

A Texas Matchmaker

By

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I. Lance Lovelace

When I first found employment with Lance Lovelace, a Texas cowman, I had not yet attained my majority, while he was over sixty. Though not a native of Texas, "Uncle Lance" was entitled to be classed among its pioneers, his parents having emigrated from Tennessee along with a party of Stephen F. Austin's colonists in 1821. The colony with which his people reached the state landed at Quintana, at the mouth of the Brazos River, and shared the various hardships that befell all the early Texan settlers, moving inland later to a more healthy locality. Thus the education of young Lovelace was one of privation. Like other boys in pioneer families, he became in turn a hewer of wood or drawer of water, as the necessities of the household required, in reclaiming the wilderness. When Austin hoisted the new-born Lone Star flag, and called upon the sturdy pioneers to defend it, the adventurous settlers came from every quarter of the territory, and among the first who responded to the call to arms was young Lance Lovelace. After San Jacinto, when the fighting was over and the victory won, he laid down his arms, and returned to ranching with the same zeal and energy. The first legislature assembled voted to those who had borne arms in behalf of the new republic, lands in payment for their services. With this land scrip for his pay, young Lovelace, in company with others, set out for the territory lying south of the Nueces. They were a band of daring spirits. The country was primitive and fascinated them, and they remained. Some settled on the Frio River, though the majority crossed the Nueces, many going as far south as the Rio Grande. The country was as large as the men were daring, and there was elbow room for all and to spare. Lance Lovelace located a ranch a few miles south of the Nueces River, and, from the cooing of the doves in the encinal, named it Las Palomas.

"When I first settled here in 1838," said Uncle Lance to me one morning, as we rode out across the range, "my nearest neighbor lived forty miles up the river at Fort Ewell. Of course there were some Mexican families nearer, north on the Frio, but they don't count. Say, Tom, but she was a purty country then! Why, from those hills yonder, any morning you could see a thousand antelope in a band going into the river to drink. And wild turkeys? Well, the first few years we lived here, whole flocks roosted every night in that farther point of the encinal. And in the winter these prairies were just flooded with geese and brant. If you wanted venison, all you had to do was to ride through those mesquite thickets north of the river to jump a hundred deer in a morning's ride. Oh, I tell you she was a land of plenty."

The pioneers of Texas belong to a day and generation which has almost gone. If strong arms and daring spirits were required to conquer the wilderness, Nature seemed generous in the supply; for nearly all were stalwart types of the inland viking. Lance Lovelace, when I first met him, would have passed for a man in middle life. Over six feet in height, with a rugged constitution, he little felt his threescore years, having spent his entire lifetime in the outdoor occupation of a

ranchman. Living on the wild game of the country, sleeping on the ground by a camp-fire when his work required it, as much at home in the saddle as by his ranch fireside, he was a romantic type of the strenuous pioneer.

He was a man of simple tastes, true as tested steel in his friendships, with a simple honest mind which followed truth and right as unerringly as gravitation. In his domestic affairs, however, he was unfortunate. The year after locating at Las Palomas, he had returned to his former home on the Colorado River, where he had married Mary Bryan, also of the family of Austin's colonists. Hopeful and happy they returned to their new home on the Nueces, but before the first anniversary of their wedding day arrived, she, with her first born, were laid in the same grave. But grief does not kill, and the young husband bore his loss as brave men do in living out their allotted day. But to the hour of his death the memory of Mary Bryan mellowed him into a child, and, when unoccupied, with every recurring thought of her or the mere mention of her name, he would fall into deep reverie, lasting sometimes for hours. And although he contracted two marriages afterward, they were simply marriages of convenience, to which, after their termination, he frequently referred flippantly, sometimes with irreverence, for they were unhappy alliances.

On my arrival at Las Palomas, the only white woman on the ranch was "Miss Jean," a spinster sister of its owner, and twenty years his junior. After his third bitter experience in the lottery of matrimony, evidently he gave up hope, and induced his sister to come out and preside as the mistress of Las Palomas. She was not tall like her brother, but rather plump for her forty years. She had large gray eyes, with long black eyelashes, and she had a trick of looking out from under them which was both provoking and disconcerting, and no doubt many an admirer had been deceived by those same roguish, laughing eyes. Every man, Mexican and child on the ranch was the devoted courtier of Miss Jean, for she was a lovable woman; and in spite of her isolated life and the constant plaguings of her brother on being a spinster, she fitted neatly into our pastoral life. It was these teasings of her brother that gave me my first inkling that the old ranchero was a wily matchmaker, though he religiously denied every such accusation. With a remarkable complacency, Jean Lovelace met and parried her tormentor, but her brother never tired of his hobby while there was a third person to listen.

Though an unlettered man, Lance Lovelace had been a close observer of humanity. The big book of Life had been open always before him, and he had profited from its pages. With my advent at Las Palomas, there were less than half a dozen books on the ranch, among them a copy of Bret Harte's poems and a large Bible.

"That book alone," said he to several of us one chilly evening, as we sat around the open fireplace, "is the greatest treatise on humanity ever written. Go with me to-day to any city in any country in Christendom, and I'll show you a man walk up the steps of his church on Sunday who thanks God that he's better than his neighbor. But you needn't go so far if you don't want to. I reckon if I could see myself, I might show symptoms of it occasionally. Sis here thanks God daily that she is better than that Barnes girl who cut her out of Amos Alexander. Now, don't you deny it, for you know it's gospel truth! And that book is reliable on lots of other things. Take marriage, for instance. It is just as natural for men and women to mate at the proper time, as it is for steers to shed in the spring. But there's no necessity of making all this fuss about it. The Bible way discounts all these modern methods. 'He took unto himself a wife' is the way it describes such events. But now such an occurrence has to be announced, months in advance. And after the wedding is over, in less than a year sometimes, they are glad to sneak off and get the bond dissolved in some divorce court, like I did with my second wife."

All of us about the ranch, including Miss Jean, knew that the old ranchero's views on matrimony could be obtained by leading up to the question, or differing, as occasion required. So, just to hear him talk on his favorite theme, I said: "Uncle Lance, you must recollect this is a different generation. Now, I've read books"--

"So have I. But it's different in real life. Now, in those novels you have read, the poor devil is nearly worried to death for fear he'll not get her. There's a hundred

things happens; he's thrown off the scent one day and cuts it again the next, and one evening he's in a heaven of bliss and before the dance ends a rival looms up and there's hell to pay,--excuse me, Sis,--but he gets her in the end. And that's the way it goes in the books. But getting down to actual cases--when the money's on the table and the game's rolling--it's as simple as picking a sire and a dam to raise a race horse. When they're both willing, it don't require any expert to see it--a one-eyed or a blind man can tell the symptoms. Now, when any of you boys get into that fix, get it over with as soon as possible."

"From the drift of your remarks," said June Deweese very innocently, "why wouldn't it be a good idea to go back to the old method of letting the parents make the matches?"

"Yes; it would be a good idea. How in the name of common sense could you expect young sap-heads like you boys to understand anything about a woman? I know what I'm talking about. A single woman never shows her true colors, but conceals her imperfections. The average man is not to be blamed if he fails to see through her smiles and Sunday humor. Now, I was forty when I married the second time, and forty-five the last whirl. Looks like I'd a-had some little sense, now, don't it? But I didn't. No, I didn't have any more show than a snowball in--Sis, hadn't you better retire. You're not interested in my talk to these boys.--Well, if ever any of you want to get married you have my consent. But you'd better get my opinion on her dimples when you do. Now, with my sixty odd years, I'm worth listening to. I can take a cool, dispassionate view of a woman now, and pick every good point about her, just as if she was a cow horse that I was buying for my own saddle."

Miss Jean, who had a ready tongue for repartee, took advantage of the first opportunity to remark: "Do you know, brother, matrimony is a subject that I always enjoy hearing discussed by such an oracle as yourself. But did it never occur to you what an unjust thing it was of Providence to reveal so much to your wisdom and conceal the same from us babes?"

It took some little time for the gentle reproof to take effect, but Uncle Lance had an easy faculty of evading a question when it was contrary to his own views. "Speaking of the wisdom of babes," said he, "reminds me of what Felix York, an old '36 comrade of mine, once said. He had caught the gold fever in '49, and nothing would do but he and some others must go to California. The party went up to Independence, Missouri, where they got into an overland emigrant train, bound for the land of gold. But it seems before starting, Senator Benton had made a speech in that town, in which he made the prophecy that one day there would be a railroad connecting the Missouri River with the Pacific Ocean. Felix told me this only a few years ago. But he said that all the teamsters made the prediction a byword. When, crossing some of the mountain ranges, the train halted to let the oxen blow, one bull-whacker would say to another: 'Well, I'd like to see old Tom Benton get his railroad over this mountain.' When Felix told me this he said--'There's a railroad to-day crosses those same mountain passes over which we forty-niners whacked our bulls. And to think I was a grown man and had no more sense or foresight than a little baby blinkin' its eyes in the sun.'"

With years at Las Palomas, I learned to like the old ranchero. There was something of the strong, primitive man about him which compelled a youth of my years to listen to his counsel. His confidence in me was a compliment which I appreciate to this day. When I had been in his employ hardly two years, an incident occurred which, though only one of many similar acts cementing our long friendship, tested his trust.

One morning just as he was on the point of starting on horseback to the county seat to pay his taxes, a Mexican arrived at the ranch and announced that he had seen a large band of javalina on the border of the chaparral up the river. Uncle Lance had promised his taxes by a certain date, but he was a true sportsman and owned a fine pack of hounds; moreover, the peccary is a migratory animal and does not wait upon the pleasure of the hunter. As I rode out from the corrals to learn what had brought the vaquero with such haste, the old ranchero cried, "Here, Tom, you'll have to go to the county seat. Buckle this money belt under your shirt, and if you lack enough gold to cover the taxes, you'll find silver here in my saddle-bags. Blow the horn, boys, and get the guns. Lead the way, Pancho. And say, Tom, better leave the road after crossing the Sordo, and strike through that mesquite country," he called back as he swung into the saddle and started, leaving me a sixty-mile ride in his stead. His warning to leave the road after crossing the creek was timely, for a ranchman had been robbed by bandits on that road the month before. But I made the ride in safety before sunset, paying the taxes, amounting to over a thousand dollars.

During all our acquaintance, extending over a period of twenty years, Lance Lovelace was a constant revelation to me, for he was original in all things. Knowing no precedent, he recognized none which had not the approval of his own conscience. Where others were content to follow, he blazed his own pathways--immaterial to him whether they were followed by others or even

noticed. In his business relations and in his own way, he was exact himself and likewise exacting of others. Some there are who might criticise him for an episode which occurred about four years after my advent at Las Palomas.

Mr. Whitley Booth, a younger man and a brother-in-law of the old rancho by his first wife, rode into the ranch one evening, evidently on important business. He was not a frequent caller, for he was also a ranchman, living about forty miles north and west on the Frio River, but was in the habit of bringing his family down to the Nueces about twice a year for a visit of from ten days to two weeks' duration. But this time, though we had been expecting the family for some little time, he came alone, remained over night, and at breakfast ordered his horse, as if expecting to return at once. The two ranchmen were holding a conference in the sitting-room when a Mexican boy came to me at the corrals and said I was wanted in the house. On my presenting myself, my employer said: "Tom, I want you as a witness to a business transaction. I'm lending Whit, here, a thousand dollars, and as we have never taken any notes between us, I merely want you as a witness. Go into my room, please, and bring out, from under my bed, one of those largest bags of silver."

The door was unlocked, and there, under the rancho's bed, dust-covered, were possibly a dozen sacks of silver. Finding one tagged with the required amount, I brought it out and laid it on the table between the two men. But on my return I noticed Uncle Lance had turned his chair from the table and was gazing out of the window, apparently absorbed in thought. I saw at a glance that he was gazing into the past, for I had become used to these reveries on his part. I had not been excused, and an embarrassing silence ensued, which was only broken as he looked over his shoulder and said: "There it is, Whit; count it if you want to."

But Mr. Booth, knowing the oddities of Uncle Lance, hesitated. "Well--why--Look here, Lance. If you have any reason for not wanting to loan me this amount, why, say so."

"There's the money, Whit; take it if you want to. It'll pay for the hundred cows you are figuring on buying. But I was just thinking: can two men at our time of life, who have always been friends, afford to take the risk of letting a business transaction like this possibly make us enemies? You know I started poor here, and what I have made and saved is the work of my lifetime. You are welcome to the money, but if anything should happen that you didn't repay me, you know I wouldn't feel right towards you. It's probably my years that does it, but--now, I always look forward to the visits of your family, and Jean and I always enjoy our visits at your ranch. I think we'd be two old fools to allow anything to break up those pleasant relations." Uncle Lance turned in his chair, and, looking into the downcast countenance of Mr. Booth, continued: "Do you know, Whit, that youngest girl of yours reminds me of her aunt, my own Mary, in a hundred ways."

I just love to have your girls tear around this old ranch--they seem to give me back certain glimpses of my youth that are priceless to an old man."

"That'll do, Lance," said Mr. Booth, rising and extending his hand. "I don't want the money now. Your view of the matter is right, and our friendship is worth more than a thousand cattle to me. Lizzie and the girls were anxious to come with me, and I'll go right back and send them down."

II. Shepherd's Ferry

Within a few months after my arrival at Las Palomas, there was a dance at Shepherd's Ferry. There was no necessity for an invitation to such local meets; old and young alike were expected and welcome, and a dance naturally drained the sparsely settled community of its inhabitants from forty to fifty miles in every direction. On the Nueces in 1875, the amusements of the countryside were extremely limited; barbecues, tournaments, and dancing covered the social side of ranch life, and whether given up or down our home river, or north on the Frio, so they were within a day's ride, the white element of Las Palomas could always be depended on to be present, Uncle Lance in the lead.

Shepherd's Ferry is somewhat of a misnomer, for the water in the river was never over knee-deep to a horse, except during freshets. There may have been a ferry there once; but from my advent on the river there was nothing but a store, the keeper of which also conducted a road-house for the accommodation of travelers. There was a fine grove for picnic purposes within easy reach, which was also frequently used for camp-meeting purposes. Gnarly old live-oaks spread their branches like a canopy over everything, while the sea-green moss hung from every limb and twig, excluding the light and lazily waving with every vagrant breeze. The fact that these grounds were also used for camp-meetings only proved the broad toleration of the people. On this occasion I distinctly remember that Miss Jean introduced a lady to me, who was the wife of an Episcopal minister, then visiting on a ranch near Oakville, and I danced several times with her and found her very amiable.

On receipt of the news of the approaching dance at the ferry, we set the ranch in order. Fortunately, under seasonable conditions work on a cattle range is never pressing. A programme of work outlined for a certain week could easily be postponed a week or a fortnight for that matter; for this was the land of "la mañana," and the white element on Las Palomas easily adopted the easy-going methods of their Mexican neighbors. So on the day everything was in readiness. The ranch was a trifle over thirty miles from Shepherd's, which was a fair half day's ride, but as Miss Jean always traveled by ambulance, it was necessary to give her an early start. Las Palomas raised fine horses and mules, and the ambulance team for the ranch consisted of four mealy-muzzled brown mules, which, being range bred, made up in activity what they lacked in size.

Tiburcio, a trusty Mexican, for years in the employ of Uncle Lance, was the driver of the ambulance, and at an early morning hour he and his mules were on their mettle and impatient to start. But Miss Jean had a hundred petty things to look after. The lunch--enough for a round-up--was prepared, and was safely stored under the driver's seat. Then there were her own personal effects and the necessary dressing and tidying, with Uncle Lance dogging her at every turn.

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