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# Pamela Morsí

National Bestselling Author



ate.  
groom?



*Here Comes  
The Bride*



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For Bill



# 1

THERE COMES A TIME IN EVERY WOMAN'S LIFE WHEN SHE must get herself a man or give up on the idea entirely. Augusta Mudd had reached that moment. Miss Gussie, as she was known to all, was in the spring of her thirty-first year. All through her twenties she had reminded herself that there was still plenty of youth ahead. At thirty itself she had taken comfort in the fact that she was barely out of her twenties. But thirty-one—thirty-one was definitely an accounting that brought realization, or perhaps even resignation.

“Get it done or past contemplation.”

That's what her father would have said to her. Papa tended toward sound advice. Gussie always weighed in with what she thought would be his opinion.

Thoughtfully, she carried her account books outside and lay them upon the little makeshift desk on the porch. The cut-glass pitcher of lemonade was already sweating in the warmth of the afternoon, two glasses at the ready. In the matching vase behind the serving tray, she had arranged some of the irises and zinnias grown

in the shadows of the white picket fence around her home.

It was her home now. Her home completely. A big, sprawling place with Greek columns and wide verandas that her father had built to impress his friends. Her mother had never been quite comfortable in it. Gussie actually liked the place. She had made it seem small and cozy.

Like a spinster's house.

The thought came to her unexpectedly and she didn't like it one bit. Spinsterhood might be a fine and noble calling. But, Gussie assured herself with stern determination, it did not call her. She would have a perfect wedding, an acceptable husband and children. That was what she wanted, and that's what she would have.

Immediately, of course, her thoughts turned to Amos. Tall, gentlemanly, handsome Amos. Her heart ached with a sad bitterness that was more painful than she would ever have expected. Last evening he sought her out after the Fire Brigade Pie Supper and made his feelings, or rather his lack of them, perfectly clear.

"I do believe, sir," she told him as she stood at the top of her porch, staring straight into his face as he hesitated upon the lower step. "I do believe that, for the sake of my future and my reputation, a declaration of your intentions should be forthcoming."

His reaction was immediate. The dark, handsome eyes, which she so admired, widened behind the round lenses of his spectacles and his jaw dropped in shock. He stepped back from her a good two paces, stuttering and stumbling upon his words.

"Miss Gussie, I . . . I mean, I never, I . . . w-well, what I'm saying is—ah—"

Humiliation welled up inside her at his hesitation. It



had been her fondest hope that he had been actively contemplating a proposal. She'd been so sure. It was shyness, she'd assured herself, that held him back. One glance at his horrified expression swept away that notion completely.

Gussie's face flushed at the memory. There was nothing in the world, she imagined, that was quite as lowering as proclaiming one's ardent devotion and having the recipient of it react with incredulity and near horror.

However, Gussie was not the kind of woman to allow the world to bring her to tears. She was not one who held onto her place in life by clutching a lacy hankie like a lifeline. Under no circumstances would she allow her disappointment to send her into a decline. Other women might find comfort in an all-consuming black morass or a fit of the vapors. But Gussie had no time to waste on such self-indulgence. When she wanted something, she simply set it as a goal. And if she was to wed, this spring was undoubtedly the last chance.

A jangle of harness bells intruded upon her thoughts and she glanced up to see Old Jezzi, a milk-white dray, pulling the familiar bright yellow wagon up the dusty, tree-lined street. The sign on the side was painted in brilliant blue. At the top it read: T.P. MUDD MANUFACTURED, and then, in two-foot-high letters trimmed with artistic frosty snowcaps, ICE. Beneath that: FROM PURE DISTILLED WATER.

The driver stopped the wagon directly in front of Gussie's house. He jumped to the ground next to her gate and tipped his hat to her.

"I saved a block for you, Miss Gussie, if you are in need of it," he called out.

Gussie nodded. "Yes, please, Mr. Akers," she replied. "Twenty-five will do me."

He stepped to the back of the wagon and opened the rear door. Using the hook side of his chisel, he wrestled a fifty-pound block of clear, cold ice into position and scored it in half. Placing the flat side of the bar against his mark and pounding it with a mallet, he deftly cut the block in two, sending shards of frozen crystal flying all around him. One-handed, with sturdy metal tongs, he toted the gleaming block. Carrying the entire weight on his right side gave him a slope-shouldered appearance as he came through the gate.

Gussie's thoughts were elsewhere while she watched him walk around the side of the house toward the kitchen door at the back. The icemen in her employ tried to be efficient and unintrusive. Mr. Akers was the perfect example. She didn't even notice.

He came back around the corner of the house very shortly, but did not return to the wagon. He hung his tongs on the rail and rolled down his shirtsleeves, buttoning the cuffs as he climbed the steps to the porch. Politely removing his cap, he stood before her expectantly.

"Did you drip water on my clean floor?" she asked him.

"No, ma'am," he answered, pulling out the damp towel that dangled from his back pocket. "And if I had, I would have mopped it up."

He sounded unoffended, though she spoke to him as if he were a rowdy youth. In fact, Mr. Akers was a few years older than she. He was a burly man, thickly muscled from hard work. His chestnut hair was baby-fine and had a wild, rather unkept look about it. And although his jaw was clean-shaven, he sported a long handlebar mustache that dipped low on either side of

his mouth and then curled upward elegantly as if in parody of a smile.

Gussie indicated the other chair. He seated himself and withdrew a small pressboard memorandum tablet from inside his jacket. With the aid of his notes, he began a recitation of the day's business.

"Manufacturing was thirty-two hundred pounds since yesterday," he said. "We had four hundred fifty remained from the previous day undelivered. That makes three thousand six hundred fifty. We delivered only two commercial accounts at a thousand each and one commercial at four hundred pounds. There were three residential deliveries of seventy-five pounds each, two at fifty pounds and eleven, including yours, at twenty-five weight."

Gussie listened to the report and poured lemonade. The ice plant had been her father's business. It had made her family secure and comfortable in Cottonwood. Now it was hers. Many young women would have sat back and allowed a competent employee to manage its operation. But Gussie felt it behooved her to take an active part. More than that, she was genuinely interested. She found that she had a head for business. It intrigued her. It gave her a sense of order and control in the world. Though she was not now, nor would ever be, some mannish bluestocking going down to an office and directing men to do this or do that. Or smoking cigars with the banker and engaging in the wiles of commerce. But she couldn't leave it alone either. So she and Mr. Akers had begun these daily business briefings.

It was no secret that Rome Akers wanted desperately to be a partner in T.P. Mudd Manufactured Ice. When the time came that he could afford to buy into the business, he wanted Gussie to be keen on welcoming him

in. In truth, she was quite interested. And the opportunity to stand with her on an equal footing might well be coming sooner than he'd ever anticipated.

His glass of lemonade remained untouched as Mr. Akers went through the accounts receivable. The same people who had trouble paying on time still did. And those who were always up-to-date retained that status.

The plant was the larger of the two ice manufacturers in town. For years now, the people of Cottonwood had become accustomed, even in the driest, hottest part of the long Texas summer, to iced tea, iced lemonade and the convenience and practicality of ice-cooled food storage. Now, with the increasing popularity of soda fountains, demand increased steadily. Enough so that Gussie had little cause for concern about her financial security. She was, by small-town standards, a well-to-do woman. But what mattered most at present was she was unmarried.

A cool breeze fanned across the yard, bringing the delightful scent of the lilacs in the flower garden to the chairs upon the porch. Gussie listened to Mr. Akers with polite attention. He was an exemplary employee. He could also be kind and decent, as well as occasionally annoying and opinionated. But he did run the business well and he was ambitious . . . She was counting on that.

When he finished his report, she nodded appreciatively. It was meticulously thorough and complete. Mr. Akers, it seemed, knew no other way to do things than with painstaking accuracy.

"Is that it, then?" she asked him.

"Yes, ma'am," he said, nodding, and reached at last for the glass of lemonade on the table. Every day when he finished his report, he hastily downed the refresh-

ment and took his leave. Today would be no different, unless . . .

"I have a business proposition for you, Mr. Akers," she said.

The glass of lemonade stopped still, the rim near his mouth, and he gazed at her over it.

"A business proposition, ma'am?"

Gussie's courage almost failed her. Just because a woman was forthright and plainspoken didn't mean she couldn't be crushed by a man's rejection. In her memory she saw the horrified expression on Amos Dewey's face.

She stared now into the clear blue eyes of Rome Akers, a fine employee in his mid-thirties and an ambitious man. Would those attributes be enough to conscript him into her plot?

Deliberately she sat very straight, her back and shoulders two inches removed from any chance of contact with the chair. Her hands were still in her lap; her tone was superior and businesslike.

"Mr. Akers," she began, a little tremor of nervousness barely distinguishable in her voice. "With what I am about to say to you, I expect complete and absolute discretion."

Rome took a big gulp of his lemonade and nodded assuringly.

"Of course, ma'am," he said. "You surely know you can trust me on that. All of our discussions and dealings are within the strictest confidence."

"Yes, very well, then," she replied. "I am prepared to make you a partner in the company."

The silence on the porch was almost total. Only the chirp of birds in the trees and the creak of leather harness as Old Jezzi grew impatient in the street intruded upon the quiet.

"Ma'am, I . . . I don't yet have enough money saved to buy in as a partner," Rome admitted.

"Keep your money, Mr. Akers," Gussie said. "This partnership will not cost you anything. I simply require that you perform a small service for me."

"A service, ma'am?"

"Yes, Mr. Akers. I need you to pretend to be in love with me."

The glass of lemonade slipped through his fingers and broke into a million pieces on the plank-floor porch.

Breaking a piece of fine crystal and splashing lemonade upon your employer was not necessarily the best way to start a discussion on business partnerships. Rome Akers had been taken completely off guard by Miss Gussie's suggestion.

He was down on his knees between their chairs, carefully picking up the pieces of broken glass. "I . . . I'm sure I don't know what you mean, Miss Gussie," he stuttered.

"I have decided to get married," she announced with great confidence. "It's time and I'm ready and I've decided that Amos Dewey is the husband of my choice."

Rome nodded wordlessly from his kneeling position. Uncomfortable, he hurried to finish his task as quickly as possible.

"Amos and I have been seeing each other for some time," she went on. "We are well suited to each other by temperament. And he is a very appropriate companion for me."

It all sounded pretty cold to Rome. He rose to his feet and carefully set the broken pieces in a napkin

upon the table. To his mind, getting married involved things like love and passion rather than temperament and appropriateness. But then, he'd never been in love, which was undoubtedly why he'd never married. That and the fact that the one woman he had asked had turned him down.

He decided to stand rather than seat himself once more and leaned somewhat uncomfortably upon a porch pillar, as distant as he could get from Miss Gussie and still be able to converse with her.

She had said she wanted him to pretend to be in love with her. He was not certain about why she needed that, but he felt sure that he wasn't really going to like the idea.

"I hope you and Dewey are . . . very happy," he said formally.

"Well, we certainly will be," Miss Gussie assured him. "I have every confidence of that or I wouldn't bother to pursue it. But in order to be happily married we have to actually *get* married. That's proving to be a bit of a stumbling block."

"A stumbling block?"

"Mr. Dewey isn't . . . well, I mean he hasn't truly thought it through."

Her statement was obtuse. Rome was a straightforward fellow; he liked the facts set out before him.

"Has he thought of it at all, Miss Gussie?" he asked her.

His question seemed to annoy her. She obviously hoped to enlist him in her plan without humiliating herself.

"Perhaps he hadn't given it a great deal of consideration," she conceded. "But after last night, he is bound to think more than once or twice about it."

"Last night? What happened last night?"

"Last night I confronted him directly."

"What?" Rome could hardly imagine such a moment.

"I asked him, 'Are you going to marry me or not?' "

"And he said?"

"Not."

"Oh."

A long, uncomfortable silence fell upon the porch.

Rome felt a wave of pity for the woman beside him. It was just like Miss Gussie to approach the world on a frank, open, businesslike basis. Unfortunately, there were some things that simply could not be dealt with in that manner.

"You disapprove, Mr. Akers," she said.

"It is not my place to approve or disapprove, Miss Gussie," he told her respectfully.

"That is exactly right," she said. "I'm sure you are looking at this in a very traditional fashion. The delicate, pale young lady must pine away at home while she waits and hopes for the man of her dreams to come to his senses."

Rome made no comment, but he did think that basically, that was the way things were.

"I am not delicate or pale, I'm not even all that young and I have no intention of allowing my life, my fate, to rest upon the whim of a man who clearly does not know what is good for him."

Rome had to admit that waiting for others to take action didn't sound at all like something Miss Gussie would be good at.

"I'm so sorry, ma'am," he told her sincerely. "Surely in time Mr. Dewey will recognize his foolish mistake."

She gave a little puff of irritable impatience.

"I will not sit pitifully praying for a change of heart,



Mr. Akers. I will take steps to make him change his mind."

"A man cannot be forced into wedlock, Miss Gussie," he pointed out. "I mean . . . unless . . . well, of course I . . . you would never . . ."

"Spit it out, Mr. Akers. What are you trying to say?"

Rome felt his face burning with embarrassment.

"Has Mr. Dewey . . . ah . . . taken advantage?"

At first she didn't seem to get his meaning; then, when she did, her obvious mortification was surmounted only by her incredulity.

"Good heavens! Of course not. How could you even think—"

Rome wished he hadn't. He had a strong urge to kick himself.

"I didn't think . . . I assure you, Miss Gussie, I didn't think anything. It's just that you spoke of *making* him marry you, and you . . . well, you two have been keeping company for a long time and . . ."

She gave a startled gasp at that statement. He was digging himself in deeper and deeper.

"Mr. Dewey and I are not starry-eyed youths," Miss Gussie stated flatly. "We would never allow passion to exceed the bounds of discretion."

Rome chose not to comment upon that. He was inexperienced with the contemplation of, and motivations for, holy wedlock. He was significantly more familiar with the pleasures of the flesh. And though it was true that many husbands appeared less than lusty where their wives were concerned, most seemed to marry those women in a high fever of desire.

"I am sorry, Miss Gussie," he said sincerely. "I am afraid I am putting everything badly. Frankly, I'm at a loss as to what you plan to do and what my part in it might be."