



# Where the Bees Dance

Gene Apple



*This story's figure of grit and grace is Sarah. Sarah Apple, a nineteenth century southern woman, is seen through the eyes of family members, neighbors, and strangers. A traumatic childhood accident has left her scarred for life. Nevertheless, she is resilient, and finds comfort in beekeeping. Sarah and her beehives journey from Maryland to North Carolina where she discovers love and acceptance. Sarah and her husband Elisha Apple seek to improve their family's future away from the confines of heritage; first in Tennessee, and later in Arkansas. Hardships, harrowing adventures, and poignant moments shape Sarah's life journey. Vivid descriptions of nineteenth century life in the expanding West provide color and texture to this woman's story until we at last hear from Sarah herself.*

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## **The Doctor Sits Up**

**Martin Rawlings, MD, the Doctor**

I moved to Wartburg, Tennessee in 1843 to escape the heat and crowding of Charleston, South Carolina, and because the East Tennessee Colonization Company paid me to take care of its Swiss Lutheran and German settlers. If truth be told, I was also encouraged by an irate and thoroughly misinformed husband to leave Charleston. He was suspicious of my dealings with his comely wife. My practice now includes the general population here in Wartburg.

It was raining heavy when young Lewis Apple rode into Wartburg and tied his old workhorse out front of the doctor's office. He was in a hurry. As he shook the rain off his clothes and carefully shut my door, I thought, "Now this youngster has manners."

He blurted out, "Can you come out, Doctor Rawlings. We need you. My papa, that's Elisha Apple, got stabbed deep with a big wood splinter while we were felling trees. We pulled it out of him and got him down off the ridge. The

bleeding is most awful and he is suffering a lot of pain."

I collected the bandaging and the medicine I would require and hastened to get into my buggy. When I saw him mounting his old draft horse I yelled, "Come on up here and join me, Lewis, so I have someone to talk to." I felt the buggy sag as the boy stepped in. "I always enjoy the company of a young bright fellow. Particularly, if I can keep him from drowning."

He looked down with slight embarrassment and agreed. "Suits me."

Their farm sits in a deep valley a few miles from Wartburg. The family has a log cabin barely big enough for them and their children. Owl Creek runs down the middle of the valley and high wooded ridges stand along both sides. Above them rise the walls of the Cumberland Gap. That day there were heavy rain clouds floating low between those massive walls.

I sit on the school board, and I knew that Sarah and Elisha's children had been pupils here since the fall of 1850. I guessed Lewis to be about 14 years old.

Lewis said, "My Papa and I were cutting down trees, when one struck another, throwing a limb at him. He was turning away and I saw the splintered branch ram my Papa's side and knock him to the ground."

I looked at Lewis and thought, Lewis did right, by first pulling the splinter out and stopping the bleeding.

Lewis said, "My older sister and I carried Papa home in a wagon."

Curtains of rain swept across the buggy as we passed along the mountainside. I asked of Lewis, "How did you get that wagon through the woods?"

"Doc Rawlings," he said, "I went and got my older sister and younger brother and oh, how we raced to cut saplings, move boulders, and cross streams to reach Father. We are as familiar with those woods as with our own hands."

"It is a shame that you didn't have George there." His brother George was about twenty and had moved into town a month before to apprentice with our blacksmith. I think that

Elisha saw it as an opportunity for George to forgo farming and seek new livelihood. From seeing George around Wartburg, I knew that he was a sturdy, robust, and honest young fellow. He and I are of the same build, though my waist exceeds his by a jug or two. I sometimes think about challenging him to an arm wrestle, but it seemed too undignified, so I abandoned the thought since neither of us could stand to be embarrassed by winning.

Lewis and I reached the homestead a few hours after Elisha was injured. A handful of neighbors were already huddled on the porch and talking quietly. There was not much doctoring to do after I had made sure that the wound was cleaned and the splinters out. I dressed the wound but the rest was up to Elisha. He was awake all the time and talking. As I instructed a worried Sarah what to do for his care I added, "I know that he was in the Second War of Revolution, the Seminole Wars and will be familiar with pain like this."

"I don't want to lose him." She whispered in a quivery voice. "We are soul-mates, you know, Doctor Rawlings."



I administered some laudanum and departed, promising that I would be back the next day. There were patients back in Wartburg waiting for me and, no doubt, emergencies far worse than this. As it happened, I was mistaken on all counts.

I traveled a half mile toward town and found myself stopped by a bridge that had washed out. The washout apparently came several hours after Lewis and I passed through. "Damn it all," I thought. When we came through, the bridge had been shaking, but I did not think much of it. Now I would have to retrace my way. I spent a few uneasy moments turning the buggy around on a narrow, two-track road, with brush along both sides and stumps and weeds in the middle.

When I circled back to the Apple's house, I told the waiting neighbors about the bridge. They would commence fixing it, as I knew that some of them had to get home that way.

I spent the rest of the night sitting up watching over Elisha. Toward morning, the festering wound became inflamed and a fever overtook his body. When I lanced the wound to

make sure I had gotten all the splinters, the odor of putrefaction and feces swamped the homey cabin smells. I called for more light and hot water. Sarah had provided able assistance when we were first getting Elisha patched up. I prodded the wound further and found a fold of intestine pierced by a splinter I had missed. I removed the splinter, cleaned, and stitched up the hole. Sarah and I remained with him until dawn. I aroused myself, said my good-bye, and promised to return the next day.

As it would turn out, the bridge had not yet been repaired. It took the efforts of neighbors and county people two days and three nights to render the bridge serviceable.

During that time, I stayed with the Apple family and took my turn sitting up or sleeping in my buggy. More and more I ached with fatigue and found it hard to concentrate or find the right words. Arbuckle's coffee helped but soured my stomach. I said, "Sarah, I must be getting old. I am finding that the smells in the house are making an old hand like me queasy."

The second evening Elisha was delirious with fever. The rotten odor from his wound was

dense around us and hung about the yard. The neighbors who came to watch with the family backed away from the sickening smell. One small group of women commenced preparing a shroud, coating the canvas with some of Sarah's beeswax.

At twilight, we heard the first panther cry. The eerie scream pierced the cabin walls as if they were paper. Everyone froze, listening. Elisha began to jerk his head from side to side and call for his musket. Those in the yard with firearms got them out and checked that they were working. Everybody there remained. Lewis and his sister Jane went out and helped the outdoor guards build fires around the house. Toward morning, there were panthers on both ridges, screaming. It was unearthly and frightening.

It went on that way for one more night, and then Elisha gave up and died. Sarah clung to him throughout the ordeal. She prayed and sang gently, her love for him undeterred by the ghastly deathbed. They buried him as quickly as they could in a cemetery in Roan County. I felt the experience had changed me somewhat. I

was so impressed by the steadfastness, strength and loving care shown by my patient's wife. She was the sort of woman that I would seek for my own wife in coming days.

I did not go to the burying. The bridge had been repaired enough for me to go back to town to an office full of people waiting for me. No surprise. I waved goodbye as the morning sunlight fell in shafts across the East Ridge onto the mist hugging the house.

Stories of Elisha's accident and his passing were making the rounds, embellished a little by the idea of panthers coming out of the mountains to stand vigil at a sickbed. That story is still around two decades later. It is one of the panther stories that people love to tell as the sun goes down and mists drift through the hollows.



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