

PATH OF PROMISE

ORDERED STEPS

Marriage did not enter the young missionary's mind until a stagecoach massacre made beautiful Marianne English his charge. How a spoiled aristocrat, a sanguine brother and a homeless housemaid—along with a praying mother—brought God's will in Perregrine Abelard's life will thrill you to tears.



LaJoyce Martin

Ordered Steps

by LaJoyce Martin

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Chapter One

The Travelers

The coach's curtain, fatigued and faded from its effort to keep the sun at bay, was looped back, allowing the evening light to fall across the four travelers. A more mismatched lot could not have been seined from the stream of life.

Despite the jostling of the stagecoach, Perregrine Abelard had slept away most of the trip; he was exceedingly tired. Now he roused, wondering how far they had journeyed.

"You won't sleep ery a wink t'night," predicted the pock-faced man beside him, who bore the marks of a bootlegger and an outlaw. He was a pigeon-shaped fellow with a large red lump for a nose. A few strands of hair lay flat on his head, combed across to hide his baldness.

"I think I could sleep a *week*, and it would seem but a *wink*." Perregrine gave a boyish grin. "Where are we?"

Mr. Flanders traced a grubby finger along the hand-sketched map tacked to the coach's interior. "Right

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about heresome, the best I can figger. Daresay the driver's tryin' to make it to the river 'fore dark."

"There's an inn there?" asked the overdressed lady on the seat opposite them. She was a statesman's wife traveling with her niece, Marianne, a porcelain-looking girl of nineteen. Mrs. English had the clipped voice of a woman who dictated her own terms to life.

Mr. Flanders snorted. "Of course, ma'am. With maids and butlers and a silver tea set. Right here in the middle of no-man's land. Just ring for service." His eyes were threaded with scorn. "Dream on, my dear lady."

She gave him a withering look. "I meant a modest lodge."

"This here's a new line, and there ain't no lodges," he blurted. "You an' the missus will have these here benches inside for to bunk the night on. Us men'll bed under the buggy with the driver. It's more'n fifty miles to ery a log cabin."

"Will it be . . . safe?"

"Will what be safe?"

"To park beside a stream and sleep in this wretched cart without protection," she flashed, angry at him for his callousness and angry at herself for making the trip without insisting on a list of accommodations.

"Nuthin's safe in this territory, ma'am. There's bears an' lions an' tigers—an' mayhap a hungry mosquito or two. Us men could take care of any of them dangers singlehanded. Except the mosquitos, of course. Can't do nuthin' 'bout their appetites."

"What about Indians?"

"This whole continent is their stompin' grounds, ma'am. They're bespread all over the countryside. The territory is theirs. Some er friendly, some ain't."

"But they all have a soul, madam," spoke up Perregrine. "And they need salvation."

“What they need,” Mrs. English disdained acidly, “is to be taught to put away their savagery and to submit to their superiors.”

“Their superiors?”

“The white man. Us.”

“You are suggesting that we are better than they?”

“Of course. They have no education, no manners, no culture. As for me, I say we should domesticate this whole unrefined continent. My husband is formulating a motion to acquire *all* their lands. Don’t you agree that this is a good idea, sir?” She looked to Mr. Flanders as a cohort.

“I’m afraid I’m on the dark side of politics, ma’am,” Mr. Flanders protested. His hand strayed to the coat-concealed bulge with its forbidden contents. “I say the givernment should stay out of other people’s business.”

“Perhaps the natives have not had the chance for improvement that you in your privileged life have had,” Perregrine pointed out.

“They are brutal! They are beastly! They are . . . They are . . .”

“And would you give up your home, your way of life and your food supply to be trampled underfoot in the dust of insult without a fight, madam?” Perregrine censured without raising his voice.

“If I had nothing more than a mud hut or a filthy animal skin, I wouldn’t *bother* to defend it!”

“I’m sorry, but I cannot share your views. Their homes, however humble, mean as much to them as yours means to you. I came all the way across the ocean to preach—”

“You’re a *parson*?” The feather on Mrs. English’s Cosack hat doddered. She was a tall, crane-necked woman with her hair scraped back from a high-boned face.

“Well, yes. I have a burden for—”