



Shenandoah Home

by Sara Mitchell

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Sloan grumbled all the way down the weed-choked lane that meandered past his recently purchased house, grumbled all the way down the two-track road leading into Tom's Brook, and vowed with every step after he headed north on the Valley Pike that he was turning around and returning home. Now. By four o'clock though, when he was twenty minutes past Strasburg, he had changed tactics. He badgered God instead, demanding answers.

He still couldn't believe he'd given in to this inexplicable but infuriatingly persistent urge to *walk* to Winchester to retrieve his horse, for crying out loud. All right, yes, He'd known since he'd taken possession of the gone-to-seed farmhouse that eventually he'd have to either fetch Dulcie or sell her to the livery owner who'd been caring for her.

Mr. Grigsby had written Sloan twice in the past two weeks, wanting to know what Sloan planned to do. Dulcie had recovered completely from her lameness, and Mr. Grigsby had declared a liking for her malleable disposition. She'd be a fine addition to his stable...

Feeling a strange reluctance to doom the faithful mare to the oft-times brutal life of a livery back, Sloan had balked at selling. Until this morning he'd also balked at interrupting his work to fetch his horse. Over the past week he'd been installing new mantels over the fireplaces – marble in the front parlor, carved mahogany in the sitting room and his bedroom. The trip to Winchester would waste an entire day, even if he caught a northbound train at Tom's Brook.

Adding insult to injury, at dawn he'd been pulled from a dreamless sleep, awakened by the vague notion that there was something important he was supposed to do that day. As though something had grabbed the back of his neck and shaken him, demanding his attention. But he knew it had been Someone, not something, and he'd been angered at the intrusion.

Two years earlier Sloan would have listened without questioning for what he had come to recognize as God's spirit-manifestation in his life. He would have waited, confident and alert, for the Lord to reveal how Sloan could serve Him this time. Usually it required a middle-of-the-night trip to deliver a child, set a broken bone or two... with depressing frequency to offer

comfort to the dying. Once, heeding that inner urging, he'd woken a brakeman and his wife, both healthy as market-bound hogs, from a sound sleep. The wife shrilled invective, while the bleary-eyed brakeman threatened to break his interfering nose before slamming the door in Sloan's face.

Sloan had barely climbed back into the buggy when the brakeman yelled his name. Seemed as though the surly fellow had stopped on his way back to bed to check on his mother, who lived with them. Turned out the woman had awakened and was suffering a cardiac asthma attack, complicated by hysteric angina. If a qualified physician hadn't been on the spot, she could have died within an hour.

On this particular morning, however, instead of heeding the call, Sloan grumbled defiantly, rolled over, and went back to sleep.

When he jerked awake a second time to that prickling sense of urgency, rebellion rather than obedience dictated his actions. "I won't listen to You!" he'd shouted, stomping down the stairs to the kitchen to grind some coffee. No longer was he a healer, a shepherd to God's wounded sheep. *Sheep, ha!* More like jackals, snapping and snarling, biting into his soul until it bled dry. He'd devoted his life to a profession that had crushed him, pledged his fidelity to a woman who had betrayed him, and trusted his soul to a God who demanded the impossible.

So why was he here, swearing and coated with road dust? Sloan asked himself for the dozenth time in the last hour. He glared at the medical bag he'd picked up out of habit on his way out the door, then lifted it above his head. "I'm selling this in Winchester!" he shouted to the sky. "I'm through with doctoring, do You hear?"

The echo of his voice mocked him. But a cool breeze blew across the road, caressing his perspiring face. The bitterness he wore like a suit of armor could not deflect a sensation of... of an understanding hand, patting him on the back.

And gently nudging him down the steep incline toward the rickety old bridge that crossed Cedar Creek.

Half ashamed, Sloan stopped in the middle of the structure to listen to the running water, reluctantly enjoying the way late afternoon sunlight poured into the creek. Light and shadow, changing with every ripple. Like life, he supposed, except he wasn't in the mood to wax poetic, so he turned his attention to an indeterminable shape on the bank, about fifty yards east of the bridge. Looked like a pile of clothes, he decided, wondering with brief amusement who had lost their shirt.

Then the pile of clothes moved. Sloan leaned over the bridge, hands gripping the stone abutment. Seconds later he was running, slipping, rapidly maneuvering his way down to the water.



Meredith steamed into the lobby, her footsteps marching in a drumroll across the parquet floor. Oblivious to the startled looks and puzzled good-mornings from the hotel staff, she banged her way through the door that led to the back, shoved open the second set of doors, stalked across the thick carpet to Mr. Walker's office, and pounded on the door.

"Come in, before you knock it down."

She was in no mood for Benjamin Walker's unruffled sense of humor. "Have you seen the letter to the editor in this week's edition of the *Winchester Leader*?" She slammed the rolled-up paper onto the desk in front of him. "That — that *fiend* Mr. Clarke called you an unprincipled carpetbagger. He accuses you, and by inference anyone under your employ, of—wait. I'll read it."

She stalked around the desk. "Right here, '... of bleeding our struggling economy from local citizens until they've either expired or have themselves been trapped into employment by the nefarious'— nefarious! — 'Benjamin Walker.'" She glared. Her insides felt as though two tomcats were clawing each other in uncontrollable fury. "What are we going to do about it?"

"Well, I suppose my great-grandfather would have challenged Mr. J. Preston Clarke to a duel. Unfortunately those pistols—"

"Don't be ridiculous! This—"

"— were stolen back in '63. There's also the minor technicality that dueling is against the law."

"— is a gross insult, a-an underhanded pack of drivel designed to turn people against you so you won't be able to build the springs resort you've been planning for a year. A year!"

"Miss Sinclair—"

"Besides which, it's full of lies. You can't be a carpetbagger. Mrs. Biggs told me you were from Richmond. Your father fought with General Lee himself."

"Meredith, sit down, close your mouth, and take a deep breath. Better yet... take a dozen deep breaths." He rose, pointing to his huge leather office chair.

"Don't coddle me. I want to know, as your office manager, what you plan to do about this. I don't need to—" She broke off with a startled squeak with Mr. Walker's large hands closed over her shoulders and plonked her down into his vacated chair.

As always, the cyclone of emotion abruptly fizzled. She sat, now feeling chagrin instead of anger: She'd done it again. No matter how many times she promised herself that she'd be sweet tempered like Garnet, or at least as disciplined as Leah, somehow circumstances always tripped her up. And more often than not, in front of her employer.

If she were Benjamin Walker, she'd fire herself.

"Under control now?"

"I was never out of control." Defense was automatic. Meredith hated admitting she was wrong.

Benjamin Walker was the most annoying man she'd ever known. Just once, she'd like to see *him* lose the indefatigable control that surrounded him like a medieval suit of armor. He stood over her, arms folded, propped against the edge of his desk, looking as relaxed as if they'd just exchanged pleasantries about the weather. A look of polite amusement crinkled the corners of his eyes. It was a look he directed upon her a lot, and it never failed to irritate Meredith.

Irritate... and intimidate. Other than her father, she'd never met a man so comfortable with himself that he seldom raised his voice, seldom hurried – and never yielded an inch to anyone. Including Meredith.

"After working with you for almost a year, I've learned to value your astuteness about people," he said. "I also admire your integrity. But Miss Sinclair," he said, leaning down until he was so close Meredith felt the warmth of his breath against her ear, "the concept of control has never been one you seem able to grasp."

He straightened, picked up the paper, and began to read as though he were alone in the room.

Strangely flustered, Meredith pushed the chair back and stood. Was that last remark a veiled censure of just one of those mild quips he was fond of tossing her way, almost as though he enjoyed watching her response? No, definitely not the later, which implied flirtatious overtones. Over the last months she'd noted the manner of woman that interested Mr. Walker—all of them beautiful, all of them cosmopolitan ladies with pedigrees that made a plain ol' Meredith Sinclair more of a scruffy alley cat surrounded by pampered Persians. Her love of fashion did not include the resources to compete with such women, had she been so inclined. Which of course she wasn't. Neither was Benjamin Walker. After all, he was her employer.

"I think I'll invite Mr. J. Preston Clarke for dinner," Mr. Walker said.

"What?"

"Here, at my private table in the Shenandoah dining room." One eyebrow quirked. "Blink if you understand, Miss Sinclair."

Simmering, Meredith tugged the starched cuffs of her shirtwaist down over her wrists. “One of these days, Mr. Walker, your condescension is going to cost you the best office manager you ever hired.” No longer uncertain, she whisked sideways around the other side of the desk. “I’ll discuss appropriate menus with Gaspar – haggis, perhaps? An overstuffed sheep’s bladder seems appropriate for both of you.”

He chuckled and reached the door before Meredith, blocking her exit. For such a large man, he moved with surprising speed. “A novel concept. Unfortunately, Gaspar is likely to object to such a delicacy. To my knowledge he’s never attempted haggis and therefore might be reluctant. So how about if you and Lowell make arrangements to pay a call on Mr. Clarke? Issue the invitation and find out *his* favorite choice for a meal. You’ve read your scriptures, I daresay. Let’s try treating our enemy with kindness, hmm?”

“Yes, Mr. Walker.”

“And Miss Sinclair?” He paused, and Meredith tensed, not trusting the smooth face and narrowed gaze. “Try not to gut and fillet the poor fellow until he’s had a chance to defend himself, all right?”

“Certainly, Mr. Walker.” She smiled. “I’ll even extend the same courtesy to you.” She said through the door without looking back.

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