came from the spectators; a rifle cracked, but the bullet whizzed harmlessly above the creature's head.

Weakly, laboriously, with every effort of his fast waning strength, the great beast raised himself on his haunches, his chin dropped and his paws met over his nose.

"Woof, woof," he grunted gently. The great, hairy body collapsed in a thudding heap. A quiver, a gasp, then the mighty limbs stiffened in a slow contortion. Old Babe was dead.

George Clayton dropped his gun and bent over the prostrate figure. His face was working strangely.

"Boys, it was him—it was Old Babe, come back after all these years, and it was me—" the words lumped in his throat, "it was me that killed him."

The Polite Jap.

"In your country you compress the women's feet, do you not?"

"No, madam," responded the Japanese. "That is, or rather was, a Chinese custom. In Japan we allow our ladies' feet to grow to their full size."

And then, after a bow, he added in the politest of tones:

"Not that they could ever hope to rival yours, madam."

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