



2013 Second Place

The Trousseau *by Josephine Young*

1873

Maisie Williams had a plan. She gathered her shawl from the hook behind the door—the air in Chicago was brisk even though it was May—and pulled the drawstring on her small beaded purse, heavy with money.

For weeks they endured her hysterics, the hours locked away in her room, the tears over her shame at the whispers in New York's elite society.

So when she suggested that she needed to get away, perhaps a trip to the Spanish countryside to visit her cousins who had always wanted her to come, her parents were only too happy to encourage the idea. Indeed, they would have done anything to relieve her pain at being jilted by Gilbert Forrestall. The fiancé that wasn't. Wasn't true to her, anyway.

Had her parents known the real reason she wanted the money, they never would have allowed her to tap into her inheritance. It all started when she happened upon a copy of *The Matrimonial News*. She laughed at first. The motto in the masthead proclaimed: "to cultivate the noble aim of life and help men and women into a state of bliss." How could it be noble to advertise for a spouse with your height, weight, and hair color? As far as she was concerned she might as well be a saddle horse.

But then she saw the ad that caught her breath. "Man of means, well established with sincere and moral intentions, desires partnership with woman of intelligence and spirit. Object matrimony. Love not necessary."

On a whim, she wrote to him. His name was Everett. Just Everett. He didn't like his given name, he said, so she addressed her letters "Mr. Everett."

She checked the mirror in the hotel lobby for stray hairs to tuck up inside her hat and considered whether Everett's tastes might favor dark brunettes. She had never given him her measurements or the color of her hair, but he didn't mind. Didn't even ask. Said he wanted a woman of character, a woman of substance, and he could tell she was that. It was then she made up her mind to accept him.

The door footman greeted her, and when he offered a word of inquiry as to her stay at the hotel, words poured out like a river. Words



that never would have been uttered in the confining spaces of White Plains, New York.

"I'm going out to purchase my trousseau. I'm getting married, you see. To a man I never met, but whom I know better than the back of my hand."

His white bushy eyebrows raised just a hint. "I see. That's some feat for never having met him. Just remember, a fine young lady like yourself could have the pick of the litter. There's no need to hitch yourself until you know the make of the man."

"Of course," Maisie answered, breathless at the prospect of all that lay before her. "I promise I'll be careful." She hesitated, amused that he seemed more grandfather than hotel footman. "But you don't need to worry. We've both had our hearts broken and we know we'll never love the same again. So it's perfectly complementary."

ONCE IN THE SHOPPING DISTRICT, she approached a store with the words "Paris fineries for ladies of fashion" emblazoned across the shop windows. She pulled open a glass door with brass handles in the shapes of leaves.

The store clerk, a stout woman with a defined French accent and steel gray hair, seemed to come alive at the prospect of a trousseau fitting for the wife-to-be of a successful entrepreneur in San Francisco. Would they be entertaining? Of course. Would she need a velvet dress for the theater? What would she wear for her wedding day? And did she want embroidery on her chemises, or lace? Oh, and do call her Miss Jessamine.

A lace-covered camisole almost floated as Miss Jessamine laid it across the selection of silk stockings

on the counter. As it drifted down and landed like a gossamer wing, Maisie melted into memories of Gilbert. Her thoughts turned to the feathery breeze the day of the garden party, when she held Gil's arm and he said he would love her forever.

Had he married her, she would have worn this camisole for him on the night after their wedding. He would have drunk in the sight of her dark luxurious locks across her shoulders, the contrasting cream lace camisole enveloping her curves. And he would have kissed the velvety arch of her neck.

The tear that slipped from her eye landed in the middle of the fine lace bodice, leaving behind a splotch of moisture. Maisie jumped as though slapped. "I'm sorry, Miss Jessamine. Take this away. Show me the embroidered one."

Pale pink roses, miniature ivy leaves and the palest of blue swallow-like birds adorned the edgings of the next camisole. She nodded. Still elegant, feminine, lovely, but fitting for her marriage to a man who would be her partner instead of her true love. Maisie picked up the camisole and held it against her shoulders, checking herself in the mirror. "Give me three of these, and three plain camisoles as well."

After the Frenchwoman added the undergarments to the growing pile, she eyed Maisie quizzically. "Mademoiselle does not have her wedding gown?"

Maisie shifted uncomfortably. "No."

"Ah. Come with me."

Miss Jessamine led Maisie to the dressing room and soon returned with a gown the color of honey. The fitted silk bodice looked as though it were made from spun gold. The brocade fabric on the front panel of the skirt carried through to the collar and cuffs of the sleeves. When Maisie held the dress next to her face, her complexion glowed and her dark hair shone vibrantly.

Maisie's hands trembled as she slid out of her travel suit. Until now this marriage had not seemed real. It was only a diversion, a bold stroke of genius, to help her escape the whispering voices of White Plains that trailed her everywhere. But when the golden dress caressed her shoulders, everything came into focus. Her upcoming nuptial was real, and it was going to change her life forever.

As Miss Jessamine assisted her with the buttons, Maisie couldn't help but gasp when she saw her image in the mirror. The dress hugged her in all the right places, displaying the stunning contrast between her waist and bosom. The price the Frenchwoman quoted her didn't draw one word of shock from her lips.

She and Everett would be married on the same day she arrived. He had never even seen her picture. Was it all too much? Maisie took a deep breath. A less elaborate dress would be appropriate as

well, but it would also signal her hesitation to throw herself fully into this decision. She must be brave.

"I'll take it."

Nine petticoats, ten chemises, two dressing gowns, one bedjacket, one dozen pair of stockings, two dozen handkerchiefs, one walking dress, one brown velvet opera dress and one riding habit later, Maisie settled her account. The purchases would be delivered to her hotel. Did she need anything else? Yes, a reinforced trunk with a lock.

Maisie pulled the drawstring on her much lighter purse and hung it on her arm. As she turned to leave, the clerk thanked her with enthusiasm. Then Maisie stopped and pivoted, facing the counter again.

Miss Jessamine looked up, one eyebrow kinked. "Miss?"

"One more purchase," Maisie opened her purse once again. "I'll take the lace camisole after all."

The overland train Maisie boarded the next day would take her as far as Colton, California, where she would catch the stagecoach to Mason Hill, and Everett. The wedding would take place at his vineyard, and a few days later they would travel to San Francisco, where they would take up residence for the remainder of the summer.

When the train crossed the northern farmlands, Maisie breathed in the musky smell of dark earth and the pungent fragrance of blooms and eager spring vegetation. In time the fertile loam soils gave way to arid plains, where tall prairie grasses billowed in

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broad waves, resembling an ocean and hypnotizing her as the train hurtled along. It seemed that with each mile they crept west, her heart opened a little more to match the broad expanse of horizon before her.

Maisie no longer sat in ponderous thought at her upcoming nuptials. She no longer pored over Everett's letters that spoke of children and family and building a legacy his sons would one day inherit. She didn't even obsess over his lack of endearing remarks toward her, or the way he described the woman who had left him for another man.

In fact, all was laid aside but the sensation of the land and sky opening before her. She located a scrap of paper, desperate to draw the sea of brown hides that were the bison of the Great American plains.

With deft hand that lost all memory of her father's harsh words about spending too much time on useless drawings, she sketched with a fury the buttes and bluffs that interrupted the grass ocean and the scores of thick-backed beasts that pounded the plains around them.

She stood for hours on the small open spot just outside the door of the passenger train, holding onto the handrail and breathing in the fresh scent of the clean, bracing air as she studied everything she could see on both sides of the train. She memorized the color patterns and horn shapes of strange animals grazing in herds. One of the passengers called them sage goats, but she thought they looked more like the gazelles of Africa.

One day Maisie sat in the passenger car with her pencil and paper, forming the prominent round eye and slender head of the sage goat, or antelope.

"You've got a fine sense for proportion and balance," a voice said.

Maisie looked up to see a stranger sitting across from her. His rolled-up sleeve and open collar contradicted his fine wool trousers and matching vest. She noticed dark stains on the fingers of his hands.

"You are kind, sir, and I thank you."

The stranger stood. "Excuse my rudeness. I would not want to interrupt your work. My name is LeGrand Smith, newspaperman."

She looked up at his thin, towering frame. "Pleased to meet you, Mr. Smith. I am Margaret Williams from White Plains, New York." She smiled at him. "But my friends call me Maisie."

Mr. Smith took the seat next to her. "I could use an artist like you. I want you to take a look at something for me. If you would be so kind," he quickly added after noticing her askance look. "I would value your assessment of this illustrative work."

"Of course," she said.

He pulled a newspaper from under his arm and unfolded it. The headline across the top blared something about the Animal Life

and the Rare Flora and Fauna of the Rocky Mountains. Rudely drawn illustrations of flowers and small animals looking something akin to sheep, deer, groundhogs and squirrels. But the depictions were simplistic, without any shading or depth, more like children's sketches.

Maisie felt uncomfortable revealing her true perceptions. "I really couldn't say, Mr. Smith."

"You can call me LeGrand. And I know you are not impressed. But you see my dilemma. I need a true artist, one with a heart for the drama and uniqueness of the West. If I am to carry out my mission successfully, that is."

Maisie cocked her head. "Your mission?"

"I have been contracted to gather stories and illustrations to depict the American West, to lure the adventurous, the risk-taker, and those who seek new beginnings, to prompt them to answer the call of the West. And I see that you are an artist who could capture someone's imagination. Can you write as well as you draw?"

Maisie shifted her seat to obscure the small cloth journal containing an outpouring of her emotion as well as voluminous descriptions of the landscape's colors and contours. "I'm afraid, Mr. Smith, that this is impossible. I am on my way to California to see the man I will marry."

"I would not hinder you, then. Here is my card should you change your mind."

LeGrand rose to his feet, bowed, and left the car. Maisie was sorry to have apparently annoyed or disappointed him. She tucked the card in her journal and picked up her pencil.

Maisie escaped to the observation platform often, marveling at the snow-capped mountains jutting to-

ward the sky within the Wyoming territory. At times it seemed as though the world turned upside down, the sky becoming the ocean and the great billowing clouds, the waves. Beyond the uplift of mountains lay more plains, then red cathedral spires of great rock straining upward against the azure sky.

Even the deserts held no end of fascination for her, their rolling brush-covered hills extending as far as the eye could see, the rocks layered with color. And the skies. The endless skies. It was always the skies that captured her and would not let her go.

With only mere hours to go before reaching California, the train wound its way through forested mountains interspersed with streams and waterfalls. The brilliant sunshine played across Maisie's skin as she soaked in the view from the observation platform, and spicy pine fragrance permeated the air.

She barely noticed when LeGrand eased up beside her. "What a sight."

Maisie sighed. "It's enough to make you break into song, or prayer. Or both."

They were silent for several minutes before LeGrand spoke again. "Miss Williams, I know it's none of my business, but I've learned from some of the other passengers about the ... *nature* of your upcoming marriage. And I would warn you to be careful. Take your time before you jump into matrimony."

Maisie felt the sting of his disapproval—he obviously had her pegged as a typical mail-order bride—and she bristled at his intrusion. "I know you mean well, but you know nothing about me or Everett. We have corresponded at length, and we have both been through ... hardship. I am satisfied with his character. But should I find anything not just as he has represented it to me, I promise you and anyone else who protests my nuptials, I will hasten to take my leave!"

"Excuse me, then, and pardon my meddling," LeGrand bowed and left. Why did she always feel she was such a disappointment to the man?

At the train stop in Colton, she disembarked and paid her passage to Mason Hill with the money Everett sent to pay for her travel expenses. Due to the full load of passengers, she was limited to one trunk and any personal items she carried, the remaining baggage to be picked up later from the station. The trousseau trunk was soon bound tightly to the top of the stagecoach.



THE MANICURED LAWNS OF WHITE PLAINS seemed an eternity away as she nestled into the corner of the rickety coach seat carrying them through the brush and rock of southern California. The constant swaying and bouncing, as well as the dust kicked up by the horses left Maisie feeling ill, and she reached for a handkerchief to cover her face. The two men sitting across from her lifted starched bandanas from their neck to their nose and squinted. They didn't much look like they were accustomed to dust. No, they could be the very kith and kin of Gilbert, whose white hands counted out money each day at the bank.

She couldn't stand it if Everett were anything like Gilbert. She wished for Everett to be burly. She would like his forearms to be beefy and full of dark hair, and unlike Gilbert's smooth, pale cheeks, Everett's face should be whiskery and deeply tanned from the California sun.

One of the gentlemen across from her loosened his tie and reached over to push the coach windows all the way up. The stifling heat brought beads of moisture to the surface of her skin. The moisture combined with the relentless dust to form a gritty layer of grime on her face and hands.

The stage rolled to a stop. Maisie looked out and saw rocky cliffs on one side and a small, treed glen with a stream on the other. Perhaps they were slowing to ford the stream or avoid a boulder.

Yelling reached her ears. The man across from her pulled down the window and his face paled.

"What is it, sir?"

"Robbers!"

Maisie sucked in a breath.

The door of the coach swung open.

"Step on out, you ladies and gents," said the man, holding a shotgun

steady and straight. The bandana across his face muffled his voice.

Forcing herself to move with calm, even while her insides trembled, Maisie was thankful she had heeded the advice from a lady on the train to hide her money in a pouch tied under her dress. Climbing down from the coach, she joined the other passengers.

She expected the thief to demand money and jewelry, but to her surprise, he only demanded they keep their hands “where I can see ‘em.”

The stage was carrying a good deal of money, according to the robber yelling at the stagecoach driver. Where was it? They knew this stage was carrying \$20,000 in gold, so open the strongbox and hand it over. The driver protested vehemently that he had no such cargo; it must be coming on the next stagecoach. And besides, he had no key to open the box, which was locked and bolted to the roof of the stagecoach.

In the middle of their argument, Maisie’s paper-dry throat threw her into a spasm of coughing, and the guard-robber motioned for one of the other men to bring water.

Maisie didn’t want to take it, but her parched lips and mouth overcame her hesitance and repulsion. Broad, swarthy hands held out the canteen. As she grasped it she noticed a birthmark at the base of the man’s wrist, barely visible under the cuff of his sleeve. The odd red mark reminded her of the head of a duck with a prominent bill.

“Thank you,” she said.

His hazel eyes met hers.

One of the robbers unhitched the horses and led them away. Two others brought out a small bundle and climbed on top of the stagecoach. Maisie realized the bundle looked like—dynamite! They were planning

to blow open the strongbox on top of the stage, and her trousseau trunk would be blown to shreds along with it.

“Stop! Wait!” Maisie yelled out and took several steps toward the thieves with her hands in the air. “Please! May I have my trunk? It’s my trousseau!”

The hazel-eyed robber walked by. “I’ll get it.”

“It’s the big black one,” she called. “With the silver lock.”

While the thieves on top threw the other passengers’ baggage over the side to the ground below, the man maneuvered her trunk down and hoisted it to safety, handling it as though it, and not the strongbox, carried the treasure.

“All right, come with me,” the man holding the shotgun grunted. He led Maisie, the driver and the other passengers behind a rock outcropping, where they all waited, and waited some more. The loud explosion ricocheted through the glen, and when the robbers finally galloped away, Maisie peeked around and saw there was little left of the stagecoach roof.

The driver climbed up to examine the damage. He held up a piece of the strongbox lid. “They got the gold,” he said. “And this stagecoach is out of commission. We’ll have to wait for the next one, and it may not arrive for several hours, or even tomorrow.”

MAISIE WOULD NOT BE GETTING MARRIED TODAY AFTER ALL.

In a way she didn’t mind. She unlocked her trunk to search out her journal and pencil. Some charming little birds were buzzing around like bees—green bodies, long beaks, and rapidly-moving wings that hummed. She wasn’t sure just how she should draw the movement of the wings.

Later that evening a new stagecoach arrived to pick up the abandoned party. “When you folks did not arrive on time,” the new driver explained, “the transport company sent me to find you.”

Although the new stagecoach was just as rickety and bouncy as her previous ride, the evening air was much less dusty. Maisie closed her eyes and reveled in the thought of what was to come. She, Maisie, was taking charge of her own life. No one would ever hurt her again. Ever.

The stagecoach stop in Mason Hill was abandoned at the late hour of their arrival, and so the driver took them to the only lodging in town, a three-story hotel on the dirt main street.

Maisie rose early the next morning to dress and prepare for the day. A few minutes after she requested tea, biscuits and jam be brought to her room, a knock came at the door. For a moment she wondered why the man held no tea service in his hands, only a bouquet of wildflowers.

Then she knew. It was not the hotel steward. It was Everett. With black slicked-back hair and a dark, bushy moustache. Good. He was hairy.

She waited for him to speak, but he seemed dumbfounded. Was

he mute?

"Miss Maisie," he whispered.

"Everett!"

He shifted the flowers into his other hand. "I...I... can't believe it's you."

Maisie tilted her head. His reaction amused her. "And why not?"

"I just never expected to find that you are... so... beautiful."

She liked him already. He was far less confident than she imagined from his letters, and far more endearing.

The maid arrived with the tea service and Maisie suggested that they take the tea downstairs in the drawing room.

"But first let me put these in water," she said, taking the flowers from his hand.

After sharing a few niceties over tea and biscuits, she and Everett conversed as freely and intimately as they had in their letters. He would like to be married immediately. No sense waiting. She found that her enthusiasm for the idea matched his own, notwithstanding the many cautions she had received along her journey, all of which she determined to keep to herself.

Maisie was in awe at how familiar this man felt to her. It was as though she knew him already. His kindness and intelligence suited her, and for the first time she recognized that though their love might not be intense and flash-in-the-pan, it could be the comforting, companionable kind of love. She liked Everett. She truly liked him, and maybe that was better than loving someone.

Everett set down his tea cup. "And now I have something to show you. Would you come with me?"

Maisie followed him out the door to the street.

Everett took hold of the bridle of a dark sorrel horse. The animal's coat

gleamed, its freshly brushed mane falling past the bottom of its neck. "This is Lady," he said. "She is your wedding present."

Maisie beamed.

Everett rubbed the mare's forehead and Lady pushed into his hand, seeking more attention. "I could tell from your letters that you were sad you had to sell your gaited saddlebred before coming to California. So I began searching for a special horse for you. She is a Spanish mare. Her special pacing gait is quick and smooth as silk."

He took a step toward Maisie. "And she is spirited, but gentle. Just like you."

Maisie felt it again. Something about Everett seemed familiar. But that was silly. It was just the feeling of being comfortable with a kind and good man. She could hardly believe her blessed fortune at having found such a generous fiancé, and reached out to smooth Lady's mane.

"Everett," Maisie said. "Thank you. She's lovely."

Everett nodded an acknowledgement. "And now I must take my leave," he said, swinging his leg over Lady's back and gathering up the reins. "There are preparations to be made. I will send my man back here with Lady and the carriage for you at five o'clock. Will that be suitable?"

"Yes, of course." Maisie felt herself blushing as she watched Everett ride away.

Late that afternoon, when Maisie dressed in her gold wedding gown, she knew she had made the right choice. Her skin glowed next to the honey-colored fabric. She crowned her lustrous dark hair with a flowing ivory veil.

Her heart skipped a beat as she climbed into the buggy. The driver retrieved her trousseau trunk and lifted it into the back, and then clucked to Lady.

Maisie never expected she would feel so light, so easy, on the day of her marriage to Everett. Her only regret was that she had deceived her parents. But she would write to them and explain everything. She hoped they would accept and understand her choice.

Flowers, ribbons, and candles decorated the living room. As the preacher led them in their wedding vows, Maisie's heart overflowed with anticipation and pleasure.

Everett produced a thin gold band from his vest pocket. When he reached out to place it on her left hand, she noticed a red mark just under the cuff of his sleeve. The red mark looked very much like a duck. A duck with a bill.

She froze. Everything in her wanted to continue her vows, but her lips went stiff. Her mind halted. She could do nothing but stare at Everett. Everett the robber? They both had hazel eyes, but hazel eyes were common. It could not be. Why would a successful businessman need to rob anyone? Then reality slapped her. He was not an entrepreneur. He was a thief.

She ran. She flew out the door to the buggy, climbed in, and asked Lady to race like the wind. She had to get away, far away from the nightmare of humiliation happening to her once again.

As darkness set in, the nearly-full moon gained luminance. Lady's sweating sides heaved. Maisie slowed her and drove the buggy in between a row of low-hanging trees. An orchard should be a good spot to take cover for the night. Lady drank deeply from a barrel of water that sat between two trees. Maisie unhitched her from the buggy and tied her with a long rope, allowing room for her to graze on the grass under the trees.

There was no point trying to sleep. No tears would come, only a heavy, relentless ache that pushed against her stomach. Maisie listened to Lady's teeth tear the grass, then crunch an apple. The owls hooted to each other.

As she rummaged through the trunk to find something for a makeshift pallet, her fingers touched the smooth silk and lace camisoles she purchased in Chicago. She tugged the lace one out and held it up against the moonlight. It was soft as angel wings. No man would see her in it now. Not Gilbert. Not Everett.

Walking to the nearest tree, she spread the delicate fabric out over the branches, careful not to tear it, then stood back. The moon's amber light made the camisole almost glow in the darkness. It pleased her. She grabbed the entire collection of camisoles and walked randomly among the trees, throwing the undergarments up into the branches, watching them catch on the twigs and leaves.

Next the chemises, the petticoats, the long gloves. She rolled the stockings, tossing them as high as she could until they reached near the tree tops, and when the stocking toes

caught the slight breeze, they danced.

Satisfied, she pulled out the velvet opera dress and laid it on the ground, now moist with dew. In the dark she slipped out of her wedding dress and into the split skirt and jacket of her riding habit. Then, lying down and snuggling into the folds of the velvet dress, she fell into a deep sleep.

She awoke to the sound of excited chatter.

Women scurried around the trees, carrying baskets. But instead of harvesting apples, they collected the pieces of her trousseau. One bony woman with gray streaks in her jet-black hair held up a petticoat to her waist and turned in a circle, showing off her find to a woman next to her. The olive-skinned woman smiled her toothless approval as she hoisted her skirt up and pulled a stocking onto her leg.

Maisie grinned. A sensation like a bubbling brook started to form deep inside, until she could no longer suppress a chuckle. The chuckle broke into full-blown laughter. Tears streamed down her cheeks and she dropped to her knees, holding her sides. As her laughter quieted, she became aware of the warmth on her back from the rising sun. She sat still for a minute, allowing the intense rays to infuse her with energy.

Lady walked over and sniffed her hair.

Maisie reached up and touched her nose. "Hello old girl. I've got a job for you. Ever heard of a traveling correspondent? Didn't think so. Let's go find the newspaperman. He'll tell us all about it."



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