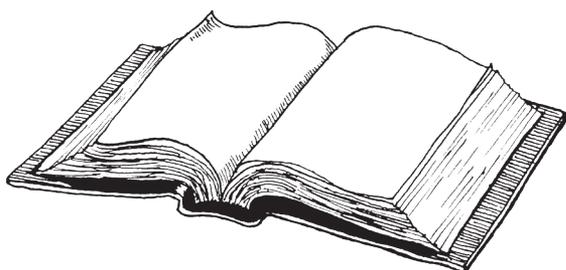


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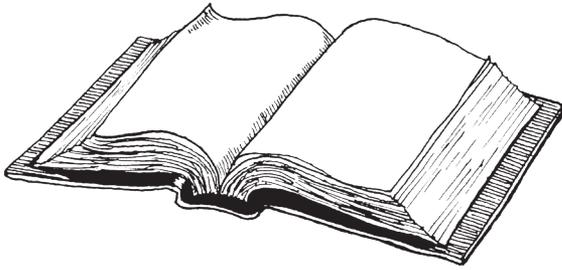
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SUNSHINE COUNTRY



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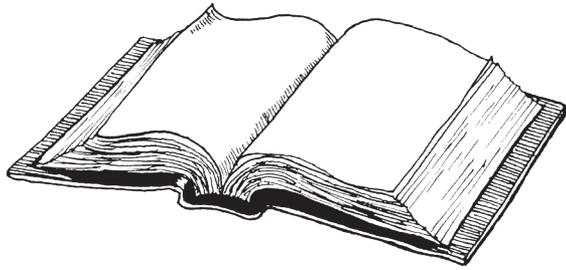
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Contents

Chapter 1: Palko.....	6
Chapter 2: The Sunshine Country.....	15
Chapter 3: Palko Has a Secret.....	22
Chapter 4: The First Beams of Light.....	29
Chapter 5: Heart Searchings.....	33
Chapter 6: In the Sunshine Valley.....	53
Chapter 7: Lesina Speaks of His Past.....	63
Chapter 8: Palko Serves Father Malina.....	67
Chapter 9: Paths They Have Not Known.....	78
Chapter 10: Lesina's Wife.....	86
Chapter 11: Father Malina is Ill.....	93
Chapter 12: A Mystery is Solved.....	104
Chapter 13: The Crown of Righteousness.....	111
Chapter 14: Palko Finds His Father.....	116
Chapter 15: The Door of Heaven Opens.....	125

CHAPTER 1

PALKO



After a long hard winter, with heavy snow and keen frost, spring had arrived in all its beauty.

No one greeted it with greater pleasure than did Palko Juriga. Like a bird escaped from its cage he set forth from the village, and started up the path that led to his beloved mountains. Life at school and in the little old house in the village during the long winter had been very confined. Even the windows of the houses, from autumn to spring, had been stopped up with moss to keep out the cold.

Old Pablo Juriga, whose surname had been given to Palko, was neither his father nor his grandfather, but this had not kept them from loving one another, and Palko always called the old gentleman Grandfather. Juriga worked in the mountains during the summer months making flour sieves. There, away in the heart of the green hills, he owned

his little hut, which, after being cleaned each spring, had been his summer dwelling for nearly thirty years. At first, his children had stayed with him, but like the young eagles of the surrounding crags, they had flown far from the paternal nest. So the old man had formed the custom of choosing a companion from among those who came to cut wood in the mountains for the summer. Two years before our story opens, a man named Rasga, about the same age as Juriga, came to share the hut with him, accompanied by a little boy, Palko. Rasga's health, however, had been broken down by the rough work, and perhaps also by the severe climate of the mountains. He coughed constantly, and was unable to do much work. The little boy who had come with him attended him like a devoted son. He chopped firewood, gathered mushrooms, boiled soup, and did what he could to make life easier for his aged companion. One day poor old Rasga took to his bed, and a few days later he said to Juriga, "Pablo, you have no one in the world to take care of you, and Palko is in the same condition. As for me, I am going home to die, and I do not wish to take the boy back with me, for I do not know of anyone there who will look after him when I am gone. Keep him here, Pablo, for he will prove useful to you, as he has been to me."

"I should be glad to have him, but what will his parents say?" asked Pablo, running his hand through his few gray hairs.

"Listen, Pablo," said Rasga, having sent the boy to the mountainside to gather a few mushrooms, "this lad is not my grandson, as you suppose, and I don't even know if his parents are living. He came into the care of my dear daughter in a very strange way a few years before her death. Stop working for a minute, while I tell you his story."

Pablo Juriga obeyed, and what his friend told him impressed itself on his memory.

“One day my daughter Anna was gathering mushrooms on the mountain when suddenly, she thought she heard the cry of a child. You know how timid and superstitious women are—they always fear the devil is trying to trap them—and so she paid no heed to the sound. But the child’s crying continued. She herself had two young children, so she went into the densest part of the forest, where the sound of the crying came from, and there she found a little lad, about two years old, who ran sobbing towards her, almost blue with cold for he was dressed only in a little shirt. How he came to be in such a lonely place, and who could have left him there, it was impossible to find out, for the child knew only the one word, ‘Mamma.’ Anna took him in her arms, wrapped her shawl about him, dried his tears and gave him something to eat and drink, having a piece of bread in her pocket. The poor little fellow ate like a hungry dog, and then he slept the sleep of exhaustion in her arms. His hair and the little shirt were saturated with dew, a sign that he had passed the whole night in the forest without shelter.”

“I have asked myself many times since, who watched over him and protected him from the wild beasts of the forest? For there are many wild boars inhabiting that region.”

“The children certainly have their guardian angels,” said Pablo as tears came to his eyes.

For some minutes both men remained silent, thinking of the lost child wandering on the mountainside, perhaps finally sobbing himself to sleep on a bank of moss, alone and far from his mother’s arms.

“What happened after that?” asked Pablo.

“Anna brought him home to us, and, having recently bur-

ied a little one named Palko, she gave this same name to the foundling. Weeks and months rolled by and we could discover nothing about his parents. My son-in-law, at that time an excellent person of good habits, was agreeable to the adoption of the boy; but my daughter Anna died when Palko was about five years of age. The new wife, who soon came to take her place, is not even a good mother to her own children, so the poor little stranger came to be simply a 'thorn in the flesh.' For that reason I adopted him myself, in a sense, and sent him off to school with the idea of keeping him clear of the house, but he took good advantage of that opportunity, for by the end of the first winter he had learned to read. You can be sure of one thing, that his parents, whoever and whatever they are, are persons of character and intelligence. I know very well, if I die, the people at my house will send him out to tend geese somewhere, and he will forget all his learning. So take him, friend Juriga! The lad will surely be useful to you. Besides, I cannot but believe that the day will come when his parents will come to claim him, and you will be able to say to them that he has been well cared for in my house—that what I had was shared with him, and when my grandchildren had to suffer from the bad temper of their foster mother, and when my son-in-law began to drink and be cruel to everybody in the house, I took Palko under my protection. 'Tis well if they give thanks to God for protecting their son! I have never told Palko these things nor how he was found. I have never thought it wise to do so. Tell me, Juriga, will you not let the lad stay with you?"

"Indeed I will, friend Rasga, and I will send him to school. In the summertime he shall stay here with me to serve his apprenticeship, and I will teach him to make sieves and wooden spoons, and then in the winter he shall go to school."

So Rasga took his departure after leaving the little boy in Juriga's care. At first Palko cried bitterly over the departure of his grandfather, but Juriga took his place so well that Palko soon dried his tears and became his old happy self.

Two years later, the old man and Palko felt as if they had lived together always. They were traveling together to their home in the mountains on the beautiful spring day described in the beginning of our story.

Palko skipped on ahead, climbing the slope of the mountain instead of keeping to the path, in order to sweep and tidy the hut before his grandfather arrived. The bundle on his back contained a change of clothing, a large loaf of bread, some onions, smoked meat and potatoes, and a bit of salt done up in paper. Besides that, there hung from his shoulder a small bundle of his grandfather's tools. There was an earthen jug in one hand and his staff in the other. Palko marched on with a light step, for he felt as happy as a prince. A dented old hat tried to cover a mass of curly yellow hair, and a little dark red cape, bordered with blue, protected his shoulders; pantaloons of homespun cloth, a shirt with wide sleeves, carefully adjusted grass sandals, and a belt of black leather with bright brass buckles completed the costume of the prince, whose great dark blue eyes were just then shining with joy. "O Liberty, Liberty, Liberty, how precious thou art!" It is an old song of Czechoslovakia—he sang it well, for his very being danced as the sheer joy of living piped its lively rhythm.

"Hallo!" he shouted at the mountains, and back the echo came: "HALLO! HALLO! HALLO! Hallo! Hallo!"

"You-ou! You-ou!" and Palko laughed happily to himself, for he sounded as if he had a bell in his throat—the echo threw back even his laugh. Whoever would have believed

that the mountains would give him such a welcome!

“Good-morning, son of mine. You’re here already?” said a voice from behind him. It was Liska, the woodcutter.

“Good-morning, little uncle,”* said Palko, stretching out his hand, for Liska was an old friend. “I’ve come on ahead to get the hut ready.” (*A Slavic mode of salutation.)

“It will be a miracle if the winter snow hasn’t knocked it down. Well, I must be getting on. See you later,” said Liska. “I’m away to the forest guard’s house.”

The higher Palko climbed the more numerous became the huts, and columns of smoke were already ascending from many of the chimneys—a sign that some people had already arrived in the woods. Other huts were but broken timbers wrecked by the snow, which still partly covered them. It was necessary to cross several brooks, greatly swollen by the slowly melting snows, and the only green that showed on the mountainside were the pine and hemlock trees, for the rest of the forest had just begun to bud.

At last our young traveler arrived at his destination, for there, at a turn in the road, was the hut—the hut that belonged to him and Pablo. How his eyes lit with joy to find it undamaged in spite of the hard winter! Although built only of wood and clay, the lowly erection appeared to him a palace. Was it not his home? Besides, how wonderful to find it undamaged by the winter snows, just as they had left it in the autumn.

Grabbing a birch broom from a corner, he swept the floor and arranged the fire on the hearth in the center of the cabin, having brought a bundle of firewood and some twigs to start it with. Then he put all the things he had brought with him in their proper places. After this was done, he ran to the spring and filled his jug with the crystal water that came out

of the hill close to the hut.

“Well done, my son!” exclaimed his grandfather who, at that moment, entered the little dwelling.

Very soon Palko had his potatoes peeled and placed in the little three-legged pot which was boiling over the fire. “Prepare the stew, my son!” cried Pablo, “I am going after some dried leaves which I spied near here, and which will do well for a bed.”

The twigs crackled merrily under the pot, illuminating the earnest face of the busy little cook. Into the water went some salt, then a little butter, followed by a handful of cummin seed, then a few onions, and some slices of dry bread. Soon the feast was ready and off came the little pot from the fire.

“Grandfather! Grandfather, the stew is ready!” he shouted from the door.

“I’m coming, I’m coming, son of mine!” and soon the old man entered, carrying a heavy load of dried leaves in a great sack which he laid in a corner.

From his pockets he took two wooden spoons, and he and Palko were soon using them with very great enjoyment. You would not find the recipe for that stew in any cookbook, but to them it was like food for kings.

Having finished the feast, their soft, rustic bed was quickly arranged. The sun at that moment seemed to poise itself just above the mountain-top—a sign of high noon to the wood-workers at that season—and so the little boy and the old workman prepared to rest for a while. Palko threw an old sheepskin over his grandfather, wrapped himself in his little cloak, and before you could count to fifty, they were asleep. The fire still burned in the middle of the hut, the smoke going up through a hole in the roof, mixing itself with the

scent of the pines. Everywhere throughout the valley there breathed the atmosphere of spring, from the soil, from the plants, and from the trees.

In a few days the whole mountain began to teem with life and animation. From early morning till late at night the click-chop, click-chop of axes, the crash of trees falling to earth, the swish of great two-hand saws, the crackle of branches as they broke and the thunder of the logs resounded as the piles rose in the forest. Added to all this was the murmur of human voices. It were better that many of these should not be heard at all, for coarse jests rose from more than a few throats. Strange indeed that, in the midst of that beautiful scene of God's blessing, men should act like that!

Soon all the huts were filled with workers, many of whom appeared as if they were beings without souls, committing acts at times that placed them below the level of the animals. There were, however, a few decent and worthy men, among whom were Liska and Juriga, although an oath escaped even their lips once in a while.

But the one person who inspired the greatest respect among all that rough group of men was Palko. As he was the only boy among them, he was considered a sort of common treasure, which caused them to suppress an oath or unseemly joke when Palko came near. He was a great favorite, ever ready to help and do whatever might be required by one of his many acquaintances, such as carrying water and acting as a general man-of-all-work. He often gathered strawberries on the mountain and distributed them to all his friends on the way back to the hut.

Juriga saw with pleasure how he showed the same simplicity and whole-hearted confidence toward every one he met. This lovely trait in the boy's character inspired the old

man to apply an old Slavic proverb to Palko that said, "Gentlemen were made to be gentlemen as the mountains were made to be mountains." He himself as a young man had been held in high esteem for the same frankness and openness of character, and even now he lived happily with his neighbors. As he himself said: "No one has ever been able to complain of my treatment of them, and I never do harm to anyone. I greet them all alike with civility and courtesy. If any lack salt, cereals, butter, or tobacco, I lend to him willingly, and I am taking care of this child purely out of love to God." Juriga had never heard the story of the self-righteous Pharisee and, therefore, was more than satisfied with his own virtues.