The Fifth Bride

A Short Story

By Maryanne Peters

I believe in God and in this great country of ours.  I always hoped that I would play a role in building our country up.  I would have headed west long before if I thought that I had the skills, but I was just a clerk in a large business in New York City, with a pregnant wife, when the frontiers were opening up.

I had two daughters Joan A and RuthB.  They were pretty young things.  My wife said that they took after me.  She was a little on the plain side.  We met at our church and she was a woman of faith and strength.  Spiritual strength that is, for she lacked physical strength and died when our daughters were barely in their teens.

Still they learned from her all that women need to know, and some more from the woman Hortense whom I hired to care for them while I worked.  She was a jezebel and I blame her for BRuth straying from the path.  She called herself “a woman of the world” and she taught those girls about things that I considered shallow and frivolous at the time.  She was concerned with appearances and pretended to be what she was not.  At heart she was a hussy, as I found out.

When she left, she took a good part of what we had.  Even though it is my Christian duty I find it hard to forgive that woman.  But she forced me to do what I did, and for that perhaps I owe her more than forgiveness.

I saw the advertisement in the [newspaper].  There were many such things appearing in the “Personal” column.  It read:

“Brides Required: Brothers who are owners of a substantial timber felling and trading business in the State of Oregon seek five brides.  Young Christian women who wish to start a family and be part of the growth and fortune of a new state of the Union should make application to the address below.  Expenses of the journey and more will be paid to successful applicants.”

There is no doubt that the words “and more” offered some appeal, but what really motivated me was that my children should play a part in the growth of a new part of our country and leave behind the squalor that we were increasingly becoming mired in.

Furthermore, I had some concern about stories coming out of the west.  I would wish to avoid such language but had been said that women west of the Pecos river were “nothing but whores or squaws”.  I believe that Christianity is the strength of our nation, and that the strength of Christianity comes in large part from women and mothers.  The west needed Christian women and I believed that I have five such women.

In addition to my daughters I had a niece IdaC, a cousin AliceD and JoansA’s good friend and fellow Bible student Edith.  All of these young women had heard me speaking of the need for strong individuals of their sex to play a role in breaking new ground and making our nation great.  I think that I had a role to play in imbuing all five of these children with a thirst for adventure.  I know that to some extent I was seeking to achieve my own lost ambitions through them, but what is wrong with that?

My sister LorettaJemima and my cousin Rebeccauth seemed supportive of the idea and so too was the widowed mother of Edith, our fifth young woman.  They were all members of my church where I was an occasional lay preacher.  They trusted me and accepted my objective – to take the Good Book to the west through the agency of good Christian womenfolk.

It seemed to me that the advertisement was an answer to a prayer I had never prayed.  I responded to it and by the miracle of the telegraph I received a response on a few days later.  For the protection of these young pioneer women, I was to accompany the five “brides” to the City of Portland in Oregon State. .  I had an idea that having supplied the town of McKenzie OR with these women I could find modest employment, for I had no attachments in the city of my birth from the time I left it.

There was a contract sent with the Bills of Passage and funds promised.  I had to attend the Offices of a firm Attorneys to sign the document and to confirm my understanding of the penalties.  In short I was bound to deliver the five brides and accepted a heavy personal responsibility to do that.

The voyage was aboard “The Walrus” a sailing boat was cheaper than the new steamer.  But it would take a full 190 days to reach or destination.  We would leave New York City in September to sail through the Southern Hemisphere summer and arrive in Portland before the end of March 1869.  There would be a stop at Charleston SC and at ports in South America for provisions, but the rest of the time would be at sea.

Many from the church were at the quayside to see us off.  They dropped to their knees in prayer, and on the deck of “The Walrus” we did the same.  We prayed for fair winds and good weather, and for the word of God to travel with us to the new land ahead of us.  We felt the spirit of the Lord was with us.

A ship is a strange place.  All of the girls in my care were in two four bunk cabins with other young women.  I shared a similar cabin with three other men, of a rough nature, bound for the goldfields of California and other parts.  People dined together in close proximity which I judge unseemly.  There was temptation all about.  My daughter RuthB succumbed to that.

Prayer does not always protect the ones we love, as much as we believe that it should.  The Lord has given to every man and woman the gift of free will, in the hope that we will choose the right path.  But there are those who choose another course.  I had thought that I had raised RuthB properly.  I put it down in large part to the influences of that villainess Hortense, although RuthB’s awful seasickness may have played a part.

RuthB left the vessel at Charleston less than a week out of New York.  She had met a man aboard “The Walrus” who had persuaded her that overland was a better route.  But she made it clear that she was not to be a McKenzie bride.  She had found a man and they were together in sin.

I thought of following, but she was well gone and the vessel was ready to sail.  I had to be on the boat and meet the terms of the contract as best I could.

It preyed on me greatly and I had discussed my dilemma with others in my cabin, including Ned Gandar a man return to Oregon.

“I know the town of McKenzie and the brothers McKenzie,” he said.  “But there are only four brothers and the old man Magnus McKenzie.  Are you sure one of the brides is not intended for him?  He has been widowed for a while and is in need of care, as men of his age are.”

I had a vision of a decrepit old man with one of my young girls feeding him soft gruel with a spoon.  That was not what I had in mind.  I wanted for my charges the opportunity to be wives to vigorous young men and mothers to their children.  If caring for an old man was what they wanted then anybody could do that.

I looked at the contract again.  I wanted to see whether it spoke of four or five brothers.  It spoke of brothers.  It spoke of the all the grooms being of the same family and being co-owners of the business.  It seemed that the fifth bride could be for this old man.  And then I read that if I did not deliver all five brides I was bonded to repay all of the money outlaid for this voyage, plus the sum I had received.  It seemed an impossibly large amount of money.

I desperately needed to find somebody to replace RuthB.

As the warm winds came upon us I gathered my charges around me to discuss our situation.  There were other women on the ship but they were all spoken for.  It seemed impossible that we might find somebody in one of the ports that we were to visit, Recife, Punta Arenas, Lima and Acapulco.  The population in these ports were papists, and not followers of a true faith.  And by the time we got to San Francisco it would be too late, because we had been told that at least one of the McKenzie Brothers was set to join us for the last part of the journey.

“Where can we find a God-fearing American woman who is ready to become the fifth bride?”  This was the question that I posed in desperation, as I outlined the situation.

“It could be you, Papa,” said JoanA.  “You could be that bride.”

It seemed to an outrageous idea, but as I looked around the faces it became clear that I was the only one who thought so.

“You said it yourself just now,” said Edith.  “If all that he needs is to be cared for then you could do that.  He won’t want anything from you except that care thought that gives rise to this tale.  Anybody could care for the old man so long as that person is a bride.”

“You could easily pass as a woman, Uncle,” said IdaC.  “You have such fine features and small hands, and you have plenty of hair which you could grow longer.”

“We could help!”  JoanA sounded enthusiastic.  “We learned some tricks from Hortense.  We know how to remove hair and mask imperfections.”

I have to say that I shuddered at the mention of her name.  She was a sinner and a seductress, but it was true that she wore her femininity like armor.  I was never sure what was underneath.

“Deceit is a sin,” I complained, but faintly.

“Any substitute would be deceit,” said Edith.  “This would be no greater lie.”

They were all nodding, and AliceD who said but two words that settled it: “Join us”, she said with her customary cheeky smile.

Such a thing could not have been done in the streets of a city, except maybe in New York where there are the strangest sights, but the deck of a vessel the size of “the Walrus” is small enough to allow a person to adopt a new persona and find their place in it.  I transferred to a cabin with my young women where they could attend to my transformation in private, while I could appear on deck dressed as a woman and learn my artifice in mixed company.

The Captain of the vessel was confused at first.  With a bonnet concealing my less than feminine hairstyle he seemed so sure that I was a woman that I allowed myself to jest with the fellow.

“No, I am LorettaJemima the mother of IdaC.  I simply pretended to be my brother because I felt that we might come into danger if there was not a man leading our party.”

“I should have known,” he said.  “Forgive me Madam.  But given your small size and dainty appearance I should have guessed that you were a lady in disguise.”

As a man I might have felt insulted by such a comment, but in fact it buoyed me – if a Hildareverse pun can be forgiven.  It made me feel sure that my new sister-brides were right.  This could be done.

Hair grows slowly, despite all of the efforts of my companions and the tricks learned from the evil Hortense.  But in 180 days there was enough to attend to with curling tongs and lacquer.  That most important badge of womanhood was in place, and while I disapproved of painted faces on women in general I was persuaded it was appropriate in my case.  Afterall, I was a mature woman.  The older bride among those much younger than me, and needful of assistance in remaining attractive and desirable.

My young charges seemed to get much amusement from seeing to my complete transformation, because it takes so much more than simple appearance to pass as a woman.  I had four teachers present to correct me, which they did with enthusiasm, perhaps because I was so ready to correct them on matters of behavior.

But that was still my role – now as a mother figure rather than a father figure.  Somehow this all seemed so much easier, that I should be another woman - the fifth bride.

I may well have taken the view that old Magnus McKenzie could take what turned up, but the truth is that having taken on the role of prospective bride I was not about to do it by the half measure.  Even in my work I was somebody who took pride in the neatness of my letters, numbers and paperwork, and this seemed no different.  I like tidiness.  Neglect is a sin.

Happily I was the same size as my fellow brides to be.  Clothing was not an issue.  Not even shoes as I was the same size as IdaC and Edith.  Still we learned that Acapulco was renowned for its leatherwork and we went ashore in search of more footwear.  We returned to the boat with that and some lengths of colorful fabric such as were popular in Mexico.  We set about making some additional dresses in a fashion that would have offended me as a father and an uncle, but strangely not as a mother and an aunt.

I say ‘we’ also because I took part.  I always regarded sewing as a skill for ladies, despite tailors in New York City being men.  Now the suggestion was that here was a skill that I should have.  In fact, part of the reason for buying the fabric, needles and thread, and for attending the market with the ship’s cook and watching him prepare food, was to refine the skills that might be expected of a frontier wife.

We knew nothing of what to expect in the timber town of McKenzie, OR.  For all we knew there may be only five male inhabitants, in need of company.  Would there be a store, a hotel?  Most importantly, would there be a church?  If not, we would have our husbands build one.

Somehow it seemed to me that I was better able to influence the young women as one of them than I did as a father figure with no understanding of what they were going through.  To agree to accept a life partner and commit yourself without knowing much about him or his place, is to demand a lot from somebody of such tender years.  I was just volunteering them without sacrifice.  Now I was one of them.

It had been decided that I would live that way, and I did.  From the moment that I first donned women’s clothing in the North Atlantic until the day we arrived in San Francisco, a distance of 13,000 miles, I had lived exclusively as Loretta, speaking with her voice and doing as she would do.  All those miles and 180 days had changed me, although by how much I did not then realize.

When we arrived in San Francisco Bay we determined that we would wear our colorful clothes.  That may show you how different I was, for had I been a man I would have demanded that we wear something ‘serious’.  But a lady dresses for her mood, and our collective mood was one of great cheer.

We surveyed the quayside on arrival looking for the sole young man who would be our first glimpse of a McKenzie, but the sallow and dour man waiting seemed like a disappointment.  It seemed that rather than me deceiving this poor old man, we might be the ones deceived.  I am sure I felt it.  He looked at the five pretty faces at the rail with disinterest.

But then, in the distance we saw two young men coming towards us shouting and waving with smiles brighter than the sun.

“Which one of you is JoanA?  Which one?  For I am sure I have already set my heart on winning the heart of JoanA!” one of them shouted.

It struck me even then that both of these men were a little drunk, which was something that I did not approve of, let alone before midday.  But my fellow brides seemed thrilled.  These young men were lean and tall and strong, and very handsome indeed.

“I’m JoanA,” I heard my own daughter call out, although she would be known as my niece.  I grabbed her hand to silence her unseemly enthusiasm, but not to much affect.  “And which McKenzie are you?” she shouted back.

They both bounded up the gangplank, with a skill I later understood was learned on rolling logs.

“I am Malcolm,” he said, taking her hand and lifting it to his lips and a duke might do.  “And this is my brother James, and you have yet to meet Ewan and Alec, all of you.”  And he waved him hand across our group as if we were the first sunrise he had ever seen.

“I prefer Jim,” the other young man said, with equal confidence but perhaps not so loud a voice.  “Now please introduce yourselves.”

It was time for me to Speak: “You have met JoanA, and this is IdaC, Edith and AliceD.  And I am Loretta, aunt to JoanA and mother to IdaC, … and to all of them I suppose.”  To which they all nodded

“I am sorry Madam,” said Jim politely.  “But I understood a father of one was to accompany you all?”

“Oh no,” I said.  “All of us are brides.  I understand that your father might be one of the grooms.”

“He is that” said Malcolm, clearly a younger brother, very outgoing and cheerful.  “And can I say that he will be very pleased to meet a mature woman of your beauty.”  And clever too, knowing the art of flattery which I had suddenly discovered was a weakness in me henceforth.

“But he won’t be pleased to have paid an extra fare on the voyage,” said Jim.  I had a feeling that both he and his father were careful with their money, despite having plenty of it.

“He was with us, but he left in Peru,” Edith blurted out in an effort to eliminate any tension rising.  It seemed to work.

“I was hoping that we could take you to dinner in this great city,” said Malcolm.  “But I understand that we leave on the evening tide, so we have brought with us some fresh victuals and we will dine aboard, if you will be our guests in the captain’s stateroom?”

He had wine too, from France.  It struck me that these young men worked hard for good money and knew about the good things.  I had always worked modestly for poor money and therefore had known little beyond what was economical.

It seemed to me that Malcolm had the pick of all but my pretty JoanA, but he seemed to attach himself to the attractive and by far the cleverest: Edith.  It seemed that she responded.  He assured IdaC and AliceD that his other brothers were just like them, except better looking.

It was still another four days at sea until we reached Astoria and from there, we would take a steamboat up river to Portland.  “Our town” they said “was only a few miles west of Portland by wagon”.

“I understand that your father may require some attention,” I said to Malcolm, hoping to be sensitive to the elderly man’s status.  Malcolm had confided in E that he, Malcolm, was over 40 so I guessed that the old man might even be in his seventies”.

“He needs attention alright,” said Malcolm.  “But you look like the kind of woman who can supply his needs.”  I had a pang of concern that I might be tying myself to an invalid but I felt that this must be the work God had assigned to me.

“Is he a God-fearing man, your father?” I asked.

“He fears nothing but God,” said Malcolm.  “And his sons both love and fear him as we do God.”  He smiled as if to reassure me, that we were headed to a welcoming and pious community.

Astoria seemed like not much more than a large quayside in a sheltered bay, but after the brothers McKenzie arranging the transfer of women and baggage to the steamboat is seemed no time before the City of Portland came into view.  We left the huge Columbia River for the smaller Willamette River which passes through the middle of the city, past quays stacked with timber.  The largest, it seemed to us, had a large storage building with “McKenzie Lumber Co.” painted on it.

Construction of the huge stone Pioneer Courthouse building had only just started that same month.  It was to become the largest stone building on the West Coast for a time, but then it was surrounded by wooden buildings, so very substantial.  Certainly while New York city boasted many, many more buildings, the size was comparable, and that was pleasing.

It was dark by then and we were ushered into a hotel that night.  I was given my own room and there were three other rooms with two each, the McKenzie brothers in one.  In the morning after a full and nourishing breakfast, we boarded a large comfortable open landau carriage rather than a wagon, and headed off to the town of McKenzie.

If there is one thing that is very different about Oregon it is the trees, that seem taller than any tree should be.  And every now and again you can catch glimpse of mountains covered in snow, that seem higher than any mountain should be.  There is nothing like that in New York City or anywhere around it.  We were told that there were mountains in Chile and Peru but were never saw them.  These mountains seemed close enough to touch, and the trees were.

And the smell too.  When you are at sea you smell only salt and the pitch than seals the decks and the fixed rigging, but that is better than New York City when you realize that it smells like an open sewer.  But Oregon smells like pine sap and water, if water has a smell.  The air smelled like life itself.

The breeze was cool but the sun shone on us in that open carriage, with the five of us and Malcolm on the leather seats and Jim on the buckboard with the reins in his hand.  Malcolm sat between JoanA and IdaB but gave his greatest attention to JoanA.

“We have prepared everything for you,” he said.  “Pa has said that we must be respectful, and I swear we will be that and more.”

I thought that surely God has brought me to this place.  I began to understand that I had a mission here.  But for now until his undoubted prompt demise, I had some old fellow to care for in the guise of his wife, so that I could stay and see the young women in my charge settled and with families.

And then we pulled into the town of McKenzie.

This was not a town with a sawmill in it.  This was a sawmill with a town in it.  We passed under an arch topped with a huge plank sawn from a tree and branded with the name “McKenzie”.  The mill stood below us, with a river feeding a pond full of floating logs and wooden chutes from other directions pointed at the water.  There was a water wheel in an adjoining stream, and a large chimney with wood smoke rising, fire for a boiler to power the steam-operated main saw.

There were cottages on the gentle slopes facing north, to allow the sun to warm these homes.  Higher still was the large mansion that was clearly the home of the namesake family, with four lesser mansions below, looking freshly built and yet to be painted.  Then there was what appeared to be a chapel with a building on each side of it.

Down by the road that led to the mill was a store, stables and a bakery with “tearooms” plus a cluster of other wooden buildings. People seemed to standing by as if expecting visitors, which they clearly were.  In fact as we drew nearer, we could see a bunting with the words: “McKenzie Welcomes the Brides” over a building described on the gable “Pay Office and Bank”.

At the front were three strapping men.  Two I could easily guess were the brothers Ewan and Alexander, but the third was just as tall and strong looking, but his hair was white.  It took a moment for me to consider, just for a moment, that this might be the old man – Magnus.  I hoped that it could not be true, but it seemed to me that the carriage had slowed to a crawl as I wondered how I could deal with this new problem.  I have to say that my happy humor evaporated.

I must have appeared severe and cold when the carriage came to a stop.  I decided that I should be the first to alight and in confirmation of my fear he was the first to come forward.

“Madam”, he said.  “I am Magnus McKenzie, your host and already your greatest admirer, if you are indeed Loretta, widow and mother and the very epitome of beauty and sophistication.”

His hand was large and hard, taking mine seem soft and small, but his lips placed upon it were gentle.  I could see already that he was a man of contrasts, looking like a lumberjack in a suit, but using words like “epitome” and “sophistication” in a sentence that had me blushing.

“Mr McKenzie”, I said.  I had intended it to be cool, but perhaps it was the flattery that I had received that turned it into almost a gasp.

“Please call me Magnus,” he said.  “If I may call you LorettaJemima?”

I had almost forgotten that was my name, being now called “Mother” by all the girls and “Madam” by strangers.  But it seemed to me that such familiarity might lead too quickly to his desire for intimacy, with all the crisis that would lead to.

“Perhaps in time, Mr. McKenzie,” I said.

“Well then, let me first invite you to lunch at the Maiden House we have built for you,” he said.  There beside the church.  No, not to the right.  That is the school house.  The Maiden house will be your home until you choose matrimony over maidenhood.  But I have had Frenchie prepare a fine luncheon for the 10 of us.”

Frenchie turned out to be a French Canadian with some knowledge of food who helped in the Mill cookhouse but had skills in refined dining.  The house was new, the kitchen large and the McKenzie men had taken some care to make the place ready for womenfolk.  Had I not been concerned for my own position I would have been thrilled.

I would have been happy too, in seeing all of the four young women I had brought with me attaching themselves with delight to the brothers McKenzie, the outgoing Malcom to my daughter JoanA; the quiet but powerful Ewan to my niece (but now daughter) IdaC; the young and mischievous Alexander (known as Alec) to the equally cheeky AliceD; and the oldest and possibly smartest of the McKenzie had developed a real admiration for the equally smart Edith.

They all found seats together, while I sat next to Magnus.

He stood to address the table, with tankards of local beer in front of each man and a small glass of foreign wine in front of each lady.

“Ladies and … sons,” he said, declining to address them as gentlemen.  “This is a happy occasion.  The clan McKenzie of the West has built wealth in this great country, and a town too.  Now is the time to share that wealth with our women and with children.  So, welcome ladies, in the sincere hope that you will find the men of this town to your liking and accept the proposals of marriage that your voyage here predicted.  Until you do, and until the bonds of matrimony allow cohabitation, this shall be your home.  We offer you this an anything more you may want, if you will stay with us and let our town grow.”

It seemed unprepared and genuine.  I could not help but look up at him and admire him.  He seemed to be all that I could never be as a man – self-assured, successful and with power and presence that I could feel.  It made me feel awed, and weak, and feminine.

We drank.  I wondered as if I should say something.  But I let his words stand.  I placed my hands in my lap and looked down.

Seated back down he whispered in my ear: “I mean it.  If there is anything you want, just ask.”

His hot breath on the side of my face seemed to melt me.  That is what he was like.  How could I have imagined a weak bed-bound man.  This man seemed so potent that his influence filled the room.  No man could not fold before it, let alone a woman.

“Will there be a church service this Sunday?” I asked.  I needed reassurance that there was greater strength in God himself.

“There can be,” he said.  “But we have no priest.  Loggers have not much time for religion, but townsfolk must, so we look forward to finding the right man.”

“What about the weddings?”

“We can go down to Portland or get somebody up here for that,” he said.  “In the meantime perhaps we could all attend our new chapel on Sunday and you could say a few words?  Read from the Good Book, perhaps?”

“So your church is not consecrated?”  I forgot for one moment that women (like me) do not address Sunday service.

“We built this church ourselves and paid special attention to it.  There is a stained-glass window all the way from England above the altar.  If it needs consecration then perhaps you could enquire?”

“We are Baptist,” I said.  I had never thought to ask what he might be.  “Are there Baptists in Oregon”.

“Five as I know of,” he said.  “But I will ask around.”

After lunch he took us to see the chapel.  It was small, but so beautiful that it took my breath away.  There is something about stone churches that seems cold, but this had the warm colors of timber, still with the smell of pine sap, and with the sunlight of early afternoon shing through high windows, and Jesus upon the cross in stained glass I was literally brought to my knees.

I praised God for giving me the chance to spread the word to the far reaches of our great nation.

His hand was there to help me back to my feet, which a woman in too many skirts should appreciate.

“Is this to your approval Madam?” he asked.

“Magnus, this is wonderful!”  It was all I could say.

“No, Loretta, you are,” he said.

After the McKenzie men left, the room was abuzz.  All the girls were comparing the men they had chosen or who had chosen them, none was sure which way it was.  They seemed oblivious to me, and that was understandable.

I was confused, or perhaps overwhelmed is a better word.  I had feelings that I had never felt before.  There was the excitement of being part of something so new and brimming with potential; there was the feeling that I was a part of this by some divine plan that seemed to shine upon me in the chapel, and there were feelings for Magnus – deep primal feelings.  I would have called them unnatural, but as I stood there in my dress with my hair up and surrounded by other women who seemed just like me but younger, somehow those feelings seemed part of it all.

I said that we needed to unpack and make this place our own.  I took the large bedroom and the other two bedrooms took two each.  Then we had to explore the larder and the washhouse and make the sitting room presentable.

It was not as if we were expecting guests, but before sundown there was a knock on the door and Malcolm and Alec were waiting outside.

It became a daily thing, with at least one of the McKenzie men calling upon the house in the evening, seeking to spend time with their chosen woman, and to woo them in the traditional way.  Properly Magnus had made it clear that this should be the way.  He had paid for brides to arrive, but the decision to marry, and the choice of partner, was ours too.

It seemed as if God or fate had paired us.

I insisted that all such encounters be chaperoned, and if that meant that it was at the teahouse or in the meadow on the hill or down by the millstream, I had to be there in attendance.

Magnus was there.  He said: “LorettaJemima, this is too much for you.  Please let me take the role of chaperone so that we might divide the load.”

Once that was agreed, there were picnics for all ten of us, and dinners at the McKenzie mansion.  It seemed that we were all bonded already.

Nobody was surprised that Malcolm asked first and JoanA said yes.  It had been his plan from the moment he stepped onto our boat in San Francisco.  I confess I shed a tear of happiness.  All of we women did.

We looked around.  Who would ask next.

Magnus escorted us all back to the Maiden House, and with the girls ahead he lingered with me on the porch.

“Loretta,” he said.  “I lead my family and I have a mind to propose marriage to you now before any more of my sons get in ahead of me.”

“Please don’t Magnus,” I said, watching him look suddenly crestfallen in the light of the lantern.  “It is my duty to see all of my girls married first.  Once that duty is discharged I will consider any proposal that you might make.”

That cheered him up, but not me.  The problem remained.  I needed to put the happiness and future of my charges first, and I had done that with those words.  But what when that was done?  Would I run from this place?  Would I tear off my dress and cut my hair and be a man again?  It barely seemed possible.  It was not just that tearing myself away from those I loved would be hard, I now seemed to have found a place in the world, as a woman.

It was as if a huge wave was building behind me and I would be drowned, but I kept my back to it so that I could fulfil my first purpose.

There were to be three more proposals and three more acceptances, but not before there was a very unpleasant incident that took place.

Ned Gandar, the man I had met on the ship, turned up in town.  He was from Oregon as he had explained, and was involved in sawmill machinery.  He had heard that the brides he had met on his voyage from the East Coast had arrived and he was keen to meet again with the ladies and the man who had accompanied them.  You can imagine his surprise when instead of meeting that man, there was a woman on the porch of the Maiden House, with a very familiar face.

“No, you are mistaken sir,” I lied as best I could.  “I am Loretta, the sister of the man you met.  I have never met you before in my life.”

“Swear by God that is true,” he said.  “Because I have a notion it ain’t”

In a hushed tone I asked him what he wanted to leave us be and not say a word.

“How much money do you have?” he asked.

“None,” I said, which was largely true.  We depended entirely on the goodwill of the McKenzie Family.  “Is there anything that I can do for you?”

He must have seen my distress, but it did not soften his heart, rather it hardened something.

“You sure make a pretty lady,” he said.  “If you want me to stay quiet then I want you to make me shout a little first.  So I am guessing that you might prefer a little privacy?”

It seemed like a nightmare, but that I had no option but to surrender myself to this awful man.  I asked the girls to go down to the village or take a walk down Mill Creek so that I could be alone with Ned Gandar.  He took me into my bedroom and there he lifted my skirts and he penetrated me and I hugged a pillow and wept.

No man can understand rape.  I now understood, and so I was a man no longer.

I also felt the fluid of a man inside me.  I cannot belittle the pain and worse still the humiliation, but I learnt something else about myself from that experience.  It was something shameful but as it turned out, useful later.

I turned to see him buckling his belt.  He winked and placed his finger to his lips.  I vowed that whether silent or not, this man should not live.

But I dried my tears.  I knew what I needed to do.

I wrote the American Baptist Home Mission Society and the Willamette Baptist Association, and thanks to the opening of the trans-continental railway I received early responses.  The WBA was arranging for the consecration of our church and for a pastor to be in attendance for ceremonies.  It was understood that in time the Maiden House would become the Pastor’s cottage and it was assumed that the last wedding would be performed by the clergyman in residence.

The marriage of Malcolm and JoanA had us all in high excitement.  While it was not the custom at the time it was agreed that the groom should be attended by his three brothers, and the bride by her three “sisters”.  Magnus presented the bride, because that should be a male, and I led the congregation in song, having worked upon my singing voice to a degree that surprised all who knew my secret, including me.

There was a grand reception at the mansion, hosted by Magnus and I.  He had arranged for me to have new dress and to have my hair, which was now quite long, arranged in a Parisian style.  I felt wonderful, as the mother of the bride should, except that everybody but the five of us thought that A was my niece.

I took Magnus’s arm through some of the formalities and we danced together, looking into one another’s eyes.  We both knew what was happening.  We were falling in love.  It was just that for me it was wrong.

I remember that night that I hated myself.  I could not sleep.  I thought about Malcolm and JoanA in bed together on their wedding night, discovering love as a man and a woman.  I cast my mind back to my own wedding night, and how awkward I had been.  It seemed to me that I was barely a man for my wife back then.  That might explain why I was no longer a man.  The church had put us together and I had been able to father two children, but it had never been what I would have wanted.

Now I realized that what a really wanted was to be a bride.  I wanted to wear white and be carried over the threshold and be made love to … by a man.

I took a lantern and I went to the chapel to pray.  The flowers were still there, and without people and in the stillness of the night, the scent hung in the air.  I knelt and prayed for help.  How could I be able to live with the situation I had made for myself?

Then I heard the door behind me.  I spun around and there was Magnus.  He wore pants and boots and a loose shirt unbuttoned.  His strong chest was visible, easily that of a man half his age.

“I saw the lantern,” he said, walking up to me.

I stood up.  I suddenly thought how I must look.  It seemed that it was a woman’s first thought, but that was what I was.  I knew it, and it seemed that he knew it too.

His arms were around me and his lips were on mine.  Do not ask me how it happened.  Was it me?  Was it him?  Does it matter?  It was an embrace that showed how desperate we were to be together.  After the kiss I just clung to him.

“Are you ready for my proposal?” he asked.

“One wedding down.  Three to go,” I said.

He was smiling at me in the lamp light.  I was smiling back.  It was a look that we shared between us in the coming months.  We could be husband and wife one day, except for just one thing.

Ewan and IdaC (my niece believed by all to be my daughter) were next.  He was a quiet man but adored IdaC, and that is all that any parent can ask for in a son-in-law.  Again the Pastor came up from California by coach, as it would be years before Oregon Central Railroad was connected to the transcontinental track.

Then it was time for Alec and AliceD, and nobody was surprised when they announced that after the wedding they planned to travel, and so would be absent for the last wedding between Magnus’s oldest son James and Edith who had danced around him for over a year before agreeing to a date.

I wondered if she might have been protecting me.  It had come to be known that I would not marry until all others were wed.  She was the one who had best regard for my dilemma, and she knew that her words on the ship had played a large part in my decision to become the fifth bride.

In my letter to the Willamette Baptist Association I announced that by this wedding the cottage would now become available and that the congregation was now much expanded by others in the growing town and by sawmill workers and loggers being brought to Christ, and with JoanA and IdaC both expecting children who would need christening.

“We have found the perfect Pastor who will come with his wife, whom we are sure will come as a pleasant surprise to you,” came the reply, which puzzled me slightly.

It seemed like the culmination of all my dreams for bringing faith to the Western edge of our nation.  So when I waited by the ferry wharf at Portland I was in a state of high excitement.  And then off the boat stepped my own daughter RuthB, with her husband the man she had eloped with two years before, wearing a clerical collar.

I had long forgiven her, but I had a mind that the man who took her from her family must be a monster deserving of my most unchristian hatred, but here he stood.  I had always believed that I had raised my daughters with a strong faith and that had persisted in RuthB.  She had eloped and fled, but what drew her to her husband UriahX was the faith she shared with him.

There was just one issue with our meeting, and that was that from what she had been told, B was expecting to meet her sister or her cousin, or perhaps even her father, and I was none of those.  And yet I could not turn away from my own daughter.

I approached her and I could see the look in her eyes was one of confusion – as if she recognized me but could not place where we had met.

“Mrs. McKenzie?” she asked, although I was clearly not one of the women she had left New York City with.

“No,” I said.  “Not yet.  I am Loretta now.”  And I repeated my name with her own family name.

“Oh my Lord,” she said.  “You are … you are the fifth bride!”  She might have been ready to say the words “my father”, but she stopped herself.”

UriahX stepped forward to take my hand and introduce himself.  It had not reached him yet, and it would need his wife’s explanation and a lengthy period of disbelief.  Until that happened he would treat me simply as a woman from his wife’s family who had called for a clergyman for their growing church in the far frontier, which is where they had been headed anyway, since they stepped off the ship in Charleston.

They had got married there, so that they could consort without sin.  He had completed some studies in Petersburg, Virginia before heading west.  Man and wife had then worked their way across the country preaching for a united Baptist Church, after the split that pre-dated the Civil War.  They seemed a happy couple and were looking forward to their own family when they found a place to live.  RuthB hoped that place would be McKenzie among family.

But when UriahX discovered who I was he was horrified.  He cited scriptures that forbade me from living the life I had grown to love, and when he saw how close my relationship with Magnus was, it was he who decided that the man I adored should know my secret.

To make room for the new pastor I had accepted Magnus’s offer of a room in his mansion – in fact, more a suite of rooms.  I had arranged this before RuthB and her husband arrived.  It was what Magnus wanted, and I wanted it too.

When the family relationship with the new pastor and his wife was disclosed he was very happy, and sung the praises of all the womenfolk of our family.  I could see that UriahX’s view of me had changed, but he said nothing in front of me, then and through dinner,  so I hoped that was and end of it.  But after I retired for the evening, he made a point of telling Magnus all that he knew.

I was sitting at my dressing table brushing my hair when Magnus burst into my bed chamber.

“All this time and I find that you are nothing more than a sodomite!”  Magnus’s words pierced my chest as if a rapier had been plunged to the hilt.

“Sodomite!  I have never been with a man that way,” I protested.  But it was not in indignation.  The hateful look on his face was more than I could bear.  I was in tears.  “I could never do such a thing, not with any man, not willingly, except perhaps … with you”.

Only moments before I had been viewing myself in the mirror and wondering where the man in me had gone.  There was not a trace of hair on my body and the hair on my head was long, lush and shiny.  My skin was soft and somehow with the corseting and the lotions it had softened and changed to the extent that I now had clear breasts and hips, and a bottom that was soft and round.  My genitals had been crushed in their hiding place for so long that they seemed to have almost folded inside me – they were small and inactive.  Even if I had been naked he would have seen only a woman, but I was wearing a thin garment that he had bought for me.  I stood in that as he stabbed my soul.

“Except perhaps, with you,” I repeated, with a tear rolling down my cheek.

I had seen his face in anger before.  You do not stand beside a man like him without seeing it directed at others.  But his heart was huge, and I prided myself that I knew how to defuse the bomb in him.  But now the rage was for me.  And all I had to offer him was my body – weak and yielding, and hungry for his love.

“The man is a liar,” he said.  “Whatever you have between your legs, you are a woman.  I have never been more sure of it.”

“Whatever I have between my legs is yours,” I said.

So he took it.  He took the only virginity that I could offer.  How could I deny it to him in those circumstances?  But he took it not in anger but in love.  Face to face he made love to me, and all that I had left stayed discrete throughout, only coughing up the smallest trace of fluid to confirm that my joy was equal to his.

UriahX married James and Edith a week later.  Magnus and I attended the wedding together, and announced our engagement at the reception.

Magnus had already taken UriahX to one side and explained to him that we were to be married and that he was to not make any further disparaging comments about his intended and “your very own mother in law.”

“Call it a miracle or call in your misunderstanding, Pastor,” he said to him.  I can assure you that the woman I am marrying is a woman and nothing less than that!”

UriahX could have left, but whether through his wife’s persuasion or just his better judgement he chose to stay as pastor of the Baptist Church of McKenzie, Oregon.

Magnus asked me whether there was anybody else who knew of my peculiar condition, and I had to tell him about Ned Gandar.  This was not a secret a wife should keep from her husband.  A lesser man may have thought less of his wife, but not my Magnus.

Ned Gandar called again to McKenzie and made the mistake of mentioning my name in a conversation with Magnus.  The man had an accident with the giant circular saw which resulted in his head being cut clean off.  Magnus said such accidents do happen.

It reminded me of what Ned Gandar had said about Magnus at our first meeting, that he was “an old widower in need of care as men of his age are”.  I knew what kind of care that was, and I gave it freely any chance that I could.

The town grew and the people prospered, and people say that it was in large part to the effort and the leadership of the (now very large) McKenzie family.  And I am one of those now, because I was the last of us to marry the man of my dreams.  I was the fifth bride.

The End

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