

"YOU CAN MAKE MY WEDDING DRESS"



Martha Helen Hooke (nee Brown)
Born: 14 September 1916

Helen was born in Ellerslie, New Zealand. She had two older brothers and one younger sister. Her father was very strict and never showed any affection to his children. He worked hard as a clerk with the Railways and never bought anything until he had the money in his hand.

Although her first name is Martha after her maternal grandmother, she was always called Helen. Her mother was determined that all her children would get a good education and encouraged them all to get their matriculation. She wanted them to have a better life than she did, because she was forced to leave school at a very early age to help look after all her siblings. This was the fate of the eldest daughter in those days.

Helen was a good student and achieved her matriculation in three years instead of the usual four. She left school and studied shorthand and typing. After a series of inappropriate jobs, she finally took a position in a hardware and building firm, starting as a junior clerk and

ending up as secretary to the Managing Director. She left this position after seven years.

In 1942 she joined the New Zealand WAF. She trained as a radar operator and worked in the filter room which received messages from outstations and tracked them on a grid. When her mother died, she returned home to look after her father, whose health was failing, and her younger sister. At 30, she started her training as a nurse. She did well in her written exams, but was a bit slow at this age.

It was at this time that she met a young man and a fell in love. However, due to the fact that he was nine years younger than she, it was not considered a possibility then. Heartbroken, she decided to leave New Zealand and came to Sydney to help her get over it.

She settled down and made some good friends. It was through these friends that she was to meet the real love of her life, her husband Richard (Dick). By this time she was 43 years old and many people had thought she would never get married, Helen says cheekily, "You see miracles do happen if you wait long enough!"

Dick and Helen had been married for five years when another miracle occurred - they were given permission to adopt a three months premature baby boy, due to Helen's nursing experience as the baby needed very special care and attention. Given all the loving care his doting parents showered on him, he grew up to be a fine, strong handsome young man.

Helen went to Macquarie University when she was 68. She loved the course, majored in English literature, and graduated in May 1990 aged 73.

Helen remarked to her son that she would love to learn to use a computer. As a surprise, he built one for her, using office discards (with permission) where possible and had it ready for her 80th birthday. So far, she has

only used it for keeping tedium at bay with Solitaire but ... She always had aspirations towards writing, but other things seem to have got in the way.

Her story, "The Wedding Dress" illustrates her whimsical sense of humour and a highly original writing style. It also tells of her love of sewing, which led to the "gift" in the story.

The Wedding Dress **By Helen Hooke**

My name is Helen and although I am now a naturalised Australian, I will always be a New Zealander at heart. At the time of my story, I had been living in Australia for about five years and my means of livelihood was working as Secretary to the Branch Manager of a finance company. I found my job very congenial. I had a pleasant little room in Cremorne as my accommodation and, surprisingly, a new engagement ring. The staff at work contained a number of young ladies who liked to gather in huddles and talk over their latest boyfriends. I couldn't contribute much there, but we all got along pretty well. Just before my fiancé and I were ready to announce our engagement, and we were going to shop for the ring, I secretly asked Lois, one of the two married cashiers (those days the married female office worker was not nearly as plentiful as now):

"Lois, I'm going to tell you something that may surprise you. Don't say anything because I don't want it known yet. My fiancé and I are going shopping today for an engagement ring. I want you to put your hand down on my desk so I can see yours."

Lois jerked her head in surprise but she said nothing. "I'm not up to date on these things," I said.

She put down her hand saying, "Mine's a family ring so it's a bit different."

Later in the day she came to my desk again. "Miss Brown, I feel quite strung up. You gave me such a shock but it was a lovely shock."

Later, when the news was out, Yvonne, the second cashier, said her husband wanted to do my flowers. They were delivered duly on the morning accompanied by a wedding gift card. He was a window dresser at Mark Foys. Guess who was unusually early on the Monday after the notice of engagement appeared in the Sydney Morning Herald. It was also Anzac Day which was appropriate for an Aussie and a Kiwi. But back to my story.

One morning in the office about three weeks later, I was working at my typewriter as usual when a shaft of sun caught the diamond of my engagement ring and I drifted off into recollection of the excitement of when I first wore my ring. My reverie was soon interrupted by a shadow. It belonged to Eileen, another workmate, stopping at my desk on her way back from lunch.

"Helen," she said, "I came across Sadie while I was out."

(I remembered Sadie. She had left the office the previous year and no one had heard of her since.) "She wanted to know the news of the office and I told her you were engaged. She was delighted. She said, 'Tell Helen I will make her wedding dress'."

My wedding dress! I hadn't begun to think of it, except to tell myself that it would be something simple I could make myself. I had never had visions of myself floating about in clouds of tulle and I was quite capable of bypassing bridal store models without mooning after them.

But why on earth should Sadie be so positive that she would make me a wedding dress? Then I remembered

vaguely that Sadie had told me that she was really a dressmaker and liked to specialise in bridal wear. I certainly didn't have money for a custom-built wedding gown.

"Sadie is going to ring you Helen," added Eileen as she went back to work.

Then Sadie telephoned and reiterated, "Helen, I'll make your wedding dress."

"Sadie, er, that's very kind of you but....."

"You remember the black blouse?"

Yes, now I remembered. A few years before, with time hanging heavily on my hands, (was there ever such a time?) I made a black blouse in crochet cotton. Goodness knows why, except that I loved making things. It went into a drawer because I'm not exactly the black lace type.

Well, Sadie was what one might call a bold dresser. At that time the meaning of that was more about colours and styles rather than areas of bare skin. When I got to know Sadie, I thought, 'Here is someone who might wear my black lace blouse' and I told her about it.

"I'll bring it in," I told her. So I brought it in and Sadie was enchanted.

"Can I give you something for it? I can't just take it."

"No, I don't want anything for it. If you can wear it, you can have it."

"Let me make you something."

"No, I don't want anything."

Sadie carried on about it so much that eventually, really just to shut her up, I said the most unlikely thing I

could think of: "OK, you can make my wedding dress," but, a bit maliciously, I thought Sadie's taste might not click with me. However after that, I thought no more about it.

So that was why I was talking to Sadie on the phone and arranging to meet her for a snack and to look at materials. On the morning we had arranged to meet, Sadie rang.

"Helen, I'm at Griggs." (Do you remember Griegs material shops?). "There's a sale on here and there are some lovely materials very much reduced. Meet me here and we will have our cuppa after. She mentioned the name of the material, it was satin brocade.

'What on earth is satin brocade?' I wondered. Anyway we looked, Sadie calculated how much we would need and I bought it.

Here is a photo of the wedding dress Sadie made me. I think you'll all agree, it's not "bold" at all. It was beautifully designed and sewn and I'm so grateful that a suggestion I made as a joke was taken seriously by Sadie!



The Wedding Dress