

Petticoat Refuge

Part 1

SPECIAL EDITION
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NEW
Illustrations

Elizabeth Anne Nelson



A "Her TV" Novel



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PETTICOAT REFUGE

By Elizabeth Anne Nelson

Chapter One: Stage To Belton

Warm moist air hung from the sooty black clouds. Shafts of stark, glaring sunlight broke through and greeted the passengers getting off the morning train. The steam engine huffed and puffed dark, acrid billows of smoke as if anxious to be on its way.

“Burnside, Burnside!” the conductor shouted, urging passengers off the train.

Paul stood to one side of the railway platform trying to determine where the stagecoach luggage wagon was. He noted the blonde haired woman busily directing a man to unload her belongings from the train’s baggage car onto a cart marked with a sign: BURNSIDE & CENTER CITY STAGE.

Crossing over to the stagecoach baggage cart, Paul watched as several lady’s traveling bags and hat boxes along with an array of wooden cases were piled

onto it. Seeing two more women approaching the cart followed by a porter pushing a cart almost as large as the stagecoach cart, Paul dumped his two bags on the stagecoach cart. He kept his artist portfolio case in his hand, and said, "Belton." The baggage man nodded his understanding.

"Young man!" the blonde woman began to protest, only to watch Paul tip his hat towards her as he walked away. "Why I never saw..."

Paul walked back to the station to pause before a sign noting that tickets for the BURNSIDE & CENTRAL CITY STAGE could be bought at the Burnside Hotel. He glanced over to an old man sitting on the edge of the platform watching the passengers. "Burnside Hotel?"

"Down the street to your left. Tallest building in town," the old man drawled, pushing back his blue Gar hat to reveal a shock of white hair. His blue eyes studied Paul's stature and brown checker plaid suit. "You a jockey? You know, old Sherman used jockeys as outriders in Georgia. I served with..."

Paul had not really thought of himself as being as small as a jockey. He was short at 5' 4" but not especially slight. The past six months in prison had left him with a cream white complexion and thinner than usual. Perhaps it was just what the elderly man said to anyone.

Paul nodded and before the old man could launch into more conversation, Paul made his way down the street. He reached a four-story wooden structure with a large sign proclaiming that it was the Burnside Hotel. As he walked along the wooden sidewalk he half-wondered if he might be that old man someday,

telling tall tales about the Spanish War to anyone who might want to listen.

Finding the ticket office next to the registration desk, he bought tickets to Belton.

“Might try lunch,” the ticket agent suggested, as he shoved the tickets over the counter. “Stage don’t leave until after two. It’ll be right out front.”

“I left my baggage with your man at the station.”

The ticket clerk nodded and Paul walked across the lobby to the hotel dining room. It was already beginning to fill up with customers. As he entered the dining room, the rich scent of fresh roasting beef assailed his nostrils. It was mingled with the smell of furniture polish that brought the mahogany walls to a glistening sheen, burning kerosene from the many mirrored lamps, and the various floral perfumes worn by the women.

The hostess was a tall Mexican lady dressed in a Harvey Girl style uniform. It had a stark white, starched cotton pinafore. A huge bow perched upon the bustle of her gray wool dress as if it were some giant white butterfly about to launch itself. “Are you in a hurry, señor?”

“I don’t think so. I need to catch the stage to Belton.”

“No problem,” she answered as she handed him a menu and rushed off to attend to other customers.

Soon a waitress returned with the iced tea that he had ordered with his meal and he sat back in his chair to watch the other customers join the luncheon

crowd. It was clear that this was the place to eat lunch in this town.

“Pardon me, señor,” the hostess interrupted. She stood before him with three women behind her, including the blonde-haired woman he had seen at the train station. “I’m wondering if these ladies could join you, since you are all going to Belton on the stage this afternoon?”

“Certainly; the ladies may share my table,” Paul agreed, stressing the *my*. He arose to greet the ladies, who did not seem at all pleased with these egalitarian arrangements. “I am Paul Brown at your service, ladies.”

He helped the matron of the three with her chair before he took his own seat and watched as the hostess handed the silent trio their menus.

The matron of the trio was dressed in a black saffron travel dress with a bolero-styled jacket that revealed the expanse of her white shirtwaist blouse. Her hat sat upon the top of her black hair like an elaborate flower boat about to crest a wave. To her right sat a young woman of about eighteen dressed in gray wool, wearing a simple white rose-decorated hat that clung to one side of her brown top knot as if it might fall off. The blonde that had taken charge of the stage baggage cart wore a beige wool dress with a beige-toned bird feather hat that suited her small, avian eyes.

“I’m Mrs. Simpson,” the matron ventured. “My daughter, Grace, and I have just finished Cook’s Grand Tour, and we are returning home. Miss Addams is visiting Belton from Boston. We are hopeful that she will settle in Belton to teach.”

“I have a cousin in Belton who owns the Yankee Dollar Saloon. I’m going to be his piano player,” Paul said with a broad smile. “So I guess we will all be neighbors in Belton.”

“I hardly think so, sir,” Miss Addams stated with disdain. She turned to her menu as if the matter was dismissed.

“My husband owns the Belton Lumberyard and Construction Company,” Mrs. Simpson managed after an awkward silence. “Your cousin must be Robert Brown. My husband built his saloon and most of Belton. It seems like every day our little town adds new businesses. It’s all because of the railroad, you know. Soon, we won’t need a stagecoach.”

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The stagecoach’s movement reminded Paul of a rocking chair out of control. It occasionally pitched from side to side as the wheels rolled out of the dirt wheel tracks or bounced over a well-embedded rock. After an hour the six horses settled into a steady pace and Paul felt that he might pass the time by working on a pencil sketch of the Simpson mother and daughter, who sat opposite him with the casualness of experienced wagon masters.

Miss Addams sat uncomfortably by Paul’s side with her eyes closed, as if the blackness would somehow screen out the bouncing motions of the coach. Mrs. Simpson busied herself with a pair of knitting needles, maintaining a sense of calm while her daughter spent her time primly by reading from Letters To A Daughter by Helen Ekin Starrett. Paul knew the book as recommended reading at the Rose Oak College for Women, where he taught mathematics and the sciences for almost two years before his in-

carceration. It was filled with little homilies and model parental advice, such as:

“...The more refined the character and taste of any young girl, the more particular will she be in the matter of all articles of apparel that are private to herself, that they shall at least be daintily neat and clean....”

It was rather obvious that Grace Simpson had said or done something her mother did not approve of. She must have required her to make it up to her, showing how dutifully submissive she was by reading this rather goody-goody book.

With box of pencils in his lap and sketch pad held by his left hand against his knees, he managed to sketch in the ‘stick man’ design that would serve as the framework of the actual picture. He sketched a series of basic shapes, triangles and ovals, that began to flesh out the drawing of Mrs. Simpson. The sharp triangle slowly took on the shape of a tightly corseted hourglass figure. Two ovals became the full sleeves and a flowing bell turned into the billowing skirt. He did the same for Miss Addams. When tracing in the perspective lines of the coach interior, he realized how large these two women were in their full clothing. Their great hats, ballooning sleeves, and large dresses took up the space of a bench designed to sit three men comfortably.

As his mind wandered, he realized that young Grace Simpson and he shared the bench with plenty of room. It then dawned on him that his small-boned frame was even tinier than he expected. Paul had spent a long session in the military hospital to recover from his wound and the illnesses that followed. While gradually recovering he continued teaching, but the sudden return to a near starvation diet in prison had kept his weight down. He assured himself

that a few months of good healthy western food and he would be back to normal with all this horror long forgotten.

He was tempted to sketch in their underclothes but the confines of the coach was such that hidden pleasures best be kept hidden. Especially now that Miss Addams seemed a bit surprised by his activity and was watching him through half-closed eyes.

His mind's eye imagined that Grace was wearing a white silken chemise under a well-cinched white satin corset that brought her waist to a firmly-held twenty inches. A garter belt waist pulled taut and smooth her pink silken stockings under the soft fullness of her white silken drawers. He could imagine that her little maidenly breasts were enhanced by bust pads worn under the tight confines of the chemise held firmly in place by the corset bust line. His eyes studied the daintiness of her feet in black patent kid leather button shoes, with just a hint of the pink silk-covered ankle. Over the firm, unyielding demands of the corset she wore a soft white silken corset cover with three full petticoats, each made of three yards of matching silk. Over these three petticoats there was a quilted petticoat designed to maintain the bell shape of the dress skirt while a pad was seated above her feminine rear by a little tie sash about her skirted waist to provide a fetching bustle. Almost in a dream state, he imagined he could feel the pillow-like fullness of the soft silken drawers and petticoats as they flowed between her legs.

Sensing his arousal, Paul pretended to arrange his pencil box and tried to focus upon his sketch. He had just finished the basic design when he heard the driver yelling at the horses. He felt the stagecoach wobble as it began to pull in front of a way station where the passengers would be treated to a light

lunch while the horses were exchanged for a fresh team. As Paul stepped from the coach to help Mrs. Simpson, he noted that it was already late in the day and half-wondered if they would reach Belton by nightfall.

The way station was located in a slight valley lined by a little creek. On either side the rolling plains seemed a sea of fragrant spring grasses and flowers that stretched for miles and miles into the curve of the horizon. The sky was now darkened with billowing black clouds that all but hid the sun and seemed to add a chill to the afternoon. The distant, sharp scent of ozone predicted an oncoming thunder storm.

While the women retreated to the outdoor comfort station, Paul considered his own needs and decided that a cool beer was in order, if the station master offered such additional comforts. He cautiously stepped inside the log structure with its shuttered windows and rifle firing slits.

“We have a light lunch and coffee,” a roly-poly man dressed in farmer overalls and a flannel shirt announced as he pointed to a bench table. Next to the table a large stone fireplace dominated one end of the dirt floor cabin. The burning pine logs filled the building with a rich pine scent that mingled with the smell of the kerosene lamps and the tantalizing odor of bean soup. “Unless you prefer something from the bar,” he added with a smile, indicating the direction towards a log bar built along one side of the room. “I have some Golden Grain Belt on ice, or whisky if you please.”

“I’ll take beer with my meal, please,” Paul responded. He noted that the other half of the cabin consisted of a kitchen and a separate room that no doubt served as the innkeeper’s office and bedroom.

Over this space was a loft with four doors facing a balcony; travelers might spend the night at the way station if the weather turned bad. "How far are we from Belton?"

"Should make it by nightfall," the innkeeper said as he filled a tall glass from the tap and placed it upon the bar. "The meal is free, but the beer is ten cents."

"Right," Paul said, dumping a dime on the counter. The women entered the cabin and the innkeeper showed them to a wash basin by the kitchen water pump where they might freshen up.

"It's awfully primitive," Miss Addams noted in disdain as the Simpson women set about to wash the grime of the stage ride off of their faces. Almost fearfully she wondered aloud, "Does Belton have indoor plumbing?"

"Most of it is quite modern. We have a town water and sewer company, and there is talk about a water-powered electricity plant being built on the Willow River for the Baxter Mines that will serve the town too," Mrs. Simpson countered. "I think that you will find that Belton is quite civilized."

Miss Addams was about to say something condescending but her better judgment for the moment took over. She eyed the wooden bench table where the innkeeper was setting bowls along with a large blackened soup kettle that he had lifted from an iron holder over the wood fire.

"Oh, Mommy, it's like that little Swiss chalet where we stayed overnight last winter," Grace Simpson exclaimed as she took her seat facing the fireplace,

grateful for its afternoon warmth. “I hope that we get home before the storm.”

“Yes, dear,” her mother responded as she accepted Paul’s arm for balance as she sat down at the table. At her gesture he took his place by Mrs. Simpson’s side as Miss Addams elected to sit at the other side of the table while showing her disdain for the fact that he was drinking. Mrs. Simpson smiled and asked for a glass of wine, causing Miss Addams to look away, while Mrs. Simpson filled her bowl with the thick bean soup, took two slices of thick brown bread and dipped her knife into the butter bowl. “If the Lord can have a sip of wine...”

“My goodness, the butter is green,” Miss Addams exclaimed in shocked surprise. “And the bread is made of unrefined rye. The doctors say that unrefined bread has too much roughage and causes cancer.”

“It’s spring butter,” Grace announced with pleasure. “All the French chefs prefer it for cooking. Holsteins produce it in the spring when they are taken off of winter forage and allowed to eat certain spring grasses. In Minnesota and Wisconsin they actually ship it to France in ice-packed tins. It ages like fine cheese. It is really wonderful.”

Miss Addams sampled the bread and butter as if she were risking being poisoned.

‘*Chalk one up for Grace,*’ Paul thought as he tried the soup and decided that the cook would get by in any restaurant. When he finished the little meal, he excused himself to locate the comfort station. By the time he finished and washed up, he found that the ladies had already entered the stage and it was ready to continue their journey.

As the team picked up the pace and settled into a steady gallop, Mrs. Simpson gave a deep sigh and exclaimed, "I must say that I am glad to be back home in America. It has been almost a year of travel and I long to be back in Belton."

"Tell me about Belton," Paul suggested as he returned to his sketch work.

"It was a cattle town once. Settled first by Charles Belton at the Willow River crossing of the Holton Trail in 1868. My husband started a logging camp nearby in '73, the Hoggans started their grain mill in '93 and the Baxter brothers opened their mine about a year later. We are the county seat and have about 500 people. And my husband has built most of the town," she nodded her head with a smile that showed her pride "The Panic of 1901 combined with the burning of Gaston Bridge Crossing wiped out the little railroad that was to connect Burnside with Capital City. We can ship our things to Burnside but we have no real passenger service unless you ride in the caboose with the railroad crew. Since the next freight is about a week away, we decided that the stage would be better. When the new railroad is finished I am certain that Belton will grow even bigger."

"Who is Mrs. Sawyer?" Miss Addams asked from her self imposed silence. "She wrote a letter to me concerning a teaching position."

"Miss Sawyer. She is our postmistress, school superintendent and county board of education chair woman. She was our school teacher before she went political and took the postmistress job." Mrs. Simpson glanced over towards Paul. "Can I move?"

"Yes, Ma'am. I'm just doing a casual sketch to pass the time."

“Where did you learn to draw?” Miss Addams asked with growing interest. “It certainly seems to be a strange talent for a saloon piano player.”

“I had a minor in art at Princeton before the war. After the war, I taught mathematics, the physical sciences and a little art at a small college for young ladies. I suppose I am going to play piano because it’s a job and better for my health.”

“Health?” Miss Addams pressed with growing curiosity.

“Out West, Miss Addams, we avoid asking too many personal questions,” Mrs. Simpson noted with an edge to her voice that caused Paul to smile almost gratefully.

“During the Spanish War I was wounded and in the military hospital I caught a tropical illness,” he offered with a shrug.

“So many of our brave boys fell ill during the war,” Mrs. Simpson noted. “In fact, I hear that most of our boys died from disease in military hospitals.”

“The price we pay to be imperialists and fight wars for the munitions makers and newspapers,” Miss Addams announced in strident tones that showed that she had somehow been prodded to mount yet another hobby horse. “I have no doubt that the Maine was deliberately sunk by our own military imperialists and the facts show that Spain was more than willing to concede Cuba before a shot was fired.”

When Paul and his troop of black cavalry from the famed 10th Mounted rode east by train they had heard the cheers. But the antiwar movement had grown quickly in some parts of the country and by

the time he had returned wounded from Cuba after a few short months, he found that `our brave boys' were less appreciated, especially by the so called `intelligentsia'.

"I've never heard such an awful lie," Mrs. Simpson responded. "Our ill-fated Mr. McKinley would not have-"

"Frankly, ladies, I would rather not discuss the war," Paul interrupted, setting aside his sketch pad. "In fact, I think that I would prefer to take a short nap."

"Of course," Mrs. Simpson agreed as a somewhat frustrated Miss Addams turned her attention towards the window. The storm clouds gathered, leaving the skies a dark silver gray over the rolling green plains.

Although Paul sought peace and quiet from arguments about a war that was over, except for the guerilla battles for 'liberation' that followed the Spanish War in the Philippines. He found that the beer and beans actually did make him sleepy and to the rocking motion of the coach he fell asleep.

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Miss Addams noted that Mrs. Simpson had returned to knitting while her daughter had returned to her book. Miss Adams, as a suffragette, found such books to be just another example of male bondage enforced by women upon their sisters. It seemed to be such a pity that the movement had found so many traitors among other females.

Trying not to think about such depressing thoughts, Miss Addams turned her attention towards

the man called Paul, in hopes of starting a conversation to pass the time. The rocking bounces of the moving stagecoach did not allow her any chance to relax. To her utter surprise she saw that he was actually sleeping!

To her mind's eye this was a very unusual man. His hair was long in the fashion so popular with the young athletic set in Eastern colleges, but she wondered at the lack of long sideburns and the traces of blonding towards the back. Was his hair color real, or dyed? His eyebrows were bushy enough. Still, there was a subtle high arch and long tapering of the brow line that suggested meticulous plucking in the past. His facial skin had the pallor of someone who assiduously avoided the sun rather than the weather beaten look so typical of western men and women. Of course, she noted that he had said he was a saloon piano player, an indoor job which might explain his peaches and cream complexion. But she doubted this because of his scrubbed look. The look of an actor, perhaps, who daily applied and removed his stage makeup. Whatever the case, his almost oval face would be the envy of any woman.

His hands were uncallused and well-manicured, like the smooth hands of a gambling man. Yet there was a certain bleached pink glow that reminded Miss Addams of a servant woman, who might find her hands frequently in laundry tubs or dish water.

What caught her attention most of all was the way that he sat in the leather stagecoach seat. Even asleep his body was erect. While most men sat sprawled with their elbows and legs open, his legs were together and crossed in a curve to one side, while his elbows and arms were inward towards the centerline of his body. A curious man, she decided.

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“Whoa! WHOA!” yelled the stagecoach driver, as he pulled back on the reins and rocked the brake lever. “What do you want, Charlie Grover? What are you and the boys doing out here!”

“Just shut up and throw the bank box out,” a voice yelled as the stage stopped and the side door was flung open.

“Git out!” a rider ordered.

“Now Nate Baxter, what is this silliness about?” Mrs. Simpson demanded of the rider as she stepped from the stage. She was followed by her daughter and Miss Addams. Paul had a dull, sickening feeling that caused him to wish that he had a gun.

Stepping from the coach, he realized that a gun would be of little use to him with over ten unmasked men on horseback milling about the stagecoach. Numbly, he handed over his wallet to the rider Mrs. Simpson had identified as Nate Baxter, while his common sense told him that he was soon going to be dead. He heard the driver curse and the shooting begin.

The rider fired at near point blank with three slugs tearing into Paul’s body. He sank into a total blackness without feeling the ground as it caught his limp form.

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He awoke to total pain, feeling his body pressed by an unknown weight. The smell of rancid blood, floral perfumes, wood polish and leather mingled with the

sound of the slowly moving coach. Opening his eyes, he realized that it was night; moonlight made its way through a side window to reveal that he was on the floor of the coach where the stage robbers had tossed his body. Above him was the weight of other bodies!

Almost timidly he turned his head to look directly into Miss Addams' horrified, dead eyes. They glistened like glass in the faint moonlight. Absentmindedly he considered the fact that the dead eyes revealed no image of her killer, just terror.

"I got the reins, Doc," a voice yelled as the sound of more horsemen came to Paul's ears.

"Jake, you and Doc check things out," a deep voice ordered as the coach stopped its ambling motion and the door was opened. "Looks to me like they just tossed them into the coach after shooting them."

"Poor souls," a tenor voice murmured. "I should stay here."

"Reverend, I'm going to need every member of the posse I can get," the deep voice ordered. "Okay, head em' up, we have to follow the signs as long as the moon is with us."

The rumble of distant thunder mingled with the sound of retreating horses.

"Jake, I'll check them for life signs as we dump them out of the stage. We might find someone still alive," Doc explained as he struggled with the body of the stagecoach driver. Paul felt a growing pain that swelled upward into another pit of pitch blackness.