

V-Day Secret

by Nancy Martz

I remember one bitter-sweet Valentine's Day when Mama churned home-made ice cream and Dad brought home from town, along with flowers for her and chocolates for us, an orange and brown rawhide whip which he hung on a nail in the summer kitchen. It was an awesome scourge meant to inspire attitude adjustment in his oft-bickering and scuffling offspring. Before the whip, we three sisters, whom he called "Mama's tow-head terrorists," were occasionally sent up to the grove, each to pick her own switch from the orchard and tow it back down to the house for behavioral modification. Our weeping began on the way up, becoming louder on the way back, culminating in ear-splitting wails once the stick was delicately laid across our calves. Certainly we deserved it and more, for the lightness of the laying-on barely grazed the summer tans on our bare legs. Dad always had a softer touch than Mama, and we knew it was her vision by which the evil orange and brown rawhide whip had been procured.

It must have been arduous for Mother raising three stepping stone daughters while constantly washing clothes and linens by hand and hanging them on outdoor lines only to watch pickups race by throwing dust from our gravel road. She kept the sprawling farmhouse floors licking-clean for company while also wringing chickens' necks, peeling piles of potatoes, kneading loaves for bread and baking chocolate cakes and blueberry pies for all of us and the hired help. She milked cows, gathered and washed eggs, sewed our clothes, and canned fruits and vegetables from the gardens she weeded. Dad needed her help with the hogs and sheep, too, and she went out into the fields in her spare time to strike out with a machete and hoe the sunflowers and cockleburs from near mile-long rows of corn and beans.

Mama's farm life wasn't easy, and I'm afraid we tow-head terrorists elevated the vexation she must have felt trying to do everything to perfection and with forbearance. She didn't mince words in citing "Daddy's little rotten onions" as the reasons supper wasn't always immediately on the table in time for all of us to retreat to the living room for prime time radio programming. Her laying on of hands was never sufficient to bring about permanent changes. So it was inevitable that a greater threat, i.e., the orange and brown rawhide whip be brought into our house as a visual aid.

It was during the era of kerosene lamps, outdoor toilets and coal burning furnaces that we towheads grew out of our britches. I recall that it took a few days for the cut flowers to wilt and for us to eat all those Valentine's Day chocolates and the home-made churned ice cream. That whole time, the orange and brown menace hung in the summer kitchen unused but deadly and suggestive, and we tow-head terrorists got along amazingly well. Then suddenly the whip disappeared from its hook and was never seen again. No one ever admitted anything, but I personally know that the place far below where the outdoor privy once stood holds a daunting, *cowing* secret uncovered to this day.