

THE RELUCTANT GROOM

AND

OTHER HISTORICAL STORIES

FAITH L. JUSTICE



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HYPATIA: HER LIFE AND TIMES

The Reluctant Groom and Other Historical Stories

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Previous publications:

"The Jar" Copyright © 2004 Faith L. Justice; first appeared in The Copperfield Review

"The Reluctant Groom" Copyright © 2012 Faith L. Justice; first appeared in The Copperfield Review

To Carl Justice, who always loves a good family story.

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INTRODUCTION

THANK YOU FOR BUYING THIS BOOK. I hope you enjoy reading *The Reluctant Groom and Other Historical Stories* as much as I enjoyed writing it. Each story is a labor of love. It's hard to place historical short fiction these days. Two of the three online markets are closed and the third only accepts stories shorter than two thousand words. That leaves anthologies and the literary markets—most of which prefer a “modern” or experimental voice. Yet each of these stories clambered in my mind to be told and I was lucky enough to previously share two of them with the reading public, both at *The Copperfield Review*.

The first two, “The Reluctant Groom” and “The Bitter Winter” are my takes on a family legend about a colonial ancestor. As I say in my Author's Notes, I'm half in love with my seven-times-great grandpa. Then there's Angelus of “Angel of the Marshes.” He started out as a plot device in a soon-to-be published novel and became my favorite wild child. He'll be appearing again in a novella and a novel, but as a supporting character. “The Jar” was an experimental piece and my first foray into historical short fiction, so it has a special place in my heart.

As always, I appreciate your feedback—love it, hate it, or somewhere in between—feel free to get in touch at my website (faithljustice.com) or leave a review at your favorite site. Enjoy!

Faith L. Justice
faithljustice.com



THE RELUCTANT GROOM

JOHN MICHAEL LUTZ, do you understand what we're saying?" The seven elders of the Lehigh Lutheran Church of the Province of Pennsylvania sat rigid behind a pine table, beards bristling, eyes solemn.

I shifted my rump in the uncomfortable hickory chair and crushed the brim of my best felt hat between my hands, resisting the urge to caress my own wispiest face hair. I was trapped and they knew it. If I didn't comply with their demands to marry, the community would shun me. I probably wouldn't lose my carting business—too many people depended on that—but I'd feel it day-to-day. No more friendly drinks or helping hands. I'd be treated as an outsider: civilly but not one of their own.

I tried one last strategy: looking each in the eyes, I said softly, "I am f-forty and have lived on my own for over half my life. I would not want to leave a w-wife and ch-children alone upon my death. It's a hard l-life without a man to pr-pr-pr..." I took a deep breath. "...provide."

Sympathy flickered in several of their eyes, but Heinrich Diebolt, the oldest of the elders, snorted.

“Brother Lutz, if you leave a widow and young children, rest assured this community will provide for them. God and Queen Anne gave us this land to tame and cultivate. It will be a Christian land, but not without some effort on our part. The Scriptures say, ‘go forth and multiply.’ You have yet to do your Christian duty.”

I felt the hot blood rise in my face and inwardly cursed the fair features that show my every emotion. My tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth, stopping the angry words I felt tumbling at the back of my throat. “I tr-tr-tr...” I paused. “I tr-tried. N-N-No wo-woman would have me.”

To be fair, I courted only two girls, in my youth. The first laughed at me and giggled with her friends whenever I passed. The other was kinder, but just as firm in her refusal. Women dismiss me because I barely measure five feet tall in my boots and I stammer. Strange, because I easily talk to my horses and lift loads bigger men struggle with, but few women look past my imperfections. I long ago made peace with my predicament and regularly visit a notorious house in Philadelphia where—if you have coin—the women are less judgmental.

“Brother Lutz, the matter is now out of your hands.” Elder Diebolt pushed a letter toward me. “Your bride is coming on Saturday next. Her name is Margueritha Ingland. The marriage will take place within a month.”

I stood, gave a slight bow to the elders and exited the clapboard church onto a muddy street, faced with a dozen houses. The forest loomed in the distance, buffered from the village by cleared fields and new orchards. I looked at the letter addressed to Elder Diebolt from another German church and crumpled the paper.

How dare they! I thought I had long ago escaped the heavy-handedness of the elders. They tended to interfere most with youths and wayward women; publicly shaming a boy found drunk, a woman who wore a flower on her bonnet, or quarrelling couples.

My temples throbbed as my anger—fueled by fear—swelled. This could only end in humiliation. I should refuse! If the roads weren't so muddy, I'd take a carting trip to Philadelphia and stay for a month, until the woman left.

I jammed my hat onto my head and the offensive letter into my pocket. I strode down the street toward my cabin on the outskirts of the village, ignoring the curious glances of passersby. A couple of dogs worried a bone outside the tiny general store and I kicked a clod of dirt in their direction.

"John!" a voice boomed. "Why the stormy face?"

I turned to see Ulrick Hahn, my best friend, in his workshop doorway, wiping grimy hands on a filthy rag tucked into his belt. The community's farrier and gunsmith, Ulrick was covered in soot and black powder. I constantly feared he would blow himself up if the sparks from the forge ignited the gun powder impregnating his clothes.

I scowled and scuffed my way over to him. "Th-th-th..." I unclamped my tongue. "Th-the Elders th-think it is ti-time, I ma-ma-ma..." I gargled to a stop, hands clenched, my anger and frustration rendering me nearly mute.

"Slow down, my friend." Ulrick dipped a tin cup into the bucket of water he kept to put out errant fires. "Take a drink."

I sipped. The tepid water loosened my throat. "I'm to be m-married."

"Why, that's fine news!" Ulrick poked me in the ribs. "You need a good woman to put that shack of yours in order and add some meat to your bones. You've land, animals, and a little money put away. It's more than time. Who's the lucky bride?"

I handed Ulrick the letter. The big man held the paper gingerly, but still left a smudge of black on a corner. Ulrick noted the address and unfolded the single sheet, mumbling under his breath as he struggled to read the script. "A woman of good reputation, but distressed means." He looked at me with a grin. "Excellent! She's ugly and poor. She'll be grateful to you for saving her from spinsterhood."

"I d-didn't th-think of her," I mumbled. I had been so shocked by the elder's action; I had given no thought to the circumstances of the woman who would consent to such an arrangement. Was she as lonely as me, looking for affection, a home—looking to share her life?

Ulrick clapped me hard on the shoulder, sending me staggering, and laughed. "If she's too old or ugly, you can always turn out the light."

"Wrinkles or gray hair d-d-don't bother me. It's...it's..." I rolled my eyes and I gestured from my head to toes.

"I'm sorry, my friend. I didn't mean to make light of your plight." Ulrick ran a hand through his thinning hair. "Truly, you are a good man. If the woman finds your stature or stammer offensive, you should not marry her. Such a lack of wits and taste would prove her unsuitable as a wife."

“Th-thanks, Ulrick.” I took the letter and left my friend looking concerned. Ulrick meant well, but I felt I had no choice in the matter: meet her and be rejected or marry a reluctant woman who would make my life a living hell.

Still, his comments offered a glimmer of hope. I approached the two-room cabin I and my father built twenty-five years ago. A crack needed daubing and a couple of roof shingles should be replaced before winter. A porch would be a nice addition. Curtains in the window would make the place homier. I shook my head. Dreamer! She’ll never see the place.

SUNDAY MORNING. I grunted as I lowered myself into a steaming tub of water. Today, after church services, I would meet my prospective bride for the first time. I sat in the cooling water, knees under my chin, brooding. All week, I had vacillated between hope and fear—between Ulrick’s advice to give the match a chance and my own reluctance to face hurt and rejection. I finally reached a calm place. I had to meet the woman, had to see for myself if there was any hope. Even if the worst happened, I could resume my life without the interference of the elders. Surely, they would leave me alone if the woman rejected me. Better to get it over with.

I grappled with a precious sliver of lavender-scented soap I had acquired on my last trip to Philadelphia, lathering my hair and beard. As much as I liked the smell of horses, I was sure a woman would prefer a man who didn’t reek of horse sweat and manure. I was determined to put my best foot forward. I towed dry and eyed my

broadcloth breeches, vest, and coat folded over a chair. Sober dark blue and worn only on Sundays, they showed little wear; the brass buttons shiny and in good repair. My good white shirt was freshly laundered and bleached by the sun; my shoes polished and buckles shined. One of my stockings had a hole in the toe, but nothing she could see. I dressed with care, tying an intricate knot in my cravat and tucking a white linen handkerchief up my sleeve. A quick look in the mirror hanging over the wash stand revealed a pleasant face: generous mouth, longish nose, and light gray eyes with just a few creases at the corners; a respectable man of some means.

The church bell rang in the distance, calling the faithful.

Damn, I was late!

I combed my flyaway brown locks into a neat tail at the nape of my neck, tied it with a black ribbon, and topped my head with my black tricorne hat. I dashed out the door, heart thudding.

I heard the first notes of *Commit You Thy Ways* as I approached the open door and picked up the hymn as I slid onto a back bench. I strained to catch a glimpse of my possible bride over the backs of bonnets and black hats, but finally gave up. Elder Diebolt, his good wife, and Mistress Ingard were probably in the front row. I fidgeted through the long sermon, but belted out the hymns. I loved to sing. I never stammered when singing and often wondered at the fact.

Finally, Elder Diebolt read out the community news: a baby boy born to the Herbers, the Muellers have chickens for sale or trade, a militia was forming in response to the Lenape tribe's threats to recover the land stolen by the

so-called “Walking Purchase.” This last announcement caused alarmed whispering among the congregation.

I heard the mutterings, but was more concerned about quelling the butterflies that inhabited my stomach and slowing my racing heart. I moderated my breathing and rubbed sweating palms on my breeches, as Elder Diebolt rumbled to a close. A final prayer and the congregation rose to leave. I slipped outside and waited at the bottom of the steps, shifting my weight from foot to foot. The congregation filed out and I greeted my fellows with nods and smiles.

Ulrick loomed in the doorway, spotted me, and approached. With his usual clout on my shoulder, he said in a low growl, “You’ll do fine, my friend. Remember to smile.” He looked over his shoulder. “Here she comes now.” He stepped behind me and engaged a neighbor in a discussion about the Lenape. I was grateful for his solid presence at my back.

Elder Diebolt exited the church, followed by his wife arm-in-arm with a woman dressed in gray broadcloth, a white bonnet, and a white knitted shawl around her shoulders.

The older man spotted me by the steps and frowned. “Brother Lutz, you were late to service today.”

Blood rushed to my face. “P-Pardon, Elder Diebolt.”

“I hope it won’t become a habit.”

“N-No sir.”

The two women approached and lingered on the bottom step. Elder Diebolt smiled. “Mistress Margueritha Ingland, may I present Master John Michael Lutz?”

I held my breath until she turned her face my way. My heart thudded painfully. She was much younger than

I expected. I had envisioned a spinster or widow close to my own age, weathered, with a bitter mouth; a woman who could do no better than a stammering aging bachelor. Margueritha looked to be in her mid-twenties, with a fresh complexion and dark hair tucked primly under her bonnet. A long nose and narrow jaw gave her a slightly horsey look, but her eyes arrested me. Large, light brown with gold flecks, set wide apart and sparkling with intelligence and humor. Her generous mouth pursed in a shy smile as she offered her hand. It was small with long tapering fingers; the pads calloused from many needle pricks. She must be a seamstress.

“Good Sabbath to you, Master Lutz.”

“G-G-G...” Panic gripped my gut. Not now! I bowed over her hand, took a deep breath and managed to say, “G-Good Sabbath.”

She stepped off the stair and, to my delight, only topped me by a few inches.

“You are joining us for Sunday dinner, are you not, Master Lutz?” Mistress Diebolt asked.

“Yes, Mistress Diebolt.” I gave a slight bow in her direction, pleased to make it through a sentence without a stumble. Ulrick poked me in the ribs as he turned and left, whistling off-tune.

I put a firm hand under Margueritha’s elbow and guided her down the street toward the Diebolt house. The stately whitewashed clapboard home, surrounded by a low wooden fence, dominated the smaller houses straggling down the street. We entered through a red door into a central hall with a staircase leading to the second floor. The wide pine boards had been recently scrubbed

and the scent of beeswax wafted from the shiny surface. I hoped Miss Ingland didn't expect my own humble home to match up with the more prosperous Diebolts'.

Elder Diebolt led us to the left into a parlor with sturdy oak furniture and white-washed walls. A side table boasted a silver tea set and delicate blue and white china cups and saucers shipped from England. I remembered carting them from Philadelphia in barrels packed with sawdust. Not a single cracked piece! Mistress Diebolt had been particularly pleased with me.

Our hostess popped her head into the doorway. "I'll see to dinner. It should be ready soon."

I seated Margueritha in a blue damask chair by the empty fireplace and took a plain one on the other side of a small table where I was out of her direct line of sight. Diebolt settled his large frame on a padded settee and turned his frowning gaze on me. I felt my throat tightening. Couldn't the man pay attention to his guest?

Margueritha's soft voice broke the silence. "Master Diebolt, what is this 'Walking Purchase' you spoke of at the end of the sermon today? It seemed the cause of some consternation among the fellowship."

I stifled a sigh of relief.

The older man's face smoothed as he turned to Margueritha. "Some men feel women should not be concerned with public affairs, but I've never ascribed to that philosophy. I'm glad to see you have an interest."

"My late father encouraged my education, but I've heard nothing of this conflict."

Diebolt leaned back and clasped hands over his ample stomach. "It's a sad affair. William Penn, a good and

fair man, treated the Lenape people well. He established Pennsylvania as a haven of religious tolerance and recruited the poor and oppressed from all over Europe to settle here. But his sons and agents are another story.” He snorted in disgust. “Weak, greedy, immoral men!”

I leaned forward. Elder Diebolt was an excellent story teller when fired up.

“Penn’s sons dug up an unsigned paper from over fifty years ago that claimed the Lenape granted them land on the Lehigh River, west as far as a man could walk in a day and a half. Last September, their agent, that scoundrel Logan, prepared a trail and hired the three fastest men in the province to run it. Edward Marshall covered seventy miles, which granted the Penns over a million acres. They sold the land with the Lenape still on it. My youngest son bought land and moved his wife and three children there last fall. He sent me a letter saying the Lenape are threatening reprisals.”

Margueritha leaned forward to put a hand on the old man’s knee. “I’m so sorry. Are your son and his family in danger?”

“The assembly has found in favor of the Penns and declared the land deeds legitimate, but the Lenape are appealing to their own overlords for redress. If the Iroquois tribes come to the Lenape’s defense, we could have war.”

I drew in a sharp breath. The Province of Pennsylvania had always been on good terms with the native peoples. War brought hardship to farmers and ordinary folk. I remembered the hard times of my youth when France and Germany squabbled over boundaries and raided each

other's borders. My own family had fled the famine and blight of war to the promise of this new land.

A young girl in a servant's apron came to the door. She curtsied to the room. "Mistress invites you to the dinner table."

On the way to the dining room, Diebolt leaned down to me and whispered, "Talk to the girl!"

The dining room was as well appointed as the parlor, with a mahogany table, carved chairs and a massive sideboard laden with food: a tureen of oyster stew, a large roast chicken, a ham, a savory beef pie, a cherry pie crusted with sugar, roasted potatoes and parsnips sprinkled with butter and dried parsley, corn bread, yeast bread, stewed pears, and a large bowl of wild greens dressed with vinegar.

My mouth watered at the range of enticing smells. It was early spring and the Diebolts did well to put on such a feast. Game was still lean from the winter, the farm animals just giving birth, the early vegetables barely poking above ground. I grew bored with my own monotonous diet of venison stew and dried apples, but would subsist until my early garden produced lettuce and rhubarb.

I inspected the salad and recognized purslane, dandelion, and fiddlehead ferns. "Wh-where did you g-get the gr-greens?"

Mistress Diebolt surveyed her largesse and gave me a significant look. "Mistress Ingland gathered them in the forest."

I nodded. My mother had been the village herb woman and I had fond memories of gathering plants in the woods at her side. She would snap off a leaf or stem and have me smell and taste it, explaining the healing properties. I had

little time for such luxuries now.

“She also made the cherry pie and sewed her own gown.”

I smiled at Mistress Diebolt’s unsubtle attempt to assure me of Margueritha’s domestic suitability. But what had she said to Miss Ingland about *my* suitability as a husband?

The older woman indicated a chair to the left of her husband’s. “Sit here, Master Lutz. Mistress Ingland, you may have the next seat.” Diebolt sat at the head of the table, and his wife to his right, where she could oversee the servant girl.

“Let us join hands and thank the Lord for this bounty.” While Diebolt intoned a traditional blessing, I prayed to the Good Lord for little conversation or—if not—a steady tongue. “Amen.”

The servant girl ladled out the oyster stew and filled our glasses with apple cider. In spite of my nervous stomach, I ate well, savoring the variety of tastes. Diebolt commented favorably on the food, and the women responded with murmured thanks.

“Mistress Ingland, I understand you were born in this country?” Mistress Diebolt broke a lengthy silence.

“My parents were settled in the Mohawk valley with others to manufacture pitch for the English navy, but the pines were the wrong kind. The first winter was harsh and the settlers didn’t have good shelters or enough supplies. If it hadn’t been for the natives they all would have perished. It was a terrible time and my father spoke of it only fleetingly. I was born shortly after they abandoned the settlements and moved to the city of New York.”

“That was a shameful scheme.” Elder Diebolt shook his head. “The German settlers in Carolina were abandoned in a similar manner, only there the natives attacked rather than providing succor. I give thanks every day I followed Penn rather than one of the other agents.”

“And you Master Lutz?” Margueritha turned to me. “Were you born here?”

Three pairs of eyes bored into mine. “N-n-no.” I ducked my head and took another mouthful of ham.

Elder Diebolt frowned. Mistress Diebolt sighed. Mistress Inglard looked down at her plate.

Damn! She must think me a lack-wit. I felt my face turning deep red and my throat closed, making swallowing difficult.

“Master Lutz’s family is from the Neckar valley, as is mine.” Elder Diebolt broke in. “Where in Germany did your parents hail from?”

“The Main River. Father often told me of the winter of 1709 when it was so cold, the river froze solid and wood didn’t burn in the open.”

“Aye, it was a bad one. After the French ruined our farms, we nearly starved. Thank the Good Lord for Queen Anne and William Penn.”

The food lost its flavor as memories of that horrible time invaded my mind: bitter cold, desperation, and starvation in Germany. Betrayal, illness, and death in the London camps while the English government cooked up one scheme after another to rid themselves of the Germans.

“Your parents were farmers, Mistress Inglard?” Mistress Diebolt asked.

“No. My father was a printer and mother a seamstress. Neither was suited for the rigors of the frontier. Mother died shortly after my birth and Father recently of a wasting disease, after several years an invalid.”

Mistress Diebolt reached over to pat Margueritha’s hand. “We have all given so much for the promise of this new land. I’ve buried three children here.” Tears glistened in her eyes. “Master Lutz is an orphan, as well.”

I nodded. The loneliness—normally held in check—slipped out and settled like a heavy mantel over my shoulders. It had been many years for me, but Margueritha’s grief must be raw and new.

“What dark talk for such a happy occasion!” Elder Diebolt snorted. “Master Lutz, tell Mistress Ingland of your farm and your business.”

I froze, a forkful of greens halfway to my lips. Damn the man! I couldn’t give a one-word answer or duck my head to that question.

“I-I-I-I...” I put down the greens and took a swallow of cider. “It’s j-j-j-j...” I unclenched my locked jaw. “I-I-I-I...”

This was impossible! Blood rushed to my face. I took a quick glance around the table. Disappointment and concern marked the Diebolts’ faces. But what flitted across Margueritha’s, before she masked it? Revulsion? Pity? Neither boded well for my suit.

I stood, dropped my napkin to my chair and gave a brief bow. I walked quickly out the nearest door hoping they would think I needed to use the privy.

A separate cabin, containing the kitchen, sat to one side of the house. Smoke trickled from the chimney. A massive

garden, already tilled and marked in rows, stretched down a slight incline toward a creek that separated the fields from the forest. I ran through a gate on the other side of the garden to the top of a low rise overlooking the village. There I found a split rail bench and sat, my back to the house, head in hands, angry tears stinging my eyes.

Why did they have to interfere with my life? I had been content until they held out the hope of family, companionship...love. A dream for a foolish little man. How deluded to think a woman could love me when I couldn't even talk to her! A deep well of grief and loss opened in my chest, startling me. I thought I had steeled myself against disappointment.

After a few moments, I stifled a sigh and pulled the kerchief from my sleeve to blow my nose and wipe my eyes. Fool. I must pull myself together, go back, and apologize.

"Master Lutz, have I disappointed you in some way?"

I started and turned my head. Margueritha stood in shawl and bonnet, her face shadowed.

"N-no!" I reached to doff my hat and realized I had left it in the house.

"May I sit?"

"Of c-c-course."

We sat looking over the quiet village. Most folks were inside with their dinners, but soon would be out to do the evening chores. Cows needed to be milked and animals fed, even on the Lord's Day of rest. The sharp earthy tang of a pig sty tickled my nose. During the summer, the pigs would be let loose in the forest to fatten on the acorns. I distracted my mind from the woman sitting next to me with such trivialities.

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The Reluctant Groom and Other Historical Stories

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