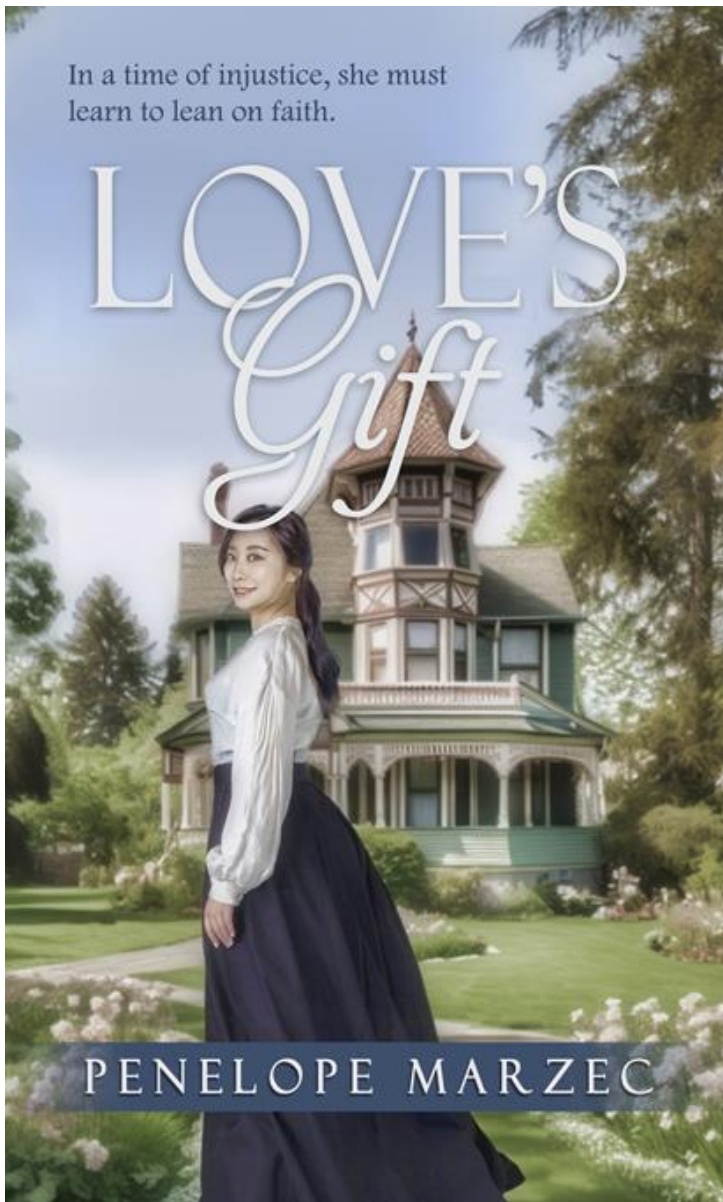


In a time of injustice, she must
learn to lean on faith.

LOVE'S *Gift*

PENELOPE MARZEC



Loves Gift

Penelope Marzec

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Dedication

To my handsome husband who fixes things.

Author's Note

The Chinese Exclusion Act, signed by President Chester A. Arthur on May 6, 1882, prohibited all immigration of Chinese laborers. It was the only law ever implemented to prevent all members of a specific ethnic or national group from immigrating to the United States.

Initially intended to last for ten years, the law was renewed and strengthened in 1892 with the Geary Act and made permanent in 1902. These laws attempted to stop all Chinese immigration into the United States, with exceptions for diplomats, teachers, students, merchants, and travelers.

~*~

If a stranger dwell in your land, and abide among you, do not upbraid him: But let him be among you as one of the same country: and you shall love him as yourselves: for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. I am the Lord your God.
Leviticus 19:33-34

1

AUGUST 3, 1903
SEA HAVEN, NEW JERSEY

Amaranth's bulky bag weighed her down as she trudged along the street in the hot sun searching for Mrs. Tildon's cottage. Huge homes lined either side of the street. Did the cottage sit behind one of the larger buildings? Without her eyeglasses, she couldn't read the numbers on the houses. She should have asked the station manager the color of the house. That might have helped.

A joyful mass of lavender and pink hydrangea bushes in full bloom drew her attention. She caressed the soft petals and remembered how Sister Felicia loved these particular flowers. Amaranth put her bag down and broke off one small cluster of blossoms to place in the band of her straw hat. No one would miss the little clutch of flowers among the riotous display. Besides, Mrs. Tildon might be more impressed with the flowers and disregard the fact that Amaranth was Chinese.

She sighed as her foolish optimism faded. Weary and beginning to believe she was lost, she dabbed at the back of her damp neck with her handkerchief. She sat on a low rock wall covered with lichen and moss.

Her stomach had given up complaining some time ago, but her mouth did not have a drop of moisture in it.

Studying the rudimentary map the station manager gave her, she turned it this way and that. The ocean lay behind her. A briny scent carried on the breeze. She put her finger on the boxes representing houses on the map. She counted six from the end of Broad Street. Mrs. Tildon's cottage should be at her back since it was the seventh cottage on Ocean Avenue, but the large, elegant mansion behind her was not a cottage. Even without her eyeglasses, the tall tower on one side of the house caught her attention. It reminded her of the story of Rapunzel, one of her favorite fairytales. If she were up in that tower, she would let her hair trail down and...

Suddenly, someone yanked at her hat. She reached up to hold onto her hair, which she feared would be pulled from her scalp along with her hat. Hairpins and hat pins went off in all directions as she fell backward over the wall. She screamed as she tumbled to the ground.

Shaking with fear, she scrambled to her feet, turned, and found herself staring at a large dog munching the last of the hydrangea with one paw pressed on the brim of her hat.

Amaranth stamped her foot in fury. "You horrid beast!" Grass and mud stained her brown serge skirt. Her blouse had ripped along the seam at the shoulder.

The dog finished devouring the flower and barked.

"Get away from me. Shoo!" Amaranth motioned

with her hands.

The dog stepped closer, crushing the top of the hat. A large tongue hung out of the beast's mouth while the animal's tail waved back and forth like a flag.

Amaranth swallowed hard and bit back tears. With her hat ruined, her skirt a mess, her hair in disarray, and her blouse torn, Mrs. Tildon would be sure to dismiss her on the spot. The dog barked once more and came closer. She stepped back and hit the stone wall. She clambered over the stacked stones in a very unladylike manner. The dog's front feet rested on the wall, her hat dangled in its mouth a moment before the overgrown miscreant shook it back and forth in a savage manner.

The racket of a large automobile startled her and the animal. While the dog ran off with the hat, Amaranth squinted as the vehicle stopped beside her.

"What is going on here?" The driver shouted. He switched off the motor on his machine and climbed out of the automobile.

Amaranth glared at the man and pointed toward the direction where the animal ran. "That beast dragged me to the ground, stole my hat, and ate the flower on it."

He walked toward her. "Are you hurt?"

She peered at him when he got close. He wore a curious leather hat and goggles. His clothes were covered with a long cotton dust coat.

He removed the goggles and the leather cap. His hair appeared the same color as the yams served at the orphanage on Thanksgiving. The scruffy growth of

beard on his chin matched his hair. His automobile glistened bright red in the sunshine. He yanked off his gloves and frowned at her shoulder. "You are hurt." His hand moved toward her.

She backed away.

He put his fingers in his mouth and blew a sharp whistle. "Tulip! Here, girl." He blew once more.

A loud bark came from the porch of the house behind Amaranth. She squinted, but she couldn't see the dog, only some movement.

"What kind of flower was it?" the man asked.

"A hydrangea." Amaranth put her hands to her hair. Her carefully twisted bun was undone. She would have to face Mother Mary Michael and tell her Mrs. Tildon fired her. Her hopes plummeted. This would be the third time she had failed in getting a position.

The man rubbed his forehead and sighed. "Hydrangea is poisonous. How much did she eat?"

"One small cluster." Amaranth attempted to twist her hair into a neat knot, but without a comb or pins, it wouldn't stay. In desperation, she braided it. She wasn't a schoolgirl anymore, and she didn't want to look like one, but there was nothing else she could do.

"The foolish dog will get sick," the man grumbled.

"Then she shouldn't have taken my hat." Sunshine glinted off something on the stone wall. Amaranth reached out and found one of her hat pins. A few inches away, she found a hair pin. Tears misted her eyes.

"I'm sorry Tulip attacked you." He sighed. "You need to take care of that scrape on your shoulder. Our

cook has a salve for scrapes and such.”

Amaranth’s shoulder hurt, but how could she trust a stranger? She stepped closer and peered at him. With his square chin and high cheekbones, some might consider him handsome, but his scowl and pinched lips did not give him a pleasing appearance.

“Why are you squinting?” he asked.

“I’m nearsighted.”

“Don’t you have eyeglasses?”

“I dropped them and they broke.”

Worried furrows marred his brow. “Perhaps we can find them in the grass and have them repaired.”

“I broke them early this morning.” The truth was she stepped on them as she climbed out of a tree. Mother Mary Michael was quite irked with her. There was no time to obtain another pair before her journey.

Most likely it was a wasted trip. Her spirits sank lower.

“This is unfortunate.” He glanced up and down the street. “I hoped you could tell me whether you’ve seen another young woman while you were walking. I was told she headed this way by the station master, but I guess, with your poor eyesight, you might not have noticed her.”

Amaranth clenched her jaw as indignation rose inside her. Was this man supposed to pick her up at the station when she arrived? She cleared her throat. “I was at the train station, too, and I did see another young woman. She told me she waited for an hour and a half. She became quite frustrated since someone was supposed to be there to meet her but never showed.”

He slapped the gloves against his palm. "The engine of my automobile overheated. Do you know what happened to her?"

"She asked the station manager for directions, and he drew a map for her. He told her he wasn't surprised no one was there to pick her up since the Tildons' driver was fired."

"The station manager should mind his own business." His tone was sharp as he rubbed his forehead. "At any rate, perhaps the young woman already arrived at the house."

"That might be possible except for the fact that I have the map." She held it out.

He snatched it from her.

"The station manager has deplorable handwriting and poor drawing skills," she said. "The unfortunate young woman could not find the cottage."

He shifted as if the light finally dawned. "You? But you're...Chinese?"

"I was born in this country and have lived here all my life." She carried her resident permit in her bag, but she did not intend to show it to this stranger. "I am searching for the Tildons' cottage. However, none of these large homes appears to be a cottage."

"You don't have an accent," he noted. "You speak English well."

She drew in a deep breath to quell her annoyance. Why was this always a problem? "As I said, I am searching for the Tildons' cottage. Can you help me?"

"Yes. Of course." He appeared to cover his surprise and handed the map back to her. "Cottage is a

misnomer. Many of the homes are summertime residences though this one is not. You're standing in front of the Tildons' cottage."

Amaranth drew in a long breath and girded herself with resolve despite her bedraggled appearance. "Then my journey is complete, but I will ask you to call off that dog."

2

William studied the disheveled young woman. With her black hair and almond-shaped eyes, she possessed a delicate and exotic beauty. "I assume you are the new secretary sent from the orphanage."

Her generous mouth hardened into a thin line. "Yes, I am Amaranth Beach, proficient in typing, shorthand, and possessed of a flowing script for personal correspondence."

"Amaranth. An unusual name." His pulse quickened in speculation as he folded the dust coat. Perhaps he was simply overheated like the engine of his Cadillac.

"It is what I was given." Her curt answer did not surprise him. She had reason enough to be peeved. After all, she walked from the train station, in the heat, after waiting for an hour and a half. In addition, Tulip attacked her. He knew Tulip probably wanted to play with her, as well as eat the flower, but Miss Beach's shoulder was scraped and no doubt it hurt.

"I have your luggage in the auto. The station manager told me you left it there. I'll drive you to the house now." He wondered why the station manager, who was evidently keen on telling everyone about the Tildons' former carriage driver, did not inform him

that his mother's new secretary was Chinese.

"May I see my luggage?" she asked with a note of challenge in her voice.

He tossed his coat into his vehicle. Didn't she believe him? "It's on the second seat."

She walked to the automobile's door, held onto the top of the frame, and stood on her tiptoes. "This metal carriage is too tall. I can't see it."

Irritable after the circumstances of this day, he rubbed his forehead. "Please, step back."

She did as he asked.

He opened the door. "There is your luggage. It doesn't weigh much."

She reached in and touched the end of the battered, pasteboard case with trembling fingers. "It's what I have." She stepped back.

He closed the door, went around to the back, and got the wooden box. He set the box on the street and held out his hand to assist her. "Please, let me help you."

"I've never ridden in one of these contraptions. Is it safe?" she asked with a tremor in her voice.

"Yes, most of the time—unless it overheats, a tire goes flat, or it gets stuck in the mud." All of which happened to him on this one journey.

She shrugged. "Carriages get stuck in the mud, too." She stepped lightly onto the box and easily climbed into the seat.

He returned the box to its place.

"How fast does this go?" she asked.

"Thirty miles an hour, technically." He didn't hide

the sharp edge in his voice. He spent more time on the side of the road today.

"As fast as a train?" The touch of awe in her tone amused him.

"Not quite." He cranked up the engine, it caught, and he got in to motor down the long driveway to the *porte-cochère*.

"May I ask your name?" Her voice held a note of hesitancy.

"William Tildon." He turned off the engine once the automobile reached the *porte-cochère*. Turning to face her, he said, "Welcome to Zephyr House."

She stared at her hands in her lap. "Are you Mrs. Tildon's husband?"

"I'm her son," he answered. "I've returned from Princeton, which is another reason I was late. I am sorry. I was there to attend an orientation program since I'm enrolled in the graduate school." He hurried out of the car, grabbed her trunk from the second seat, and got the box from the back.

As he set the box down, Amaranth gasped. "The dog!"

Tulip rushed toward him and threw up the contents of her stomach on his shoes.

"Well, Miss Beach, there is your hydrangea and some of your hat as well."

~*~

In the chaos following Amaranth's arrival, a maid who introduced herself as Joan, hastily led Amaranth

to a room on the third floor.

"I cannot understand why Mrs. Tildon would hire you, a Chinese immigrant," Joan stated with a note of derision in her tone.

"I am not an immigrant," Amaranth explained.

"You are Chinese," Joan emphasized. "Anyone can see that."

Amaranth sighed. Her race would always be an issue. Sister Felicia always said that her citizenship was in heaven. That was something no one could take away from her.

"There's a bath down the hall so you can freshen up and you'll be needing to for Mrs. Tildon is a stickler for neatness as she has asthma and not a speck of dust or dirt is allowed in this house." Joan, who was perhaps a few years older than Amaranth, turned to go.

"May I have a little something to eat?" Amaranth asked.

"Dinner for the help is at six. Sharp." Joan left, closing the door behind her.

Amaranth swallowed and glanced at the white walls of the simply furnished room. A breeze came through the window carrying the pungent, salty tang of the sea. The scent drew her toward the window where she stared in wonder at the wide ocean, which stretched out seemingly forever and met the horizon as it did in all the stories she read. But now she saw it with her own eyes, and the grandeur of it took away her breath. Of course, if she hadn't broken her eyeglasses that morning, she might be able to see more

details. Still, none of the stories she read adequately described the experience of the sea: the scent, the sound, and the endlessness of it.

Her soul stirred with a strange longing. Someone found her as an infant on a sandy beach covered by a ragged shawl. Until now, she'd never seen a beach. Perhaps, she never would again if Mrs. Tildon sent her packing.

She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and sank onto the simple iron bed. Exhausted, hungry, thirsty, and sticky from the heat, she longed most of all to take a nap. However, she must make herself presentable for Mrs. Tildon.

She opened her luggage. Right on top, sat a brown paper package with a note attached.

My mother and I will be thinking of you often, praying for you, and hoping you'll come back to visit us when you can. Fondly, Mrs. Devine.

Tears sprang to Amaranth's eyes. How did the note get there? What was inside the brown wrapping. Carefully, she opened it. There were three of Mrs. Devine's most delicious oatmeal cookies, and they were bigger than usual.

"Bless you, Mrs. Devine." Amaranth said a brief prayer of thanks for the cookies as well as her safe arrival. She added a petition for the health of Tulip. Then she ate all of the cookies, savoring each morsel.

Strengthened, she gathered her things and walked down the hall to the bathroom. She knocked, even though the door was slightly ajar. No one answered and she walked into the room. She stood for a moment

and took it in for it was unlike any other bathroom she had seen. A huge tub stood on the right supported by legs that were shaped on the ends like the clawed feet of a lion or some such beast. She smiled. Would it run away?

Small black and white tiles covered the floor. A delightful wallpaper with pink flowers and green leaves brightened the walls. A closet contained neatly folded towels and washcloths. Compared to the orphanage with its bare essentials, this was close to heaven.

Then she looked in the mirror and sobered. Her long black hair appeared in complete disarray. Stains marred her clothes, including blood on the torn sleeve of her blouse from her scraped skin. While mending the blouse would take a while, she had a spare. She longed to soak in the tub, but she did not have time for that. She washed her face and attempted to rearrange her hair in a neat fashion when someone banged on the door.

"Miss Beach, you are to meet Mrs. Tildon in the library immediately," called Joan.

"I don't know where the library is." Amaranth gathered her things. Aware her brief moment of bliss had ended, she opened the door.

Joan gasped. "You are still a disgrace."

"I did not have time to undo the damage."

"Mrs. Tildon will not be pleased. Follow me."

Amaranth's anxiety knotted in her throat. "I should put my things in my room."

"There's no time for that. Come along. When Mrs.