

A man with long blonde hair, wearing a white shirt and a brown vest, is embracing a woman with blonde hair in a floral top and a white apron. They are standing in a field of tall grass under a dramatic sunset sky with clouds. The man is holding a black hat. The overall mood is romantic and nostalgic.

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THE COWBOY
and
THE MAIL ORDER BRIDE

ANGELA R. SARGENTI

The Cowboy and the Mail Order Bride

By

Angela R. Sargenti

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Chapter 1

There I was at Miss Chasen's Finishing School when I first got the news my parents were dead. It filled me with grief, of course, but the worst blow was that, after their mortgage was paid off and their other debts settled, they were penniless.

I was penniless.

This would be my last term at Miss Chasen's. "What will I do, Penelope?" I asked my best friend. "Term ends in a month."

"That's not much time, I agree," said Penny. "Do you know anyone who'll offer for you?"

"Not in these circumstances."

"Maybe you can find employment. Maybe you could go to England and become a governess."

"I don't have the money to try."

"Well, there is another way, but you won't like it."

"Which is?"

"You could come out West with me and become a mail-order bride."

I stared at her in shock. "Me? Marry a complete stranger?"

"Why not? As you said, you're not likely to find a husband around here now. Not with no money."

"No."

"I could write to my fiancé and see if he knows anyone."

"Absolutely not."

But she did anyway, and a few days later, she came to me with a letter in her hand. "Amos says he knows a rich rancher who's desperate for a bride."

"Why desperate? Is he ugly? Mean? Repulsive?"

"No. Amos says he's just shy around women, and wouldn't have the time to go out and meet one even if there were some. Which there doesn't seem to be, apart from women like us."

"Women like us?"

"Mail-order brides."

I glanced away. I knew Penny was right, and I was out of options. "Penny? Go ahead and have him write to me."

I got a letter a few days later, and when I unfolded it, a photograph fell out. He was very handsome, not at all like I thought he would be. He had a thick moustache and kindness in his eyes, but he also had a certain determined set to his mouth that told me he was straightforward and would stand no nonsense.

Dear Miss Foster,

Thank you for letting me write. I understand Miss Green has explained everything to you, and she has told me of your misgivings. To set you at ease, I have enclosed a photograph of myself and am prepared to settle seven hundred dollars a year on you if you decide to come out. If you would like, I'll have a

lawyer draw up the marriage contract and will send you a train ticket and three hundred fifty dollars as good faith money. All I ask in return is that you be amiable and affectionate and willing to work.

There's one more thing I think you ought to know before you decide, and that is this: I am a fair and forgiving man, but I won't hesitate to put a wayward wife over my knee and teach her the error of her ways. I especially hate gossiping. If this don't appeal to you, I don't blame you none, but if that is the case, I'd say we'd better not go no further with this.

Please write me back and let me know how you feel about coming out here, one way or the other. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

*Yours Truly,
John Henry Morgan*

"What does he say?" asked Penny.

"He says he's going to spank me. Especially if I gossip."

"He does not."

"He does. Read it for yourself."

She took the letter and read it with a skeptical look on her face, but when she got to the part where he discussed his ideas on discipline, her face got serious and she handed it back. "I guess you're not going to go, are you?"

"Oh, I'll go. What reason could he ever have to punish me? I'm as good as gold."

"You'll go? I'm awfully glad, Eleanor. I was afraid for a second there I'd be riding the train alone."

* * * * *

A month and a few-odd days later, we were on the train headed for Ryder's Gulch. The men had gotten us passage in a very nice Pullman sleeping car, with our own porter, a Negro man named George.

"What's a gulch, anyway?" I asked Penny.

"I think it's a sort of drainage ditch."

"Hmm. Doesn't sound very romantic, does it?"

"That's the trouble with you, Eleanor. You always want things to be better than they are."

"What's wrong with that?" I asked, smoothing down my skirts. "I'm ambitious."

"Well, sometimes you just need to sit back and enjoy things the way they are."

But a couple of days on the train and neither one of us was enjoying it, not even in a sleeping car.

"Good lord, it's hot," said Penny, for the hundredth time.

"I know," I said, fanning my face with a very pretty fan John Henry had sent me. "Dusty, too."

"And that soot. I swear, by the time we get to Ryder's Gulch, they'll take us for a couple of blackamoors."

"Do you think they'll let us have a bath before we tie the knot?"

"No," she answered. "Amos says the preacher will perform the ceremony as soon as we arrive."

"Well, I'll be glad to get this corset off, anyway."

She looked out the window with a dreamy smile. "What do you suppose the wedding night will be like?" she asked me. "Do you think it'll be wonderful? Millie told me her married sister says it hurts the first time they put it inside you."

I felt myself blush. "Penny, how can you? Nice ladies aren't supposed to know of such things until they're married."

"Why not, if it's the truth? Forewarned is forearmed, as Miss Chasen always says."

I sat back, fanning myself harder. Maybe Penny was right, but I didn't see how you could arm yourself against something like that. Besides, I wondered if it wasn't just something people said to frighten young girls into remaining virgins. "What about the second time?" I asked. "Did her sister tell Millie what that was like?"

"No, but I don't suppose it could've been too bad. Millie says they're happy as larks together."

I sat there a while daydreaming about what marriage would really be like, what it would be like living with a man I barely knew, a man who'd already expressed his willingness to inflict corporal punishment on me. What if he was a hot-tempered man and he beat me all the time? "I'm kind of nervous about all this, aren't you, Penny?"

"No, not especially. I can't wait to have intercourse and see what it's like."

"My goodness, Penny, you'll be lucky if your new husband doesn't wallop you, too, if he hears you talking that way."

"He won't."

She glanced out the window with a smile. There wasn't much to see anymore besides sagebrush and the occasional herd of cattle. "Just think of it, Eleanor. By this time tomorrow, we'll be married women."

* * * * *

But when the day finally dawned, I felt extremely unwell. I moved slowly as I put on my wedding gown, with its embroidered borders and five tiers of ruffles, four of plain silk and one of lace, while Penny chattered on about how glad she was that we were finally here.

"You're quiet today," she observed, as she put up her hair. "Scared?"

"No. Just a little under the weather is all."

"You do have a bit of a fever," she said, feeling my forehead with the back of her hand. "Maybe if you take some tea?"

The tea went down well, but I still felt achy, ill, and restive. The cabin was hot and stuffy, but we didn't dare open the windows and take a chance on soiling our wedding finery. When the train finally pulled into Ryder's Gulch, it felt like we'd been on it a year. I'd been shaken and jostled so much for so long, the ground beneath my feet felt like it was still moving. I sat back down quickly, feeling a little faint.

"Eleanor, are you sure you're all right?"

"I think I have the grippe."

"Stay there. Let me get George."

When she returned with George, they labored together to help me off the train. Our husbands-to-be came forward and introduced themselves. Penny's was a short, stout young man, but very amiable. Mine was tall and quiet, and he handed me a lovely bouquet of roses. Penny explained the way things stood and John Henry offered to put off the wedding.

"No, no. I'll be all right. Just... help me to the church."

"This won't take long," he promised. "As soon as it's over, I'll take you home to a nice, soft bed."

I glanced at him sharply, suspecting him of irony, but when his glance met mine, I knew he was simply being courteous and sympathetic.

"Whoa," he said, stopping me to avoid a tumbleweed that was rolling by. I watched as it skittered on down the road past us, and John Henry pressed my hand. "If you need it, I'll get you a room at the hotel so you can lie down."

"Thank you. You're very kind, but I'm sure I'll be fine. Please don't make a fuss."

He nodded his head in agreement. "Whatever you want, darlin'. If you feel up to it, we can have our picture made after the ceremony. They've got it all set up in a place next door to the church."

Not wanting to rob him of this treat, I nodded. "That'd be wonderful."

He led me into the church and sat me down in one of the back pews. There were a couple of other girls from the train who were mail-order brides, too, and we sat and watched them marry first. As we sat there waiting, I turned my head and studied John Henry's profile.

He was good-looking, even better than in his picture. He must've felt my gaze upon him, because he turned all of a sudden and, with a twitch of his moustache, gave me a sweet, crooked smile, his eyes twinkling.

Finally, the first two couples were finished and filed out to go have their picture made as the four of us approached the altar. Like the couples before us, we stood up for each other and served as each other's witnesses.

I felt hot and feverish and barely heard what the pastor said. Penny nudged me, and I realized we were to repeat our vows.

As an enlightened woman, I didn't approve of promising to obey, and I'd meant to discuss that with John Henry, but by then I didn't care anymore. I just wanted to get it over with, so I said the vows as repeated to me by the pastor.

"I, Eleanor Lynn Phillips, promise to love, honor, and obey John Henry Morgan for as long as we both shall live."

In his vows, John Henry only had to cherish me, but as we faced each other for the kiss, I saw that he took that quite seriously. He encircled me with one arm and gave me a kiss full on the lips, my illness notwithstanding.

"Do you still feel up to that picture, Mrs. Morgan?"

Hearing him say that made my tummy feel all fluttery and I smiled. When I glanced around, Penny seemed quite anxious for it, so I nodded.

"Right this way, then," he told me, leading me away to the photographer next door.

* * * * *

There I was, not moving a muscle, my elbow on my new husband's shoulder, he sat while I stood and tried to keep my bouquet steady. The flash startled me, and when the picture was taken at last, I was finally allowed to sit down.

"We were going to have dinner together at the hotel," Amos told us girls, "but maybe we'd better make it for another time. Your missus is looking a mite puny, J.H."

"Yeah, she is."

"Oh, please don't change your plans for me," I told the three of them.

"Nonsense, darlin'. You come along with me and let me put you to bed."

So John Henry had them fetch the carriage, and soon I was on my way to my new home. "I'm sorry I'm ill," I told him, probably for the fourth time.

"Don't you worry about that, darlin'. I'll have you home in no time."

Thankfully, he'd brought his coach, a fine landau with the top up, instead of an open wagon. He helped me inside and jumped up on the running board to tell his coachman to spring the horses.

We broke off the main road through town and took a dusty country road. John Henry held my hand during the entire drive home, talking to me in a gentle, loving voice. "I'll have them make you a posset when we get to the ranch," he told me. "That should fix you up in a quick hurry."

"Is it far?"

"Not very. About three miles. With a team like mine, we ought to be there in just over fifteen minutes."

Just then, another tumbleweed rolled past and the horses tried to shy, but John Henry's excellent coachman held them steady. As the dust cleared, the ranch came into view. It looked rather rustic and weathered, but well kept-up. It was bigger than I expected, the main part of the house constructed of logs, with a two-story wing made of stone attached. I envisioned window boxes and geraniums, and a smart new knocker on the door. We pulled up around back and stopped.

"Well, Mrs. Morgan," said my husband, jumping down to hand me out. "Welcome to your new home." He led me to the door, and then he stopped me as he opened it. Suddenly, he swung me up in his arms and carried me over the threshold.

He set me down on the stone kitchen floor and a woman of about forty-five came forward and clasped my hand. "Mrs. Morgan, I'm Mrs. Allen, your housekeeper."

"It's a pleasure to meet you. Please call me Eleanor."

"Yes, ma'am. I've got a daughter around here somewhere, name of Claudia. She helps out with the housework, too."

Just then, John Henry broke in. "There's time enough for all that later, Mrs. Allen. Eleanor here is feeling poorly, and I'm going to get her into bed."

"What a shame. And on your wedding day, too."

I darted a quick glance around the kitchen before he took me by the elbow and guided me toward the staircase. The stairs were bare wood and creaked a little underfoot, but the hall upstairs was carpeted with a dark blue Oriental runner.

"I imagine you'll want to change some things once you're on your feet again."

"Well, I guess it *could* use a woman's touch."

"You change anything you see fit."

He opened the door and followed me inside. It was a large, sunny bedroom with a brass bed and a dressing area already set up. He must've seen me eyeing it because he grinned. "It don't take a genius to figure out what that look means," he told me. "Can I help you off with that dress, or would you rather have one of the ladies?"

"We'll have to see each other some time," I told him, my practical streak coming out. "If you can help me with the buttons, I can get the rest."

I felt so ill my hair hurt, but he was careful not to be rough.

"Can we leave it to tomorrow to unpack my trunk? I have everything I need for tonight in my bag, and I'd be awfully grateful if I could lie down."

"Sure thing, darlin'."

"I brought a lovely counterpane I made. Well, you'll see."

His hands on me were almost more than I could bear. I was sorely tempted to say to hell with my illness and let him deflower me then and there, but once he was done with the buttons, he left me alone to change for bed.

He came back a little later with a nice tray of soup and slices of bread and butter. Luckily, my appetite was still good. I had no wish to offend Mrs. Allen or her daughter by sending it back untouched. John Henry sat nearby while I ate, and when I was all done, he took the tray and set it outside the door.

When he came back, his moustache twitched another gentle smile. "Can you do me a favor?" he asked. "Do you mind letting your hair down for me?"

I reached up and felt it. "Of course not," I said. "I forgot it was even up." I pulled the chignon pin and my hair came cascading down past my shoulders. I shook it out, because I knew that's what he expected, and he eyed me lustfully.

Suddenly, though, I knew I wasn't up to it and I smiled regretfully. "I'm sorry," I told him. "Can we do our wedding night another time?"

He looked at me in surprise. "'Course we can. You get you some rest, sugar. You need anything, just holler."

So I took his advice, laid down, and promptly fell asleep.