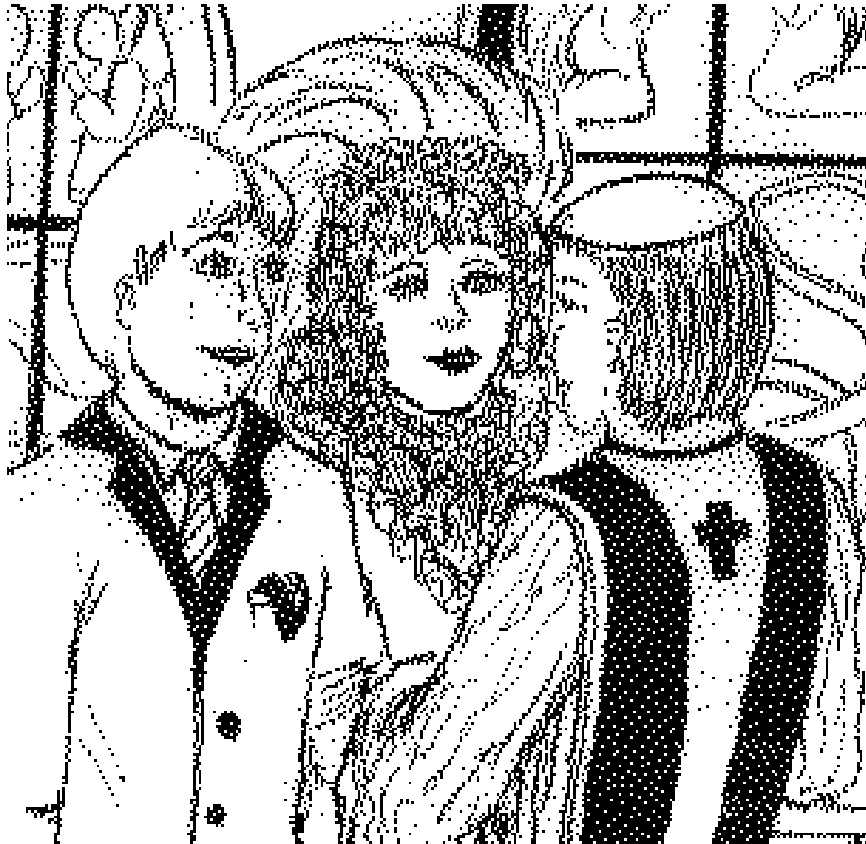


UNCHAINED BRIDE

By Susan Peerless



ILLUSTRATED BY C. PITTS

A 'NEW WOMAN' NOVEL

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UNCHAINED BRIDE

By Susan Peerless

Bride, be thou beautiful and all will adore thee. With but thy glance of innocence thou wilt melt the hardest of male hearts. Thou art in thy essence the apex of human beauty, beloved by all. Thou art the female spirit at its very loveliest and most appealing. O, how I envy thee thy bridehood.

- Susan Peerless

Chapter I

It was a sunny morning, promising a hot August day. I sat on the front porch steps and watched Betsy Bell cut roses. Betsy was an uncommonly beautiful young girl. She wore one of those very feminine dresses with a full three quarters skirt, now favored by the women of our colony. The dress was a pink print with a sleeveless top made to look like it was covering a frilly white blouse although the whole thing was just one peasant style dress. It went well with Betsy's long, swinging blond tresses.

{God, if I could only look like that!}

I turned my head to watch Ed starting up the blue wood-burning tractor over in front of the barn.

{Looking somewhere else doesn't help, idiot! She's just plain adorable in that outfit. Wonder what the swing of that long, soft blond hair feels like across her bare shoulders. I'll bet it feels nice, she keeps swinging her hair to and fro as if on purpose!}

I jumped up and started toward Ed. I tried to keep my thoughts under control, perhaps not as hard as I should. They kept creeping in.

I wanted to do girl things, dress in their pretty dresses. I kept getting feminine thoughts, a gut wrenching desire to BE a girl! God! If old man Mathers ever found out he'd whip me out of the colony or worse! A lot worse!

I stopped in the middle of the barnyard. Ed had finally gotten the tractor engine to draw on the gasifier. He was gunning it out the gate. So I turned back toward the dormitory and my seat on the porch. Betsy had finished and was walking briskly toward the main dining hall. Every once in a while she gave a little skip that twisted her skirts and showed a flash of petticoat. I had never seen anyone so satisfied and happy to be just what she was. I sighed with envy and sat down on the steps.

So there I sat, little, unhappy Bernie Hawkins. I was 17 and a bit undersized. Took a lot of ribbing for that, and a couple of beatings from the other guys. I shifted and looked toward the main dining room. Betsy had disappeared inside. There'd be roses in the vases in the dining hall for lunch. Why was I sitting there, after work started, on

a weekday morning? Mr. Mathers had sent word that he wanted to see me so all I could do was to wait!

My mind went back to last night's session. Last year I had built a phony back on my closet. If I take everything out of this closet and remove the pipe where all the hangers hook, then the back comes loose and swings out revealing my meager stock of girl's things. A few things I had swiped from clothes lines. Some I had bought and a lot I had gotten by working as a volunteer in the colony's used clothing warehouse sorting and cataloging. My extra time work had been paid for with coupons good for clothing; no one noticed that my coupons were exchanged exclusively for frilly, girl type stuff! I got some of the sweetest things there! Then they put on a couple of permanent workers and I was out in the cold. So here I am, still waiting for old Mathers.

I suppose that, while I wait, I could explain what's going on here. The year is 2014. It was 2002 when they showed up in our solar system. They were the Avenging Angels. They were not human physically nor mentally. They said that we were a strange species. As individuals we were often geniuses but as a race we were insane. We randomly killed each other. We were destroying the planet that we lived on, and knowingly. We were dying by the tens of thousands from skin cancer because we had willingly destroyed our ozone layer. The silly thing about what they said was that we had to admit that they were right.

They were called the Plexians and they said that they were missionaries, though not of a religious sort. They shrugged off our religions, saying that they neither helped nor hindered. Certain groups of men that controlled things, especially the armies, fought back under the battle cry, "Mankind must be free!" They died by the millions. Others rioted and robbed, taking advantage of the unsettled conditions. They died by the tens of millions. The Plexians were not human; they were thorough and they were emotionless when it came to the general population. In ten years, three quarters of the human race was gone.

They set up colonies of humans. In many cases these were rural and self sufficient in energy, most food and a few other things. Some were lightly industrialized and these supplied the others with parts, computers, cloth and so forth. Most colonies contained around 1000 people and were closed, no one went in or out. The Plexians may have been ruthless with the general human race but they lavished love on their cherished colonies!

We were Colony 917 with a population of 1014. We had started with 1015 but a woman had died by falling from a barn loft and impaling herself on the red hot exhaust stack of a tractor. Most injuries or diseases were easily cured by the "medical machine" that was supplied by the Plexians to each colony but that sort of injury couldn't be cured. She died almost instantly.

Each colony would remain sealed for 20 years, during which time it was to form its own flavor or culture. If extreme violence broke out in a colony, it would be exterminated. Our colony was in its second year. The Plexians kept out of our way in the colonies. Hell, I've never even seen one!

Colin Mathers became our leader by vote. He did fairly well, but his overly strong religious views didn't always set well with most people. In many ways our culture be-

came based on American rural culture of a century ago. By the way, our tractors and electrical system ran on firewood. The few aircraft in use and some other machines burned alcohol. As far as I knew, not a drop of petroleum was being burned on the planet any more.

“He's ready to see you now.”

I jumped a meter. I hadn't noticed it when Rubin came up to me.

“Ha!” he exclaimed. “Give you a chance to loaf and you go into a daze. Come on! Get your rear in gear!”

I grinned. “O.K., O.K. Where? In his office?”

“No, the council chamber.”

I shrugged and walked toward the Administration Building. Mathers probably wanted to chide me for not having started to look for a wife. There were some forty available girls and there was a lot of pairing and unpairing going on right now. So what excuse could I give? That I'd rather be among the giggling bunch of girls being picked over? Hardly!

I strode into the council chamber. Colin Mathers was at the front desk doing something on the computer. I stood by the desk.

“Mr. Mathers? You wanted to see me?”

“What? Oh, yeah. Bernie. Come on around here and take a load off your feet.”

He was using the over-friendly, father confessor image which meant that he wanted something from me.

“Thanks.”

“Bernie, as you know, the most important thing that we are doing right now is getting all the remaining families formed. So all the single people are getting to know each other and are struggling with that important decision.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“But, you haven't been out there, shall we say, patting a few fannies and kissing a few lips. You haven't been looking the young ladies over. Now, Bernie, in our society the girls are definitely homebodies, proper young ladies in every sense of the word. It is up to the men to initiate courtship. In other words, the girls aren't going to come to you.”

“I understand.”

“Then could you tell me the trouble?”

“I don't know. I just can't...”

“Are you a homosexual?”

“No!”

“I didn't think so. Which is lucky because the colony can't have unproductive permutations in its midst. So what is your problem?”

“Nothing that I know of. I'll probably come around O.K.”

“You may be a bit late already. As you may know, there's two more men than women in our population. They put an extra man in here as men are more likely to get killed by accident. It didn't work out that way.”

“I know.”

He pursed his lips and looked at me thoughtfully.

“Would you give your life for the colony, Bernie?”

“I... Well... I suppose so but I've never seen where such is necessary.”

He laughed. “No, We're not much given to making such dramatic sacrifices. I didn't mean that you'd have to die because there aren't enough women.”

I chuckled weakly. “I certainly had hoped not.”

“Bernie, I want you to attend the meeting of the council tonight. God may be willing to help you with your problem.”

“With all due respect,” I said, “I don't feel that I have a problem. It would appear that it is you and the council that have a problem.”

“True, true. But, of course, you will do your damndest to help solve this problem, won't you?”

“I'll do whatever is in my power to help the colony. That goes without saying.”

“Good! Good! I know you'll come through if called upon.”

“To do what?”

“Let's just see what comes out of the council's deliberations.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Now go on over to the dining hall and tell the girls that I said to stuff you!”

“But its only ten o'clock.”

“Yes, yes. But some of the eligible young ladies are there. Gives you another chance to look them over. Right?”

“Yes, of course,” I said, but without any deep enthusiasm.

On the way over to the dining hall, I thought things out. I was sure that my mental outlook would be counted as an undesirable perversion by the council. I might even end up dead. I would bet that there's at least a half dozen gays in this colony, but to save their lives, they had gone very deep into the closet! I guess I'll have to do the same. Shit!

“Hi.”

Delphinia turned and said with obvious relief, “Oh, good, they sent someone immediately for once. It's that one, Bernie!” She pointed to a large pot on one of the biggest stoves. I went over and looked in the pot. Some uncooked onions and tomatoes floated around in it.

“Doesn't look cooked,” I commented.

Betsy laughed like a waterfall of music {Am I in love with the girl or her wardrobe?} and gushed, "Of course it's not cooked, silly. The stove doesn't work. That's why you were sent over. Or is it?"

"Oh, yes. Let's see. Are all the gas burners out?" Obviously they had called maintenance and nobody had shown up yet.

"Yes," answered Natalie. The flame just got lower and lower and went out. But the other stoves still work."

"Then the answer's clear. You've got a discombobulated burpinstan."

Delphinia looked worried. "Can we get another?"

"Oh, we can probably combobulate this one."

"Could you?"

"I can try."

"Wow! It works," came Delphinia's voice.

Suddenly I received a swift kick to my badly exposed rear. Betsy's voice came sweetly to me, "Thank you for combobulating our whatever it was. Your mechanical abilities are..."

"Yeah, yeah. It was just a joke, that's all," I complained.

"Bernie, you don't think much of girls, do you?" Betsy asked with an annoyed look on her face.

I twisted around and looked her in the face. "I think that girls are the most wonderful things on Earth," I gasped out.

"Oh," said Betsy, her eyes wide. "Well that's a good start!"

"Well, what I meant to say was..."

"No," replied Betsy. "I think that you said something real. Come on over here and let's have a cup of coffee." We were soon at a table our of earshot of the other two girls. Betsy stared at me over her cup of coffee. "Bernie, are you one of those boys who are so impressed by pretty girls that they're afraid to make a move?"

"Oh, I don't know. Are you one of those girls that are so impressed by being pretty that..."

"Bernie!" She stared at me a minute. "I've got a feeling that you see through a lot of cover up type things."

"Shall we let our hair down and discuss the situation?"

Betsy grinned. "My hair is already down. Why haven't you made much of an effort to find a girl for yourself. You're not more interested in boys, are you?" I hesitated.

"No, I'm not gay if that's what you mean."

"What else could I mean?"

"Well, you're interested in boys and..."

"I'm not gay?"

“Something like that.”

“Bernie, what an extraordinary thing to say! Ah! Now I understand!”

“You do?”

“In a sense. You're trying to say that you're into something else. Bernie, what do you think about girls?”

“Well, there are certain things that seem strange.”

“Strange? Wow! I expected one of any number of inane standard statements, but not that. Explain. And I mean in detail.”

“I guess it would be best to compare them to boys.”

“Very logical.”

“I'm not trying to be funny, Betsy. Anyway physically they're smaller and weaker. They don't seem to develop mentally as much as males, or at least they appear that way. From the way you talk I kind of doubt that they are all that dumb-dumb.”

“Look, we're a bit shallow in personality, perhaps a touch childish with our pretty dresses and such. But this is what is expected of us by society, 'men' if you will. Especially in this society that we're building. In it women are expected to be good wives, helpmates and mothers. Pretty submission is the name of the game.”

“And the childishness?”

“Oh, I don't think it should be called that. Bernie, women are the mothers, the go-betweens between the little child and the adult. It's only natural that they have some traits of both.”

“I've never heard a girl say these things before.”

“Some really don't consciously realize it. They ARE shallow. Others accept it because you can't fight city hall. But,” she leaned close as if to impart a great secret, “there's an even more important reason that we freely subject ourselves to these clothes, this submissiveness to rough, demanding men, this image of sweet beauty and dainty femininity.”

“And what is that reason?”

She grinned at me impishly. “Because it's a hell of a lot of fun!”

Betsy smiled at me, expecting discomfort at my being taken in. But I frowned thoughtfully and said, “Don't laugh. You may really be imparting one of the great secrets of the Universe.”

“Huh?”

“I've watched you enjoying it. Just a few minutes ago you went out to the front yard and cut some roses.”

“Yes. I didn't see you.”

“I was sitting in the shade on the front stoop. Anyway, Your dress is cut low in back and you enjoy the feel of your hair swinging across your back. You often move your head in a certain way just to cause that sensation.”

She stared at me. “Bernie, you're not supposed to notice things like that. I'm flattered that you were studying me but you're supposed to note how my 'boobs' bounce and not...

“Then there's your skirt. It's a colorful full print and fairly long. You enjoy both the feel of its movement and the display it makes when you move. You often grab it unnecessarily to move and swirl it, increasing both those enjoyments. Am I right?”

“You're either a very deep person or have some other...”

“Am I right?”

“Why ask? It's so obvious. Of course you're right. But why would you notice? Bernie, are you in love with me?”

It was my turn to smile and look mysterious. “But Betsy, you're engaged to that young fellow who makes all our plates and things, Dave ...?”

“Simmons, Dave Simmons. But that didn't answer my question.”

“No, it didn't, did it? Betsy, you interest me greatly but I couldn't call it love.”

She finished her coffee and studied me over the rim of her cup. “Bernie, there's something that you're not telling me.”

“There's thousands of things I'm not telling you. Say, is there anything to eat around here? That's what old man Mathers sent me in for originally.”

She stood with her coffee cup. “It's not time to eat yet but I'll get you something.”

As Betsy headed back toward the kitchen area she stopped and looked back at me over her shoulder. Then, with an impish little grin, she tilted her head back a bit and tossed it back and forth so as to swish her hair over her back.

I smiled and nodded. I had had to cut off this conversation as it was getting too close to the truth about me. Betsy was a nice person but there was no guarantee that she wouldn't post anything she discovered about me on the colony's bulletin board!

Chapter II

The council meeting was every Monday at seven. Although most people were expected to be present as occasionally certain matters went to a full vote by all, I often missed the meetings because I was one of the men in charge of the power plant. Commonly, I volunteered to keep my eye on things while Fred Griddly and Tom Hudson, the other two involved in keeping our power system going, went to the meeting. This time Tom manned the power station and I went to meeting.

I stood in the doorway and looked the situation over. It was five to seven and people were still wandering in. Mr. Mathers must have been watching for me as he gestured for me to go up front and sit there. I wasn't comfortable there. Mr. Mathers got up and cleared his throat into the microphone, the universal signal to come to order.

“Your attention please. The meeting will come to order. First we will ask the Almighty for his blessing.” He bowed his head into the respectful silence. “Lord, bless those who assemble here tonight and extend your understanding to their feeble but sincere efforts to govern themselves in the light of thy teachings. Amen.”

He looked up as if expecting an immediate answer to his little prayer but none was forthcoming. Then he turned to the four men seated at the table with him, our council.

“Very well. I move that we dispense with old business tonight as the only thing left unresolved is the question of raising the pressure of the water supply on the South side of town and Fred Bradley is still studying that.” A chuckle ran through the crowd as Fred Bradley, in charge of the town water supply, was the most methodical man in the colony.

“The first item on the agenda tonight is a case of theft. As you all know, Dart Ferns was found guilty of stealing three chickens from the colony poultry farm.” He shuffled among some papers. “Yes, here it is. Our Court ruled that the council will pass sentence. I would presume that the traditional 8 hours in the stocks will be served?”

He looked questioningly at the other members of the council. They all nodded but one raised his hand.

“Yes, Will?” Mathers inquired.

“I would like to point out that this is the second time that Dart has stolen chickens. I move that the sentence be 24 hours in the stocks and an extra time agricultural project.” I half listened as the council thrashed out Dart's sentence.

“Now we pass on to the next item, the sexual ratio in the colony. Almost all our people are now paired off and as you well know, the colony's ability to increase in size is of prime importance. By the way, just this afternoon, Jerome Drew and Beula Higgens announced their engagement. Stand up there Jerome and Beula. Let's give them a hand folks! Good luck you two!” Everyone clapped and craned to see the beaming couple in the back.

Then Mathers tapped on the microphone to regain order. “Jerome, as most know, delivers milk and our newspaper. Very well, back to the matter at hand. My sense of properness leads me to propose to the council that the colony sexual ratio be adjusted to 50% men and 50% woman every two years. I've already passed out copies of the proposed law to the council members. Yes, Mr. err - Mr. Townsend.”

A man halfway back in the meeting hall had raised his hand.

“May I ask how it is to be decided who to kill off in order to bring the sexual ratio in line each time.”

“Mr. Townsend, the killing of people is not being proposed!”

“As you all know, the Plexians give each colony a device which we call the 'medical machine'. What is not common knowledge is that, over a period of time, this device is capable of modifying a person physically, even to the point of changing his or her sex.”

A murmur passed through the hall. A cold shiver passed down my spine. Change a person's sex? My sex? But this was an impossible situation. They would never change the sex of anyone who wanted it! Mather's religious righteousness would never permit it! The only way that I could get it done would be to go into it kicking and screaming, 'No! Why me?!'

Mr. Townsend continued. "Fascinating, Mr. Mathers. But where is the long line of volunteers. Or will it be done by lot? Ahead of time, I might mention that I, or for that matter my wife, will die before..."

"Rest easy, Mr. Townsend. The method requires a certain amount of cooperation on the part of the person involved. Now, of course, the first idea that comes to mind is to change the sex of perverts. Well, not only does our colony not have any but the very idea of giving a twisted and perverted person what they want is repugnant to our ideals.

"This change will only be carried out on honest, upright persons who are willing to sacrifice this aspect of their lives to help the colony. Now, I might mention that the sacrifice will not only be rewarded by the knowledge that the colony is being helped but the person involved will be given title to a cottage in Shady Lane!"

Another wave of talking went through the hall. The pretty little cottages on Shady Lane were the only private houses in the colony. Most married people lived in the condo apartments, single people in the dormitories.

"All right! Settle down. If there are no more questions, the council will vote on the proposed law. We'll do this by a show of hands."

Three of the council members raised their hands. One, a Mr. Tribbly, sat there with his arms crossed and a glum expression.

"Excellent! Now, we'll go on to what this new law requires. Obviously, this time we are looking for a male to become a female. The council will not accept applications. The council will decide who to ask. The person in question will have one week to decide then another will be asked. These people must be single. There will never be any dishonor connected to a refusal. The first person selected by the council is Bernie Hawkins. Stand up Bernie."

I slowly rose. I'm sure my face was white. I sat again almost immediately.

"I might mention that Mr. Hawkins did not know about this until this very moment. I just asked him to be present. He may not refuse nor accept for one week. Bernie, I will make whatever time you may need for counseling available to you. Hear?"

I nodded, 'yes'.

The meeting dragged to an end and people began getting up to leave. I decided to wait a bit.

"Came as a shock, eh, Bernie?" Mathers was standing in front of me.

"Yeah. A shock is right. I don't think I could do it, you know."

"Few would have the courage, the dedication to do such a thing."

I looked up at him. "Why don't you do it?"

"A couple of reasons. I can't since I'm married and, being over sixty, I'd still be sixty as a woman, well past child bearing age."

"Child bearing? I'd have to have babies?"

"That's the main idea."

"I'd have to marry a man?"

"That's the way it's properly done. Look, your mind is not in condition right now to digest all this. I'm going to ask a number of the older married women in town to talk to you about all this and what to expect."

"Sort of mother - daughter talks?"

"Sort of."

"Great."

"I understand that with the physical and hormonal changes, the way you look at life, your own self image, would also change."

"Somehow, to know that doesn't help me." I got up. "I may ask to see you tomorrow or the next day."

"I'll fit you in whenever you want."

I left, mulling over the fact that I now had Colin Mathers at my beck and call! A hand touched my shoulder in the doorway. It was Betsy.

"Bernie. I'd like to talk to you."

"Ah- Let's go to the soda bar in the rec hall."

We went well back into the darker part of the park and felt around for one of the benches. We sat down. There was silence.

"You know, Betsy, if your Dave finds us out here there'll be Hell to pay!"

"Maybe. It is quite innocent. I wanted to ask you what you're going to do about Mather's request."

"Figured as much. I don't know. Probably will turn it down. It's just too weird."

"I wonder."

"Wonder what?"

"If you really want to turn it down; I mean, after what you said in the dinning hall this morning."

"Oh, come on now! That was just talk! Conversation to kill some time."

"No. Bernie, I'm not stupid. You made observations and statements that a boy never would make. I mean that a boy would NEVER make them. If, by strange chance, he noticed something like that, it would passed through his mind for a second or two, he might chuckle and then he'd forget it. He'd never bring it up with the girl. He's got far more important things to think about than if a girl likes the feel of her long hair sweeping her bare shoulders. But it would appear that it made a fairly deep impression with you. That and the fact that I might swish my skirts a certain way once in a while. Why?"

Bingo! She had hit the nail squarely on the head! Me and my big mouth! Now anything that I say will sound exactly for what it is, a lame excuse without the slightest touch of reality.