

The Wedding Dress



The true story of a proud young beauty and the hidden message that changed her life

BY I. A. R. WYLIE

THIS story starts some years ago in a small hill town in southern Italy.

One of the gayest youngsters in the whole town was Lucia Gazzoni — a dark-haired, dark-eyed beauty of great charm. Lucia had many admirers, and she liked to keep them guessing. For a few days she would choose one young man as her favorite, and then she would change to another. Though she made them sad, they never got angry with her. And none of her suitors ever ceased to adore her.

If for some reason a man paid no attention to her, Lucia felt challenged. So she couldn't help trying to add Giuseppe Silva to her list of admirers. Giuseppe seemed not to notice her charms.

Giuseppe wasn't romantic-looking. He was rather short, and he had heavy shoulders. His face was plain except for his bright, kindly eyes.

But many girls in the town wanted to marry him. For he was the only tailor in that region, and he was quite rich. He was a clever dress designer, who could do anything with a pair of scissors, a needle and a piece of material. The town boasted that you could go as far as the city of Naples and do no better.

An Evening at the Fair

Every spring the fair came to set up its booths in the town square. The day before it opened Lucia went to Giuseppe's little shop. She bought some thread. Then she lingered, as if she were shy.

"Why do you stay in this little place, signor?" she asked. "Everyone says that you are so clever. You could go to Naples and make a lot of money. . . ."

"The money I have, signorina, is enough," said Giuseppe.

"You have no ambition," Lucia said scornfully.

"It is foolish to be ambitious for things one does not really want — or for things one cannot have."

"What *do* you want?" she asked.

He went on stitching silently.

Suddenly she asked gaily, "Would you like to take me to the fair?"

Any other man would have jumped at the offer, but Giuseppe took his time. "I should be very pleased, signorina," he replied. And she had to be content with that cool answer.

At least Giuseppe had one thing all the other men lacked. He had money, and he spent it freely. Lucia dragged him into the booths, where he bought her sweet cakes and cheap trinkets to her heart's content. But he let her ride on the merry-go-round alone, and he waited for her patiently on the edge of the crowd.

So Lucia met Roberto Bellini. He rode the wooden horse next to hers. When she pretended to be afraid, he laughed and held her steady with a strong hand. She had heard about him. He had relatives in the town, whom he had come to visit at fair-time. Roberto was a steady, successful young wine salesman who had traveled all over Europe.

Giuseppe's Gift

Did it seem to Lucia's restless heart that Roberto was a way of escape from her drab little world? At any rate, she was delighted when he called at her home the next day. Lucia and her parents understood why he had come. A young man did not make a formal call like that unless he had a serious purpose.

Within a few weeks, Roberto was back with a proposal of marriage. He was going to America to sell wine, and he wanted to take Lucia with him.

There was no doubt of the answer. Lucia's parents might be sad at her going so far from them, but America was the golden land of an Italian peasant's dream. They were glad for her good fortune.

The news spread quickly. When Giuseppe heard it, he called on Lucia's parents and asked to be allowed to make her wedding dress. He said that it would be his wedding gift. They were thankful to accept. For they were poor and

the dress would have been too expensive for them to buy.

So almost every day Lucia went, with a chaperone, to Giuseppe's little shop. He knelt at her feet, and he fitted and snipped and pinned the lovely silk. It was so rich and heavy that everyone knew Giuseppe must have made a special trip to Naples to find it. When the dress was finished, Lucia smiled happily at herself in the mirror. She hadn't known that she could be so beautiful.

The sun shone brightly the day of her wedding. That night her parents gave a party, and there was dancing in the square. But Giuseppe's house was closed and he had vanished. People said he had been called out of town to visit a sick relative. Lucia was too happy and excited to think of him. The next day she and her husband left for America.

The Tide Turns

At first, marriage was as wonderful as Lucia's dreams of it. Roberto was a good husband and a good businessman. They had a pleasant house in a suburb of New York City. In time they were blessed with two little girls as pretty and bright-eyed as their mother.

For a few years Lucia wrote home often, but then less and less. The little Italian town faded into the mists of her girlhood memories. She thought of Giuseppe Silva just once — when she laid the wedding dress away finally. It was already old-fashioned, but the material was still rich and lovely. Someday, perhaps, she would find a use for it.

Then slowly the tide of their fortunes began to turn. Business was no longer good. Though Roberto worked hard, he lost his job. Then he became seriously ill. Little by little, their savings were eaten up. And finally, one tragic day, Roberto died.

Lucia had no one to turn to. Her friends had troubles of their own. Her parents were dead. Her daughters, aged ten and seven, were too young to help her.

Frightened and sick at heart, she sold their home. She rented rooms in a cheaper neighborhood. She earned a little money by teaching Italian in a New York school, and by giving English lessons to new arrivals from Italy. Sometimes she would lie awake at night and wonder what would become of them all if she were to be taken ill.

There were other problems, too. Little Lucy, the younger girl, was almost ready for her First Communion, the first important event in her life. "What shall I wear, Mother?" she asked. Lucia knew what was at the back of the child's anxious questioning: would she have to be ashamed, as she was so often, of her shabby clothes? But what could Lucia do?

Then she remembered her wedding dress!

There it was — as rich, as lovely as ever. It was amazing to think that she had owned something so beautiful, and had almost forgotten it. She began at once to rip it apart and cut it down to fit Lucy. As she undid the deep hem, she found — to her surprise — a neatly folded paper. On it, in faded but strong writing, was a message that had been waiting for her nearly fifteen years: *I shall always love you.*

Lucia sat for a long time, remembering. She saw the dark man with the square shoulders, really, for the first time. She thought of the unspoken love she had never known he felt for her. She cried her heart out with loneliness and grief.

That night she wrote a letter. It was addressed to a man who might now be dead. In any case, he must surely have long since forgotten her. But she felt she must tell him that she had found his message. And she wanted to thank him for a love she had done so little to deserve. Beyond

telling him that her husband was dead, she said nothing about her misfortunes.

Weeks passed, and there was no answer. She did not expect one. Little Lucy wore the beautiful dress at her First Communion. She was the proudest, happiest girl of all her class. Watching her go up the church aisle to the altar, Lucia thanked Giuseppe for his goodness.

A Fairy-tale Ending

One day soon after, Lucia came home to find a man waiting in the poorly lit hallway of her apartment house. At first she did not recognize him. His shoulders had grown heavier and a little stooped. The once thick black hair was gray. Then she heard his voice: "It is still true, Lucia."

Though she had not written of her distress, he had known of it in his heart because he loved her. Giuseppe had come all the way to America on the brave chance that she might need him.

This story has a true fairy-tale ending. Giuseppe had done well for himself. He was able to start a tailoring business in the new country that had become hers. He made a good home for Lucia and her little girls. And they lived happily ever after.

What a Whopper!

Mrs. C. KOROSCH, of the New York Liars Club, stepped off the curbing into a pool of water, but her feet didn't get wet. Looking down, she saw the water receding swiftly — the tongues of her shoes were lapping it up.

— Albert Lea (Minn.) Evening Tribune

Sure Bets

SAY to a group of friends: "I bet any of you that if you put a penny under your cap on the table I can take it away without touching the cap."

One of them must then put a penny on the table, and his cap on top of it.

Conceal a penny in your hand and knock mysteriously on the table three times. Then reach under the table, knock three more times, and pull out your hand showing the penny in it. Your friend will pick up the cap to see if his penny is still there. Now is your chance to grab his penny — without touching the cap!

— Based on a contribution by John Tazewell Jones

BORROW a dollar bill (any piece of paper the same size will do) and ask a friend to hold it by one end so that the bill is hanging down. Place your thumb and forefinger on either side of the bill — as close as you like, without actually touching it — and try to catch it when your friend lets go. We bet you miss it!

— Based on a contribution by Daryle Feldmeir in Minneapolis Tribune