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Miss Juliana's Wedding Dress

L. M. Montgomery

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Jean was making her wedding-dress, a thing of fine sheer white organdy and cobweb lace, just such a dress as she had dreamed of having ever since the day that Martin Reed had put the little ring, with its three blue turquoises, on her slender brown finger.

The dress stood for a good deal of extra economy and a bit of self-sacrifice on the part of the father and mother. Jean knew this and knew that the love so woven into fabric and seam was in itself the finest and most precious of bridal adornments. Her heart sang with joy as she hemmed the froth-like ruffles, and no hint of the gloom of the autumn day crept in to shadow it. To Jean, the world was all springtime.

Mrs. Milman, passing by, stopped and touched the dress gently.

“Deary me, isn’t it pretty?” she said wistfully. “Seems to me such stuff couldn’t be meant for wearing any more than moonshine. I’m real glad we made out to manage it. Your father thought at first that it was kind of foolish to spend money on a white dress when money was so scarce and you needed so many other things. But I stood firm. I remember when I was married I wanted a white dress, too; but they all said it was such foolishness that I gave it up and was married in my brown silk. But do you know, Jean, I’ve had a hankering for that white dress ever since. So I was determined you should have yours. It seemed to me that it would satisfy my own old wish, to see you married in a white dress. Deary me, there’s Miss Juliana coming across the field. Mattie, run to the front door and bring her in that way. I wouldn’t have her see the back porch, all littered up as it is with excelsior, for the world.”

Mattie flew to the front door while Jean hurriedly gathered up her ruffles.

“Mother, help me get these out of sight. Miss Juliana mustn’t see the dress. She is such an old gossip and pry. It would be talked over in every house in Brightwood in a week and I should feel that like a desecration. And she’d poke it about with her little claws and peer into the stitches.”

The white dress was safely out of the way before Miss Juliana came in. Perhaps she suspected something, for her sharp black eyes did not fail to notice a snip of organdy on the carpet and a white thread clinging to Jean’s dress. But she said nothing about it, although she prolonged her call unreasonably and talked gossip until Jean almost lost her patience. To be sure, poor Miss Juliana’s gossip was always harmless enough; but Jean detested all gossip.

So Miss Juliana had to go home without having been taken into Jean’s confidence.

“It wouldn’t have hurt her to have showed me her things,” whispered Miss Juliana resentfully, as she fumbled about to unlock her door, blinder by reason of a

few stinging tears in her eyes than by the falling dusk. "I've been fond of Jean ever since she was a baby and I've been in and out over there almost every day of my life. They needn't treat me like a stranger. I do hate for folks to be so close."

But neither Miss Juliana nor anyone else in Brightwood was destined to see that white dress of Jean's. On the day that it was finished Jean laid it carefully on the "spare-room" bed; and that night fifteen-year-old Mattie went into the spare-room to curl her hair for prayer meeting.

Mattie was inclined to be absent-minded. She was pondering deeply whether to dress her hair in the Cadogan braid, as Millie Jones wore it, or turn it up over her head like the stylish Patterson girls at the Center; and when she lighted her lamp she gave a little "pouf" at the match and tossed it carelessly away—another habit of hers. The next moment Mattie saw what she had done. The still blazing match had fallen on the chiffon frill of Jean's wedding dress. A draught was blowing across it from the open window and, before horrified Mattie could open her lips to utter a piercing shriek, the frail, dainty thing was a mass of twisting flames.

Mrs. Milman reached the spare-room first, to see Mattie striving to smother the fire with a towel.

She snatched the down comforter from the foot of the bed and in a twinkling the fire was out and the danger over, just as Jean came running in. She saw Mattie crying and nursing her blistered hands, she saw her mother standing pale and trembling in the middle of the room, and she saw on the bed a heap of charred rags that had once been her wedding dress.

"Mother!" she cried.

"Jean, this is dreadful," said Mrs. Milman helplessly. "This is what that child's vanity and carelessness have come to. To be sure, I suppose we ought to be thankful it wasn't the house instead of only a dress."

But just then Jean did not feel that she could be thankful for anything. She broke into tears and fled to her room without even touching the pitiful fragments of the gown she had made with such pride and delight. She would have to be married in black silk, and it wouldn't seem like a marriage at all!

Jean cried all night and moped all the next day. The Milman household was a rather gloomy one at that time. Mattie, between burned hands and remorse, was almost heart-broken; and poor Mrs. Milman was, as she expressed it to Miss Juliana, "quite upset and worried to death." She had run over after tea to pour out the dismal story to Miss Juliana.

Miss Juliana listened intently and for once was not forward with comment. When Mrs. Milman had gone on to the Reeds', Miss Juliana threw a shawl over her head

and hurried across the sere meadow to the Milman homestead. She found Jean curled up on the sofa, with her face in a pillow. Miss Juliana sat down beside her and put her arm over the girl's shoulders.

"I've heard about it, Jean," she whispered, "and I'm so sorry. But don't cry any more. Please come over to my house for a minute. I have something to show you."

Jean wiped away her tears and went. Somehow, she did not resent Miss Juliana's meddling in the matter. When they reached the latter's tiny house Miss Juliana took Jean upstairs. Before the door of the gable room she paused.

"I've never taken anyone in here before, Jean," she said tremulously. "You won't tell anybody about it, will you? I couldn't bear to have it talked over."

She unlocked the door and led Jean in by the hand, like a child. It was a young girl's room—quaint, neat, very old-fashioned, with frilled white muslin curtains at the window, a white-canopied bed, and a high, shining chest of drawers, topped by a gilt-framed mirror. Scattered about were girlish knick-knacks and belongings, all neatly kept and speckless of dust, but evidently long unused by any human hand.

"This was my room long ago, when I was a young girl," said Miss Juliana. "I've never used it since—since I put girlhood behind me forever one bitter day. But I've always kept it just as it used to be. And nobody but myself has ever been in it since then."

Miss Juliana went to the chintz-covered chest under the window and opened it. A sweet, faint spiciness floated up into the room as she lifted out a dress—a dress of white embroidered muslin, ivory-tinted from its long seclusion.

"This," said Miss Juliana softly, "this was to have been my wedding dress, Jean. Long ago I was engaged to a young sea captain, Malcolm Lennox. When he went away on his last voyage I promised to marry him when he came back. I got all my things ready and then I made my wedding dress from a roll of muslin my uncle had given me. He was a sea captain, too, and he had brought it home from India. Look at it, Jean; it was fit for a queen—so fine you might almost have drawn the whole web through a ring. Well, Jean, the very moment I finished it I heard voices in the kitchen below. I ran out to the landing and recognized old Joe Marks' voice. He was telling mother that the *Annie Ray* had been lost with all on board. The *Annie Ray* was Malcolm's ship. Jean, my youth and happiness died then. I crept back here broken-hearted and I put away the wedding dress that was never to be worn——"

Miss Juliana's voice broke in a sob. Jean bent forward and laid her young arms about the little woman.

"I didn't bring you here to cry to you," said Miss Juliana wiping away her tears. "Now, you see this dress. The material is as good as ever and it will bleach white.

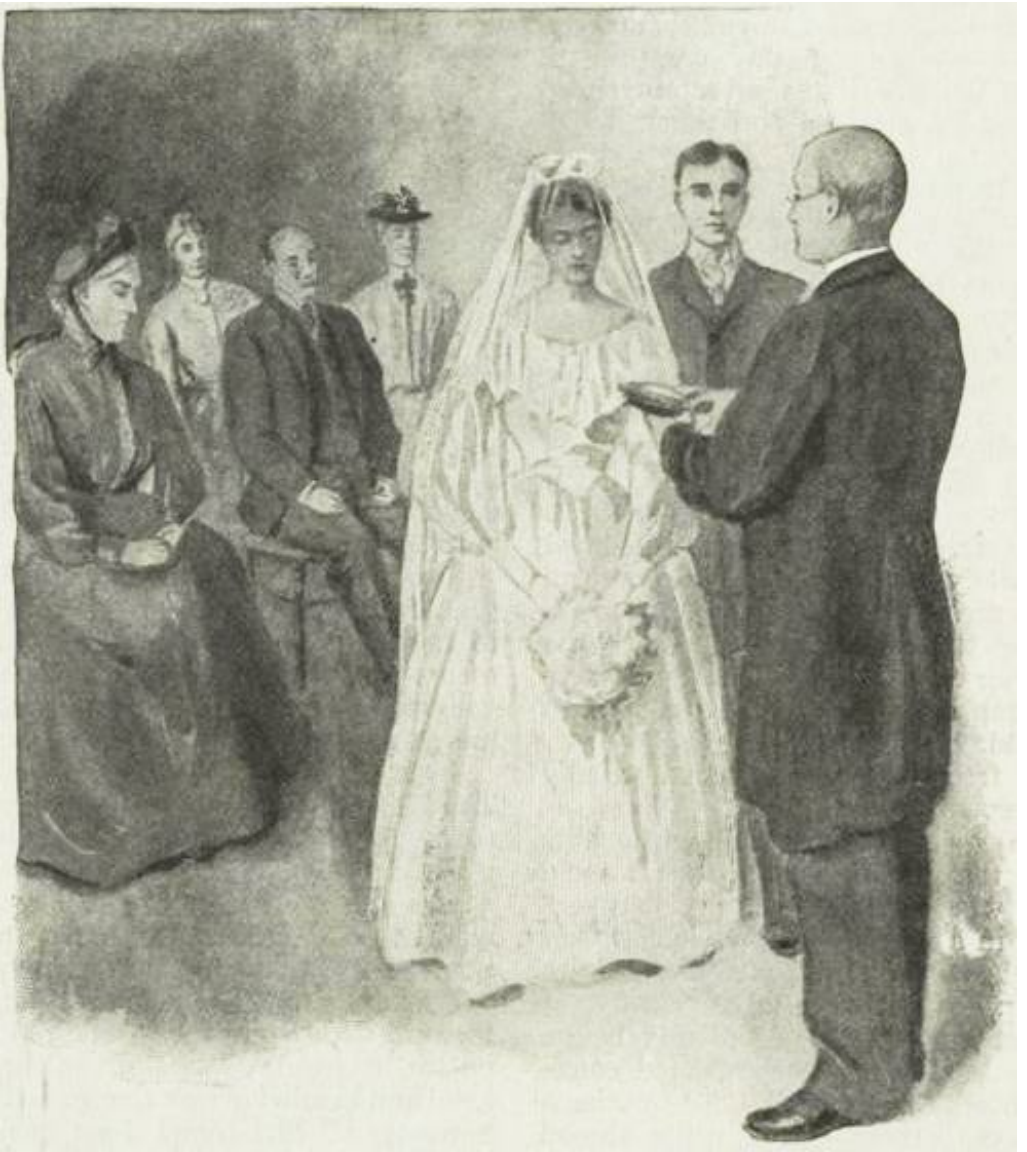
You see the skirt is long and full and the sleeves are like balloons—that was the fashion then—so that there will be plenty to make over. You must take this dress, Jean, to be married in.”

“Oh, dear Miss Juliana,” cried Jean tenderly, “I couldn’t. Why, it would seem _____”

“Wait, dear,” interrupted Miss Juliana, “I don’t want you to think that I am making any sacrifice in giving you this dress. I am just indulging a whim of mine. I’ve always wanted to see this dress worn by a bride—that is what it was made for. Do take the dress, Jean. It seems to me that it is full of dreams and hopes, and that they will all blossom for you if you wear it.”

“Thank you,” said Jean tremulously. “Oh, dear Miss Juliana, thank you.”

“Wasn’t it sweet and lovely of her, mother?” said Jean that night, as she showed the dainty, old-fashioned gown to Mrs. Milman. “I’m ashamed to think how I have misunderstood her. I said that she didn’t know anything about the sacredness of a wedding dress! But I shall never think of her as a prying gossip again.”



No bride could have looked sweeter.

“It’s the loveliest thing in the line of material that I ever put my eyes on,” said Mrs. Milman practically. “And the sewing on it is beautiful. It does seem a positive shame to think of cutting it up to make over.”

“Mothery, I have an inspiration,” cried Jean. “There’s nobody coming to see me married except Martin’s family and Miss Juliana—so I’ll do it.”

“If you wouldn’t mind telling a body what you mean to do?” smiled the mother,

and Jean did.

Miss Juliana wondered a little when Jean meant to make over her wedding dress. Once she offered to help her. But Jean thanked her kindly and said it wasn't necessary. Miss Juliana felt a little hurt: but on the wedding day, when Jean came down into the parlor and stood simply beside her young bridegroom, Miss Juliana understood. For the wedding dress which Jean wore under her snowy bridal veil was the very wedding dress she had taken from the chintz-covered chest, unaltered in any respect. It had been beautifully bleached and done up, and fitted Jean's slender figure perfectly. No bride could have looked sweeter and fairer, and Miss Juliana wept tears of happiness in her corner.

"How lovely of you," she whispered to Jean later on. "I did feel a little bit sorry to think of the dress being cut up and made over, but I didn't see any other way if you were to wear it, as I was bound you should. Oh, Jean dear, I'm so pleased and proud and happy!"

"So am I," whispered Jean, with a blush and a shy glance at Martin.

[The end of *Miss Julianna's Wedding Dress* by L. M. (Lucy Maud) Montgomery]