

BUSTLES & BULLETS

By Susan Peerless



ILLUSTRATED BY BRIAN DUKEHART

A 'NEW WOMAN' NOVEL

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BUSTLES AND BULLETS

By Susan Peerless

I.

It was boring as hell but I waited it out. I was hiding in the bushes near my sister's house in Pecos. It was after 7 O'clock and there was no moon. I had to be sure there was no one else around. A man on the run has to be careful. I had tied my horse to a mesquite shrub in the draw behind the house. The wind kept the mosquitoes down anyway. Sure wished that I could roll a cigarette. Hell, there's nobody else around. Just gotta chance it goin' to the house.

I move to the back door and opened it a crack. Nothin'. I slipped inside. The kitchen was dark. There was lamp light comin' from the sitting room. I moved slowly and carefully over to the door. Never can tell when you gonna bump into one of them do-dads that wimmen are always leaving around.

In the sittin' room, Sis was in the big winged chair that had been Dad's. She was reading a book. Always was one fer readin'.

Sis was a couple a years younger than me. I'm Ben Carter, she's Sylvia Carter. We were raised in this area. Old man was a cowhand. Later on he worked in the mine back in the hills. He got hisself killed in a barroom brawl back in '67. So anyhow, I'm 23 and Sis is 21. I got a habit of getting into trouble while Sis is a real purdy angel. She got some half dozen orphans in her house. The Territorial government pays her some to take care of them. I've tried to give her money too but she don't cotton to takin' from me. Says it's from the devil. Sure I've robbed some banks and stuff, but most of what I tried to give her, I earned fair and square gambling.

My gun touched the corner of the big ole stove and made a tiny clink.

Sis didn't even look up from her readin'.

"Come on in, Ben. I've been expecting you."

I stepped into the room and took off my hat.

"Wadda ya mean, been expecting me? How could you..."

"Good Lord, Ben, the sheriff has a posse of some 20 men out hunting for you and that `Pinto Pete'. You were sure to show up here again. It's a wonder they didn't just camp out in the back yard and wait for you to show."

I glanced out the window.

"They didn't, did they?" I pulled the shade down.

"Of course not."

"Why ain't they looking for Hincho Gonzales?"

“Because they shot him down just west of town yesterday.”

“Pobre Hincho. He was stupid enough to cut back here. Must have been that Rosales girl. He just couldn't leave her alone.”

“And you're just as stupid to come back here!”

“Not a day later. They think I'm long gone.” I went over to a chair to sit down.

“I guess so. Ben, don't sit in that chair with your gun belt on. The sight scratches it all up on the side.”

“Sorry, Sis.” I took my gun out and laid it on the table.

“You can't stay here, Ben. I've got a bunch of children upstairs asleep.”

“Just `til dawn. I'll be gone by sun up. I need to get a little sleep in a bed and a bit of tucker under my belt.”

“Oh, Ben. You know I can't deny you anything. As long as it don't hurt the kids.”

“Where's the posse heading?”

“They galloped out of town on the road south. Guess they figure you're heading for the border.”

“Naw. I'm heading north fur a spell.”

“Why'd you get into this mess? Robbing a train! Who's brilliant idea was it? Pinto?”

“Un-huh.”

“And you got a bunch of watches and purses.”

“And the payroll in the baggage car.”

“Ben, they'll hang you if they catch you. The girl died. How did that happen?”

“Pinto fired into the air to scare 'em and the bullet ricochet off'en somethin' up above. It hit the girl in the head. It was an accident, damn it!”

“Ben, Ben. You're never going to learn. Poor Dad would have been mortified.”

“I never learned them big words, Sis.”

“Ashamed, Ben, ashamed.”

“Well why didn't you say so?”

“Ben, you're going to end shot down or strung up.”

“One or the other, Sis. Want me to sleep down here?”

“The back room's got a bed in it. I'll heat up something to eat.”

“I'll help you get the stove lit.”

It was sort off homey, sitting around the kitchen table, talking about the old times when we were kids. I gulped down what was put in front of me. Man, I was hungry! Of course, all that time I kept an ear cocked for anything suspicious outside. I was finally full. “Listen, Sis, I gotta go put up my horse.”

“Put him in the shed. I think there's some corn and oats in the second bin from the left.”

“Thanks, Sis. You're my favorite sister.”

“Yeah, Ben. I know.”

As I pulled the saddle off my horse, I thought about that silly stuff we had been talking about. Sure she was my favorite sister, being that she was my only one! But ever since we were just kids, that sort of thing had pleased her. I stood for a while outside the shed door and eyeballed the night, listening and watching. There wasn't nothin' stirring. So I ambled back to the house.

It was just past dawn when I said my farewells to Sis. She was all teary eyed and such. Like she was never going to see me again. Maybe she was right. I took to the North and rode hard. By noon I was well into the hills. I got off my horse and sat down by a trickle of a stream to have a look at what was in the bag that Sis had tied to my saddle. Bread, cheese, a bit of hog fat. I couldn't take the time for a fire so I wolfed it down as it was. I was standing by my horse, about to mount, when I saw a flash over on a nearby slope.

‘Shit! That was the sun reflecting on bright metal, maybe a gun!’

I mounted in one smooth leap and stayed low on one side of the horse. Shots broke out from where the flash had been as well as behind me! They'd been working around me while I ate!

Couldn't follow the trail so I worked my way up a slope covered by heavy brush. Shouts broke out behind me. Then one rifle began firing from the ridge above me, right where I was heading. Damn! I was cut off! I realized that my hand was bloody. The horse had been nicked high on the shoulder. I pulled up near a group of three boulders with the idea of making a stand there. As I jumped down everything went black.

I cracked an eye. *‘Hey, I was alive!’*

I was lying on the ground with a hell of a head ache. I tried to raise my hand to my head but my hands were tied.

“You got clipped on the head.”

I twisted around to see who was talking. It was a young cowhand with a scraggly beard. I didn't know him.

“You outlaws? What do you want with me?” I asked.

“Nope. We're the posse. And don't try to fool me. We know you're Ben Carter.”

“Oh.”

“Hey Sheriff!” he called back over his shoulder. “He done come around.”

“Hey boy, I got a pile stashed away,” I said in a low voice. “You help me and I'll...”

“No way, Ben. I do and they're just as likely to string me up. Ain't no money worth that!”

"He's talking eh?" Sheriff Peterson came around the bushes. He had two others with him.

"Yup, he offered me a pile to help him."

The Sheriff grinned. "Yeah, then he'd kill you to steal it back. Hey, Ben, where's Pinto?"

I just glared at him. He fetched me a whack on the side of the head and the whole world took to whirling around.

"I'm talking to you, son. Where's Pinto?"

"I don't know. Think he went west."

"Sure you do. Come on where's he at?"

There was another whack on my head. I went out again.

It was dark when I came to again. Still had a splitting headache. So why didn't they get me on a horse and get going? I began workin' on the knots. Maybe I could get loose?

A voice came out of the darkness.

"Not gonna let you get loose, Ben. Might as well stop workin' on it."

"Sheriff Peterson?"

"Uh-huh."

"They're gonna hang me, right."

"I suspect so. After a trial."

"Hell, I didn't kill nobody."

"Don't matter none."

"Why're we hangin' around here?"

"Waitin' on Federal Marshall Porgum."

"Jean Porgum, the female marshall?"

"The same."

"Shit, she kills most her prisoners."

"Heard rumors. Don't matter much to me."

"All of them try to escape."

"Heard say. You gonna try?"

"No way! The ones that don't make it end up shot."

"Logical, Ben. Shot while trying to escape."

"And the ones that get away are never heard from again. I think they're shot too."

"Nope, don't think so. I guess they just go away and change their ways. Don't matter none. When Marshall Porgum gets her hands on confirmed criminals, they just don't bother us none no more. That's what's important."

"I gotta take a leak."

"O.K. on yer feet."

We didn't talk none the rest of the night. I slept a little, not much. The morning brought Marshall Porgum. She didn't look anything like a woman. Hell she warn't no kind of woman. She was a fair sight bigger than I am but I'm sort of smallish. She wore men's clothes but her voice was a little high. She looked at me and I shivered all over. It was like the devil hisself had just taken notice of me!

She never said a damn thing. I was put on my horse with my hands cuffed in front. There was a couple of other men with her. They looked hard as nails. We started out riding to the West. After an hour we pulled up in a little valley. There was a bare tree trunk in a clearing. I was taken off my horse.

"Hey, I'm not trying to escape!"

Nobody said nothin'.

I was placed with my chest against the trunk and tied there. Porgum came and stood in front of me and stared at me coldly for a couple of minutes.

You're a common criminal. But you can be cured. Do you want to be cured?"

"Cured of what?"

"You will have to make two big decisions. The first one you will make now. Think. Your life depends on this. You will decide if you want to be cured or not. If you decide not, then you will be shot trying to escape. If you decide that you want to be cured of being a criminal then you will be taken to a place I have on the other side of the Pecos River. What happens to you there will be painful and strange but I can guarantee one thing; you will never again rob or kill. I will allow you one question then you will decide. If you do not decide in two minutes, you are trying to escape. Understood?"

"Yes."

"Your question?"

"What will my second decision be about?"

"Congratulations! You are listening. I cannot tell you exactly but I can say that you will have to decide between a horrible fate worst that death or one that is fairly pleasant. Very good. Your two minutes start now."

"I don't want to die."

"Obviously."

"I'm not trying to escape."

"You have a minute and a half."

"You can't just shoot me. I mean you're a Marshall and all that."

"One minute."

"All right, I'll do it."

"Say it completely!"

"Say what?"

“A half a minute remains.”

I heard a rifle cock.

“I want to be cured!” I shouted.

“Excellent. You're a bit stubborn, but you'll be broken of that! Untie him and take him to the center.”

The Marshall mounted her horse and rode off. The other two untied me and helped me onto the horse. The ride took most the rest of the day. The last few hours I was blindfolded. The sun was very low in the sky when the blindfold was removed.

I looked around.

We were inside a very big stockade. There were green lawns and long flower beds. To one side there were nice houses, one was quite large. On the other side there were low sheds and some heavy buildings made of rough stone, as was expected.

I was led toward the sheds. Then I saw a strange sight. Over near one of the nice houses was a rig; one like you'd ride behind a single horse. The difference was that this one was hitched to a team of four naked men!

“Hey! What in the Hell was...”

“Shut up. You ain't supposed to talk. Get in there.”

There was a cell with bars. The floor had a great mound of straw in a corner. Beside it was a small wooden bucket full of water. I was shoved inside.

“Gimme your clothes,” said one of the two.

“My clothes?”

“Yeah, all of 'em.” He held out his hand, opening and closing it impatiently. “Come on. You'll be given your prison uniform.”

“Oh.” I undressed and passed everything over to the man. He took them and closed the door, locking it. Then he walked away. “Hey! What about the uniform?”

The fellow turned and laughed. “You got it on, buddy!”

I drank most of the water in the bucket.

A little later a rough looking character came by and put some slop in a tin plate. This he threw into my cell so that half of it sloshed out on the floor. I ate it all. It was tasteless but filling. As night fell I burrowed into the straw for warmth and slept fitfully.

The gray early morning light found me peering out from my straw bed scratching flea bites. My eyes fell on the door. One of the hinges had its pin halfway out!

I crawled over there and started working at the pin. I soon had it out and used the same pin to work the one on the top loose also. With both hinge pins out the door came open on the back. I slipped into the corridor and silently moved to the door on the end. There was only one other cell occupied, at least the straw moved as I went by. As I recalled, there was sort of a guard room on the other side of the door. I opened the door and peered in. There was Marshall Porgum and her two cronies sitting in a semicircle facing the door.

“Good morning, Ben. We were rather expecting you.”

I started to jump back but felt a pistol barrel in the small of my back. So I stepped forward into the room with my hands raised. Now I knew what the movement in the straw had been!

Marshall Porgum smiled. The smile was decidedly lacking in humor.

“Ben, we have discovered that the really desperate ones find that hinge pin in the night and break out earlier. The mediocre ones like you fill their bellies and get a night's sleep before thinking of escape. The ones that don't break out at all are either the ones that are too dumb or the very smart ones that realize that it's all a setup because nobody is going to make a cell door with removable pins in the hinges!”

She just sat there looking at me with that little humorless smile.

“When do I get some clothes?”

“Clothes? For the likes of you? Hardly.”

“You're treating me like an animal!”

“You're glorifying yourself. Animals have certain rights, even if it's just to a certain amount of compassion. You have no rights at all. You will learn to envy the animals their social status in the community! All right boys, arm and leg irons.”

I was soon in leg shackles with a piece of chain between them and arm shackles connected by a long wooden bar. The bar was tied to overhead ropes and the leg shackles fastened to rings in the floor so that I was extended like a huge “X”.

The Marshall came over to me and reached her gloved hand out to finger my balls!

“This is the part that I don't really like to do even though it is absolutely essential. Do you know what an ox is?”

“Beast of burden.”

“Yes. And why don't we use bulls for plowing and such?”

“Too wild and uncontrollable.”

“Right! And in horses is not the same true of stallions and geldings?”

“Yes.”

“And what is the difference between an ox and a bull, or a gelding and a stallion?”

“Well a bull still has his...” I looked down at what she insisted on fingering. “But your not going to... to... to me? But not to a human being!”

“To a human being? Of course not! Never! But to you? What else?”

“NO!!”

The outside door opened and a white. enameled, metal table on wheels entered pushed by what seemed to be a Chinaman. He pushed the table over in front of me and leaned down to fasten it to other rings on the floor. The narrow side of the table touched the front of my legs.

“This gentleman does not talk. He is Korean and his name is Kum Woon. He is trained in a number of variations of Eastern medicine and has studied in Manchuria and Tibet. You will take an instant dislike to him!”

She gestured to the other two men. They unfastened the pole between my arms from the ropes in the ceiling. I was pulled forward and stretched over the table so that I lay on it lengthwise. The pole was fasten to even more rings in the floor. I couldn't move and had to keep this uncomfortable position.

Kum Woon moved in front of me and impersonally opened my mouth. He stuffed a roll of leather in it and tied a gag around my head.

“Well I'll leave you now,” said Marshall Porgum. “You will undoubtedly not believe it but you're in good hands. Kum Woon rarely loses a patient. Oh, this procedure is quite painful. Bear up, it'll soon be over.”

I heard the door close. A bottle clinked and I felt a liquid sloshed over my cheeks and scrotum. A smell of phenol filled the room. The first cut was just a sharp sting. But it soon developed into a deep, intense, personal pain! I bit down on the leather and passed out.

When I came to I was in a different cell. The door's hinges did not have removable pins. I was wrapped in a blanket, lying on straw with a throbbing pain in my scrotum. I reached down and felt only bandages. There was food and water beside me. I fell asleep.

The next day I was taken to small blacksmith shop and outfitted with an iron band around the waist. My hands were shackled to this with very short pieces of chain. A pair of sandals were strapped on my feet. They had horse shoes fastened on their bottoms.

A sort of bridle was strapped around my head. It had a thing in front with a metal plate that entered the mouth and prevented speech. One could drink by sticking his face in the water and sucking. Then I was taken outside and put in a line of four others in the same kind of rig-up. A lead was snapped on my bridle and tied onto a hitching rail. And there we stood. I looked around. A couple of the others had big muscles and the same sort of blank stare that a horse would have when tied up for a period of time at a hitching rail.

One other fellow looked around at me like he would like to say something but of course couldn't.

I became busy with a dang horsefly which wouldn't leave me alone. I bumped the others and got twisted around to rub up against the hitching rail and discourage the damn fly.

The fly finally ended up on one of the “stare into space” types. He flinched a little as it bit him, but then allowed it to chew on him as it wished.

'Is that where I'm heading?'

Then two ordinary looking “cowhands” walked up. One had a short whip.

“O.K., fill out the gristmill team from these,” said whip. “Just give me the first four in line.”

“Hold on. Not this one.”

I received a flick of the whip where my balls used to be.

“He's too new. Let's put him on a lawn mower. Get Fred pissed off.”

“Yeah,” said the other. “On the gristmill the others would just be hauling him around anyway. Fred hates it when you give him a new one. Slows him down all to Hell!”

'Whip' went around the corner and returned with a pony. The pony had a harness around him which had a big ring on the top. My four companions had their leads fastened to this ring. The pony was given a light slap on the rump and it trotted off down the road hauling the four men behind. It obviously knew where to go.

I was left alone by the rail. Another hungry horsefly showed up. It had only me to concentrate on so I was kept busy. After some 15 minutes of trying to get rid of it, I finally let it bite me in the ankle to get it over with. Then I just stood there staring into space.

The pony came back. It was well trained.

'Whip' came out and fasted my lead on the pony's ring. After a slap on the rump, the pony trotted off in the other direction. It came up to a small shed between the better looking houses, with me trotting right along side. No matter how I tried to slow our progress up, the pony just dug in and pulled. I didn't have a chance. We waited outside the shed.

Just then two ladies in fancy dresses, sun bonnets & parasols came around the corner. All I could do was to stand there in all my naked glory. I expected shrieks of horror, etc. What happened was different. They stared at me, then cast their eyes downwards, and went on their way.

At that moment a man with bright red hair and an unkempt beard came out of the shed. He stood there and looked at me.

“Shit! They sent me the dregs of the lot again! Christ, it looks as if this is your first day too! Well. I'll break you in real good.”

He untied me from the pony, who immediately trotted off the way we had come. Then he tied me to a post and went back into the shed mumbling to himself. I soon found myself harnessed to a large lawn mower. 'Redbeard' had a leather strap in his hand.

“Now I'm gonna explain something to you. I gotta do a certain area of lawn today. I'd like to get it done fast but naturally this all depends on you. If you're a bit slow, even just a bit, I got some encouragement here.” He slapped the strap on the side of his leg. “I'm sure that you understand. Now I can slap you all over town and nobody's gonna say nothin'. Even if I kill you, there'll be nothin' said. So you put out in pulling power and I'm happy. If I'm happy, then you make it through another day. Although why a thing like you would want to live another day I sure don't know. O.K., enough chitchat. GO!”

This last came with a vigorous whack across my naked buttocks. I pulled, I mean pulled. Within an hour or so, my vision was blurred; I was exhausted. I know my

rear was red with the lashing I had received. And it kept on and on. At lunch break, 'Redbeard' sat down in the shade of a tree and had at his lunch bucket. I knelt in the sun, so I wouldn't "cool down too much" and drank from a bucket placed in front of me. In a half hour we were at it again.

I don't know how I got through that day!

During the next couple of weeks (I think), I was used to do a number of tasks, including pulling a little horse cart converted to being pulled by four of us. Time became a blur. I was never allowed to talk. There were no days off. Then I was brought before Marshall Porgum and my bridle was removed. I just stood there.

"You're looking well. Not very happy but well. Go ahead, you can talk."

"Uh... I... I don't seem to have anything to say."

Porgum smiled. "Out of the habit, eh? Is it obvious to you that, with a couple years of this life, you could never return to being human?"

"Never thought much about that."

"Haven't thought much about anything lately, eh?"

"No."

"I can keep you in this mold. You've been castrated so you don't have much in the way of the old male drive. There are certain drugs in your food to keep you even more placid and bovine. In effect, you're just one step above a machine. Are you happy that way?"

"No."

"Now some of you are left that way. The ones that just sink into their new role comfortably. However, there is an alternative. One that will let you return to life on the outside in a role that will make you very useful to society and be far more interesting to you than what you're doing now."

"What is it?"

She ignored my question.

"This is the point of your second decision. If you decide to go on, it will be hard. You will have to do things in a way that is completely different from that which you are accustomed, and failure to do everything correctly could lead to your death. If you stay with how you are now, you will probably have a long life. If you go on and mess up, you will die."

"You'll not tell me more?"

"No."

"I must decide now?"

"Yes. If you do not decide or decide to stay as you are, I will never talk to you again. Probably no one will ever talk to you again, except perhaps to curse you for not working hard enough."

"In my place what would you decide?"

“A very intelligent question. I would decide to go on. To be a human being again is worth the risk.”

“Then I will let you decide for me.”

“You throw yourself on my mercy? I, Marshall Porgum?”

“Yes.”

She leaned back and smiled.

“You may go far. At least you will go on and try to be a human again, for that is my decision for you. I'm warning you that this will be hard. You may, in the near future, curse this decision. But I believe that you will try your best. Yes, I really do.” She raised her voice. “Rick?”

The door opened and one of her 'assistants' came in. He was chewing on a toothpick and said nothing; just looked at her questioningly.

“Take this one to the blacksmith shop and have all his fetters removed. Then feed him well, give him a chance to clean up and install him in his new cell. Good luck,” she said, the last part being directed at me.

Following Rick, I walked out to my new life.

II.

Of course, I walked into a new kind of Hell! My cell had a bed. I still had no clothes. Water dripped slowly from a pipe. I was fed the same tasteless mush. And my cell was dark. I mean dark all the time. I was never let out. The food was put in while I slept. Nothing.

I ate and slept, slept and ate. Once in a while I used the waste bucket in the corner. There was no sound, no light no nothing. Days passed, weeks, months, years, eons. I talked to myself. I judged time by the growth of my beard. I did nothing at last, just existed.

I awoke. There was a beam of light. I enjoyed it, studied it, absorbed it. Then I realized that it fell on an object. An object of vivid, wonderful color. Everything else in the cell that I could see had a sameness, a gray sameness. This object was a bright red. I have never concentrated on anything as much as I did then. Then I identified the object. It was a woman's sun bonnet hanging on a nail on the wall. I studied it. I tried to absorb its intense color. I reached up and touched it. It was real! I jerked my hand back.

It was quite a period later that I got up enough nerve to reach up again. I took it down. It was smooth and pleasant to touch. It was lightly perfumed. In effect it appealed to all my senses. I fondled it, smelled it, kissed it and rubbed it against my face. Then, as seemed oh so natural at the moment, I put it on and tied its ribbon in a big bow beneath my chin. A deep pleasant sounding gong rang out and a small door opened in the bottom on my cell door. A steaming, big dish was placed inside. It was a full meal with meat and potatoes and vegetables and bread and butter and...

Oh, how delicious it was!

Sometime later, I was hungry again. It was quite dark. I still wore my bonnet. Suddenly that beam of light fell on a mass of cloth hanging on the same nail.

I now knew on what side my bread was buttered!

I got up and examined the cloth. It turned out to be a pair of pantaloons styled women's drawers. I climbed into them without hesitation. They slit at the crotch so that their wearer could sit on a toilet without removing them. They ended with lace and a pink bow below my knees. The same gong rang out and another wonderful meal was placed in my cell.

Things were looking up!

When I had finished eating, my cell door opened. I stood and waited expectantly. Kum Woon appear and gestured for me to follow him.

I did so, watching him. I had not seen another person for so long! I was soon lying on sort of a hospital bed. He got my pantaloons and bonnet off and stood there studying me. I just lay there and watched him.

After cutting my beard short, he began smearing some kind of cream on my face. It stung a lot but I could take it. I even liked the pain after feeling nothing for so long. Kum Woon worked me over with little wires that also stung. There was some gray gunk that he put on my legs.

I lost track of all the things he did. Then he took me to a new cell. But what luxury! There was even a window! (With bars, of course.) It was a nice little bedroom, and it had a private bathroom!

In the little bathroom there was a small pump sink, a commode vanity and a portable tin tub filled with buckets of hot water; so I took a bath. There was an awful lot of hair floating around. I must be shedding!

Back in my room, with my pantaloons and bonnet on again, I explored. There was a closet filled with woman's clothing. I just stood there and studied it. I began to see what was expected of me. I took down a rather plain brown dress and examined it. Turning to a full length mirror on the wall I held it up to myself.

Was I really considering putting on this dress?

“Perhaps I can help?”

I spun around.

Standing in the open door was a woman.

I started to fling the dress down when I realized that I was dressed only in a pair of lacy pantaloons. So I just stood there holding the dress up to myself.

The woman was rather tall and heavyset. She smiled at me. “Cat got your tongue?”

She walked over to me and gently took the dress away from me. Looking me over, she commented, “Have we got a long ways to go! So let's get started. My name's Betty. What's yours?”

“Er... Ah...”

“Erah. Strange name. Is it Chinese?”

“My name's Ben.”

“Erah Ben. Hum. May have to find a better one, Eh?”

“Who are you?”

“I'm your trainer, honey.”

“Trainer?”

“Uh-huh. I'm to teach you how to act, dress and all that sort of stuff.”

“Like a woman?”

“Are you a man?”

“Not any more.”

“Right! And you accepted this training, this new position in society?”

“Yes, but I didn't know what it was.”

“You didn't know and you still accepted?”

“Yes.”

“Then I would think that you should do your best to comply. In any case, if you fail there is only one out, death.”

“Death?”

“That's right, honey. You go out into the world as a woman. If you are found out publicly, if you try to revert to acting like you were before, then you will be run down and killed in a particularly horrible way. Oh, cheer up. You're not going to fail. Very, very few of our graduates do. Do you know that more than half the school teachers in the territory are our girls?”

“Oh?”

“It's better than pulling a lawn mower or turning a gristmill isn't it.”

“Yes.”

“And since it's your only other real choice, do it! And do a good job of it.”

“I'll be a school teacher?”

“Not necessarily. You obviously can't marry or have intimate contact with men. But there are many other possibilities. We have girls who work as store clerks. A couple have trained as nurses. Quite a few have set themselves up as seamstresses. Would you like to learn to sew?”

“I... don't know.”

“Well, plenty of time to decide. First let's get you dressed. You've already picked out a dress.” She fussed in a nearby bureau drawer to produce a white camisole, which she put on me.

“I was just...”

“You're also going to have to pick out a name.”

“But I've got...”

“Bengimena?” she teased as she actually took the liberty of removing my drawers before she placed a garter belt about my waist and used its dangling garters to secure a pair of black silk and cotton stockings. She then replaced the pantaloon styled drawers. “That your new name?”

“No, I don't think so.”

“Neither do I,” Betty replied.

While this conversation was going on, Betty was matter-of-factly putting some sort of a corset on me. I was too startled to complain. She started to stuff the front of the corset with bust pads.

“Betty, is all that necessary?”

“Well, I would hope so. How about ‘Phoebe’ or ‘Daisy’?”

“For what?”

“Your name, silly. Got to choose now.”

“Listen! I'm not going to...”

Betty stood off, hands on her hips and frowned at me.