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THE PALUXY VALLEY

*"Many waters cannot quench love
Neither can the floods drown it."*

Songs of Solomon VIII, 7.

DURING INDIAN SUMMER, when the first nights of October had come, the autumn winds blew softly through opened windows of Texas farm homes. Rooms were filled with the coolness of the night air, and the big white moon rose in all its glory penetrating the dark shadows. The crisp leaves from vines and shrubs expelled exciting pungent sweet odors. On such nights young love grew deep and strong and full.

It was on such a night that Coke had called Lelia, "Sweet-heart", and then, as if fearful of his daring, had hurried away and left her to glory in his words. She watched him step into the shadows of the wooded area near her home and would have called him back, but she had nothing to say. Turning she rushed into the house and to an opened window to scan the forest edge for just another glimpse of Coke. Every now and then her fingers would caress her throat as she tried to calm this throbbing which was new to her. Now she knew why Coke had avoided her of late. She knew why he had left his ice cream half eaten and gone from Jessie's little confectionery when she had entered to get some special treat for Aunt Adeline. She knew why he had given all the little folks a drink at the pump, and why he had been so angry when she had given her drink to his sister, and had then given the cup to Dale to pump her drink. Her heart twisted in her bosom, and she moved restlessly about the moonlit room. She knew that the one she cared for had not forgotten her, but had wanted to be near her all along. She wondered about the rooster that had dis-

turbed prayer-meeting. She hoped that Coke was not unhappy and ashamed.

Aunt Adeline called from the adjoining room, "Is that you, Lelia?"

"Yes, Aunt Adeline."

"Are you sick? You're stirring around awfully late."

"No, Aunt Adeline. I'm just a-thinking."

"Well, you best think into bed. Might catch cold wandering this time of the night. Goodnight."

Aunt Adeline's voice was smothered in a yawn, but she had broken the happy trance, and Lelia was now ready to climb between the two clean white bed sheets. She was soon sound asleep, and the airy melodies which tickled her ears, tantalized her sweet dreams. Coke was far away on the highest hill, singing love's song to the skies.

The pie supper was the beginning of a series of dances and frolics. Lelia had told Dale at school that she was going with Coke. Dale had been shocked, then he had bullied, and at last entreated, but Lelia was a trifle headstrong at times, and she definitely preferred this date with Coke.

By the time the pearl gray clouds of the west were tinged with delicate pinks, lavenders, and reds, the valley people had begun to arrive at Rock Church for the pie supper. Couples cantered up on horseback; large families rolled in the big green wagons, and sweethearts, if they could manage, came in black hacks drawn by the most spirited horses they could find. There were carts pulled by oxen which lumbered in just as the chords of the organ wheezed the opening of the program.

Uncle John had lent to Best and Lelia his shining black two-seated hack. Best and Ola were in the back seat. Lelia and Coke handled the team. They were the last to enter the church that night. The four of them were pressed forward by a teasing mirthful crowd. They moved gaily to the front, their heads high and their arms akimbo to protect their highly decorated boxes. The two red and white crepe boxes were put high on a pedestal for all to see. The four young people then edged their way to the windows, fearing that they would have been left standing in the front of the overcrowded church.

The program for the evening began with group singing. When the songs were over, Earl Hanna played several variations of "Turkey in the Straw." Earl was only thirteen, but she had gone to the eastern music schools, and was a skilled musician. Her fingers danced gaily up and down the old organ as she pedaled vigorously to keep enough air in the leaking bellows to carry the melodies. The applause was thunderous, but sheer exhaustion prohibited her playing another melody. Perhaps there was purpose behind this bit of an exhibition. Uncle Davie Wood said that the funds from the supper were to be applied on a new organ. One that would have bellows in the back and one which, with assistance, the little organist could play all day. Now that the valley had a real musician, they must have an instrument that the valley would be proud to have and could enjoy.

Later Lelia gave a recitation from the *Caudle Lectures*, followed by Don Wood and Charlie Taylor in a banjo duet. Cave Meek's boy gave a fair imitation of the song birds, and the valley quartet sang.

At last came the auctioning of the pies. Aunt Mary Woods' box went first after three bids, 25—35—50 cents, sold to John R. Jones, the gentleman with the "bright green tie," Brother Moore said, as he grinned pleasantly over his own bit of humor. The boxes went fast. Dave Uckles had to pay high for the box of his bride of three weeks. George Landers, Coke's half-brother, and Temp Curl had hiked the bids to \$2.25, and then fearing they had reached the bottom of Dave's pocket, had stopped bidding. Since he did not have any best girl of his own, George Landers made most of the young men pay high for their boxes. He even made Best pay \$1.75 for Ola's pie.

Finally Lelia's box came from the pedestal, and she flushed happily as Coke opened the bid at \$1.00. He knew that he would have to pay that much anyway, and he wanted to shy from the long bidding game.

"One dollar! One dollar! Going for one dollar!" Brother Moore grinned.

Dale Rierdon had been quiet, but now he stepped out defiantly.

"One and a half!" he shouted.

"Two dollars!" Coke did not wait for the auctioneer's challenge.

"Two and a half!"

The crowd cheered as Coke answered back stoutly, "Three dollars!"

"Three and a half!"

Dale knew he had nothing to lose, and he had the money to pay if he could embarrass Coke by making him stop the bidding. This would be even better than having had his date with Lelia.

"Four dollars!" Coke bid, but he swallowed hard. That bid would take his last cent.

"Four and a half!" Dale upped the bid.

The excitement of the room was running high now, and Brother Moore did not like the turn of things. This innocent game was becoming a gambler's test. He saw that the two favorite young people of the valley were victims of a game of high-handedness. He definitely favored Coke, and he knew that Coke had bid his last nickel. He was not prepared for Coke's next bid, else he would have stopped the game when the bid was given.

"Five dollars!" Coke's voice was harsh and his gray eyes glittered. His eyes were glued on the box held high above the crowd. He had wanted that prize more than anything else in the world, and he had breathed a prayer of thankfulness when his brother Jessie had slipped into his tense fingers a handful of change.

Dale, now fully confident that Coke would not let him have the pie, bid, "Six dollars!"

Lelia even charged, "Let him have it, Coke. It's just an old pie."

"But he'll get to sit by you," Coke protested as he tried to count the change that Jessie had given him. "You're my girl."

"Ten dollars!" This bid came from George Landers. His voice pronounced doom to both the young bidders. Brother Moore sighed and ended the bidding without the usual plea for higher bids.

"Sold to Mr. George Landers for ten dollars."

George Landers strode masterfully to the front and claimed his pie. He was a handsome man, an old bachelor, possibly twenty-eight years old. He had a lively sense of humor, and any young woman should have been pleased to eat her pie with him. Lelia had even dreamed that he was a wonderful man—for her Aunt

Isabel, but when he came toward her with all the folks just looking at her, at the pie, and at him, she found herself shrinking closer to Coke. With brave sweetness, she released Coke's arm to go with Mr. Landers, who grinned at the two, and then began to complain bitterly of a toothache, but Lelia saw him wink at a near bystander as he handed Coke the pie. Coke blushed, but smiled gratefully at his older brother.

The bidding went on with unexcited finality until the last box had been sold. The young people left in cliques for their favorite nooks on the hillside to eat their pies. Lelia, Coke, Jessie, Ola, and Best went to the brush arbor and chatted the evening away, and the boys did not neglect the expensive treats the girls had provided.

Coke decided that night that he would never make a very good gambler. Henceforth, he would pay if he could, but he would never put his most precious possessions up for bidding. He had not cared about the pie, but he did care about the privilege of sitting that evening with his sweetheart.

When the moon began to creep behind heavy clouds, the parties went back to the church to bid noisy goodbyes. For an hour or more, lively swinging songs were ringing over the hillside as tired, happy people moved toward home.

Corn harvesting throughout the Paluxy valley was in full sway. Everyone, from the baby to the eldest in the family, was up at the break of day. Hired hands fed the horses before the coffee was made, and the boys milked the cows while the women prepared breakfast. Every fellow knew what his particular job would be just as soon as he finished eating, and before going into the fields or off to school. The girls had beds to make, floors to sweep, dishes to wash, milk to strain, and the churning to do before walking from half a mile to three miles to school, even though they had to be there by nine o'clock. After preparing dinner for the farm help, the older women would knit or quilt in the afternoon. The girls prepared supper when they came home from school. Lelia could sew a fine seam, and Coke could husk corn with the best of them.

Except for school work, where they were now among the older students, these two young people lived in an adult world. Their youthful shoulders carried the obligations and responsibilities of adults. It is a wonder that they did not think as adults, but some-

times they found themselves acting much as any other sixteen-year-old youngsters would act. On one occasion Best, Ola, Coke, and Lelia arranged to go to the night services of the Bluff Dale Church. Again Uncle John R. let them use the two-seated hack. This was quite a concession since Bluff Dale was eight miles away, and they would have had to use one of the farm horses. Best was supposed to be the owner of the outfit, but he insisted upon Coke's doing the driving. Coke complied readily enough on the trip over, but in whispered conversation while the preacher belabored the sinners, Coke and Lelia decided to rid themselves of the handicap of driving and claim the back seat for the ride home. They whispered too loudly, for as soon as services were over, Best and Ola rushed back to the hack and were giggling in comfort in the back seat when Lelia and Coke found them.

No amount of coaxing or wheedling could remove the two from the choice seat. Not to be outdone, Coke and Lelia sat down on a large boulder and refused to ride in the front seat. Best tried to command his sister to get in the hack and go home, but this did not work. While still in the back seat, he took the reins and drove off a short distance.

He called, "You'd better come running or I'll drive home without you."

"Pull out!" Coke yelled.

It was a dark night and cold. Best was sure he would soon have the two back into the hack on his own terms. After going only a short distance down the road, he stopped again, but Coke and Lelia, fixed in purpose, were not going to drive back. Coke slipped his hand under Lelia's elbow, and they set out in long hurried strides to the Bluff Dale livery stables. Coke selected a long-legged livery team and buggy. It did not take them long to overtake their friends, and the race was on. Best could not let Lelia get home ahead of him. Ola, Coke's cousin, could not arrive at Uncle Jake's ahead of him. Coke took a short cut over the hills with Lelia clinging for dear life to the buggy's side to keep from falling out as the buggy bounced over the rocks and holes. Best charged on down the roadway doing double time to make up for Coke's short drive, but Coke had bettered him, and Best came thundering along about fifty paces behind. Rather than go around the river road, the boys plunged their teams into the Paluxy. The horses found the footing

easily but were slowed in their pace. They had had a hot run and then had been plunged into icy December water. Both boys and girls were aware of the dangers of their excitement and were, though in the highest of spirits, anxious to get home and give the stock the proper attention. Too, the girls had to be home by midnight.

The boys cantered their teams on to the barns. Coke and Best worked furiously to bed the farm horse in a warm stall. Coke's livery horses were given proper attention as well. Probably Uncle John, whose horses showed no ill effects from the run, never knew about this frolic, but Uncle Jake did. Coke had to borrow \$5.00 from him to pay the livery bill. It was one-half of Coke's monthly wages.

Winter passed and spring came. Lelia and Coke were wandering through a dreamland. Their arms and their hearts became entwined. They were two souls leaving the world behind as they dwelled in sweet enchantment. Spring camp meetings were beginning, and with them singing school started. The young folks would come to the schools early, and then stand on the swinging foot bridge to woo and coo until the large bell assembled all to Rock Church.

The picturesque bridge swung across the Paluxy from the bluff near Rock Church directly across the river to two high poles. Between the poles there were steps from the bridge to the valley. The clear sparkling waters of the river below rushed over the crowning green on the river's bottom. Ripples of the waves left glistening jewels on the surface. The young lovers on the bridge would count the schools of fish as they skimmed upstream. Sometimes a big lax and lazy cat rested in midstream. The fox squirrel scolded and harassed his mate while leaping from one hiding place to another, and the cardinal, arrayed in a new spring coat, flitted in and out of the thickly wooded area. The mocking bird clowned and strutted and filled the air with rare melodies. The gentle breezes scattered the fragrance of the wild plum blossoms through the evening shadows. In the dimming twilight the whippoorwill whistled clear. Coke's hand sought Lelia's, and she was grateful for the handclasp.

Love kindled long ago glowed to the warmth of the spring weather. They wandered over the swaying bridge and with lithe grace down over rocks to the valley. An old mustang grapevine swing was waiting for them. While time slipped softly by them,

they gazed into the twinkling beauty of the clear dancing river reflecting the light of the moon. A little ripple of water indicated where two young deer were drinking. How gently our young lovers were swinging. Slowly and haltingly the boy began to speak.

"School will soon be out. I'm going to work hard for Uncle Jake. I guess I'll be making some money."

He seemed distressed. He had meant to say something else, that was sure.

"Yes, Coke, I guess we'll both be pretty busy now. I guess I'll go back to Stephenville pretty soon."

She had not meant to say that either. The words just came out. She looked away and a sob seemed to rise.

"No, Lelia." Despair came quickly to a young lover, who saw the inevitable circle of events taking his sweetheart from him. "Lelia, let's get—I mean let's have—I think I can make enough money—would you—?"

"Yes, my Coke."

An impulsive flow of love made Lelia encourage Coke. She saw his distress and wanted to help him express his thoughts. She was a little unprepared for his words, but an unexplained heart leap gave her splinters of delight when he said, "Lelia, let's have a home of our own."

She had no power of expression now. She had loved Coke so long. She had delighted in the pain of sweetness caused by his nearness. That he liked her, and liked to be with her she understood, but love—as she loved him, was wonderful beyond words. She felt comfortably frightened. She felt tingles of emotion, and a singing delight possessed her heart. Like a startled deer she wanted to bound away, but as a woman with the man she adored, she felt tenderness and passion for the firm tense arms which now held her against his side. Coke said nothing more as he waited for the glance that would be his answer.

Was the time short or long? They did not know, but Lelia turned and her brown eyes filled with wondering doubt met his earnest gaze of tenderness. "Oh, Coke." The little orphan's voice sobbed out the loneliness that had been buried for years. She melted against him, and like a god he held her in his arms in that first sweet embrace.

"I love you, Lelia," he whispered.

"Coke, I love you, too. You are the kindest, the dearest, the sweetest man in the world. I shall love you always."

"Then you won't go back to Stephenville? You will marry me? You will, won't you?" He hugged her close, and then pushed her quickly away so that he could be sure of her answer.

"Yes, yes, I will." Lelia, who had always had to count each penny and had always had to wonder how she could make ends meet, had another thought. "No, Coke, we can't. We'd have nowhere to go. We are just sixteen. We wouldn't dare."

"But we could live at Uncle Jake's. He loves you."

Tears of disappointment lurked in her soft dark eyes. To go from one family to another as a burden was not in her plans for her home. When she heard this she knew that Coke was still just a boy. She gently withdrew from his arms and walked slowly to the large round boulder. Tears glistened on her cheeks as she studied her two little brown hands that lay quietly folded in her lap. Coke understood and slipped his hand over hers.

"Only for a little while, darling. I won't have to go to school any more. I'll work hard. Maybe Uncle Jake will let us have the little house across the river." His voice pled to clear her distress. "I think we can find a way."

An adorable smile displayed two dimples making him very happy when she whispered, "Of course we will find a way."

On the cliff above them, they heard the voices of valley folk bidding one another goodnight. They skipped lightly up the steps and over the swinging bridge to join their friends at the buggy.

When school was out that spring Lelia stayed at Grandpappy Caraway's. She sewed during her spare time, making minute dainty stitches which were the envy of all. Viola Wilson was married in June, and Lelia made her wedding trousseau. Others came to Lelia for help with their sewing needs, causing Lelia to work late at night, and during her spare time in order to have a little extra money for that wonderful day in the future when she could make a special dress of her own.

Uncle Jake sent Coke to Granbury to work in a small confectionery with his brother Jessie. They served cold drinks and ice cream. The little business was quite successful during the summer months, filling Coke with enthusiasm over the prospects of his

monthly salary which amounted to \$27.50. The thing he did not like about this set-up was that Granbury was fifteen miles from Paluxy where Lelia was living. However, Coke had his own horse and once every two weeks he would ride to see her on Sunday morning. Together they went to hear Brother Moore's sermon. Together their voices rang in praise of their heavenly Father and Benefactor. After church they walked happily along the clear stream. Coke would lead Prince, his beautiful steeldust stallion, and carry a lunch hamper until he found a little grassy nook well-shaded by an oak.

"What have I been doing since you were here?" Lelia repeated his question in a soft voice. "Why I have been a-working and a-working."

Though her tones were gay, he saw that her eyes were tired; those beautiful rosebud lips were thin, and the expressive plump shoulders were drooped and exhausted. He loved her dearly, and had not counted on this sacrifice of youth that Lelia must be making. Instead of leaping here and there over rocks and making this visit one of exciting adventure over hill and into dale, he was very tender and saw that she spent the day resting. Their plans for the future now began to take form and after pooling their scant savings, they set the wedding day as December 15, 1892. As the whip-poorwill made his last call to his mate, Coke helped Lelia to Prince's back. Then they sauntered to Grandpappy Caraway's old rock house, where they parted as Coke had to make his fifteen-mile ride to Granbury to help his brother open for business Monday morning.