

# FAMILY GATHERINGS AT PROMISE LODGE

by Charlotte Hubbard

Fully awake now, Lester swung his feet to the dock. When he could get a word in edgewise, he needed to deflate Agnes's high-flying hopes in a hurry, because in her vivid imagination, she was already standing before the bishop with him, repeating her wedding vows. As he opened his mouth to speak, however, another urgent female voice hailed him.

"Lester! Lester Lehman, it's me—your Elverta! I read about Gloria's wedding in the paper, so it seemed like the perfect reason to come and see you!"

Lester moaned. His sense of freedom, peace, and unencumbered living had just hit another serious snag.

As the national newspaper for Plain communities, the Budget was a wonderful way to keep track of far-flung friends and kin, but he suddenly wished that Gloria—and Rosetta Wickey, their community's original scribe—hadn't been quite so descriptive in detailing the Lehman family's relocation. The tiny town of Promise, Missouri was out in the middle of nowhere, yet Agnes and Elverta had apparently followed every line of the newspaper's weekly reports right to his doorstep.

As Elverta Horst, dressed in deep green, strode toward his dock, her tall, skinny, ramrod-straight body reminded Lester of a string bean. He knew better than to express that opinion, of course, because the woman he'd broken up with to begin courting his Delores had never been known for her sense of humor.

"Wh-who's this?" Agnes asked him under her breath.

Never one to beat around the bush, Elverta stopped a few yards from the dock. She glanced at Lester before focusing on the flustered woman beside him. "And who might you be?" she demanded with a raised eyebrow.

Lester answered as indirectly as possible, because he knew these women would soon find out every little thing about one another. "Elverta, this is Delores's best friend, Agnes Plank. She lives down

the road from our former home in Sugarcreek,” he explained hastily. “And Agnes, this is Elverta Horst—”

“And I was engaged to Lester before he took up with Delores,” Elverta put in purposefully. “First loves are often the strongest, ain’t so? The flame may flicker through the years, but it never really goes out.”