Masterpiece Marriage
by Gina Welborn

Heaven and earth seemed never to have agreed better
to have framed a place for man's commodious and delightful habitation.
Captain John Smith
HISTORY OF VIRGINIA
on describing *Ye Antient Kingdome of Accawmacke*
(the Eastern Shore of Virginia)

The LORD will perfect that which concerneth me: thy mercy, O LORD,
endureth for ever: forsake not the works of thine own hands.
PSALMS 138:8 KJV

1

May 9, 1891

In all his thirty-one years, Zenus Dane had never expected to see seven inches of rainfall during a six-hour period.

He trudged through the flooded floor of the textile mill he was able to inspect since the fire marshal had declared it safe. Still, the water reached the third metal clasp of his vulcanized rubber boots, a product he wished he had invented, but was thankful Charles Goodyear did. Although, at the moment, he felt more nauseated than thankful. Through the hole in the roof, the morning sun revealed the full extent of the destruction caused by Friday afternoon's deluge setting a record for one-day rainfall in Philadelphia.

April was the month for deluges. Not May.

His mouth sour over the damage, Zenus looked to his foreman on the other end of the mill. The man didn't have to speak for Zenus to know he shared his grim thoughts.

Zenus stopped at the loom furthest from the collapsed roof. A floral cotton print lay half-woven in the machine. Unlike the bolts of textiles in the storage room, the print was as dry as his gabardine suit. It was also water-stained on the bottom portion of the roll. As he had with the other machines, he examined the loom's frame, the crankshaft, tight-and-loose pulleys, picker stick, shuttle, and race plate. All damp. He knelt. Oxidation here, too, on the bolts where the floodwater reached its highest level. The looms hadn't even had a month of usage, and now rust?

As if his flooded warehouse of raw cotton bales wasn't a torturous enough loss.

A fitting *why God?* moment if there ever was one.

Zenus whipped his newsboy's cap off his head, ran his hands through his hair, then put the cap back on. Living by faith could be hazardous.

With a shake of his head, he released a breath.

No sense bemoaning fate. Count it all joy—it was the only contingency he had. And he *would* count it all joy he'd fallen into this trial, because the testing of his faith was producing patience in him. He didn't consider himself an impatient man. His well-planned schedules allotted time for the unexpected and diversions; they resulted in maximum efficiency. Everything would work out, in time. Optimism: the first necessary ingredient for success. Don't lament the obstacles was the second. A few days were all he needed to solve this setback.

He could—no, he would—do it.

After a slap to the loom beam, Zenus stood.

"Cousin Zenus!"

He looked across the mill's vast floor to the entrance. His ten-year-old goddaughter Aimee stood with her father, waving frantically, while wearing her perpetual smile. The parts of her blue dress not stuck in her rubber boots grazed the surface of the floodwater.

He waved back with a silly expression, knowing it'd make her giggle.

And she did.

"Morning," his cousin Sean Gallagher called out, his voice echoing in the practically empty mill.

Sean said something to the fire marshal then touched Aimee's head. The fire marshal, nodding, motioned Sean to enter. As they did, he resumed pointing to the second-story rafters and speaking to three other firemen, likely, about the hole in the flat roof.

Sean gripped Aimee's hand. He slogged forward with the pants of his gray suit tucked inside his own pair of shin-high galoshes, his arm and Aimee's a pendulum between them, their

legs creating ripples in the water.

"I should've insisted you buy flood insurance," Sean said.

Zenus's lips twitched with amusement. Typical of Sean to cut to the *should've*. "Buying flood insurance wasn't logical. When was the last time this part of Philly flooded?"

Sean gave a yeah-you're-right shrug as he waded through the water.

"I'm sorry about your mill," Aimee said in almost a whisper.

"It'll be all right, sweetheart." He gave her a gentle smile. "Did Noah have flood insurance?"

She shook her head, her dark corkscrew curls swaying.

"Did he survive?"

She nodded.

"Then things will work out for me as well."

"Sometimes your optimism annoys me." Sean stopped with Aimee one loom from where Zenus was. He rubbed the back of his neck as he glanced about the mill, his blue eyes even lighter in the morning sun. "You'll need a new roof before production can resume. Insurance will cover it. Unfortunately, it won't cover damage caused by rising water."

Zenus motioned to the looms around the mill floor. "Is any of this fabric covered by insurance because the damage was caused by the collapsed roof brought on by an act of God, not by flooding?"

"Yes, but" —Sean removed folded papers from his suit coat's inner pocket—"let me see what your policy says."

Zenus blinked, stunned his cousin actually remembered to bring the policy. Details, Sean never forgot. Items—always. If the man ever married again, his wife would have to accept Sean would remember their anniversary, but wouldn't remember to get a gift. Or if he did remember to buy a gift, he would leave it at his law office or in the cab or at the café where he always had a coffee after leaving work.

Good man. Honorable. Just forgetful.

"What isn't excluded," Sean said, "is included, so it's covered. But from what I can tell, none of the fabric on the looms looks damaged."

Aimee ran her hands across the orange-and-brown plaid, one of his new textile designs. "It's not wet."

"Because it dried overnight." Zenus trudged to the loom where Sean and Aimee were. He looked to his cousin. "Even if the textiles don't have stains, I have to declare they were exposed to water and sell them at a drastic discount, which means no profit. I lost all the raw cotton bales in the warehouse, too."

Sean repocketed the policy. "You'll get insurance money to help you equal out. Why are you shaking your head?"

Zenus leaned back against the loom. "I have forty-seven bolts in the storage room''—Aimee touched his hand, and his fingers immediately curled around hers—"all damaged or partially damaged by the flooding."

"How much fabric is it?"

"A hundred yards per bolt. Each bolt, fifty-four inches wide."

Sean opened his mouth then paused, clearly thinking, running numbers through his head. "Were those bolts already paid for?"

"Almost all. They were scheduled for cutting and delivery this Monday. Forty-five days of weaving will go to fulfilling those orders." Zenus loosened his tie. "Insurance money will go

to repairing the roof and making my loan payment. I have enough left in savings to make payroll for a month."

"Maybe this is God's way of telling you to sell the business and do something different."

Zenus nodded thoughtfully. Maybe this was God at work. He'd go to his grave believing God worked in mysterious ways. He also knew God generally did not cause a field of wheat to grow unless a farmer sowed said grain. Made no sense for God to tell him to expand his business, if God wanted him to sell the business. The loan he took out to buy the looms—to "grow his flock"—could now cause him to lose everything.

He needed guidance. Heavenly guidance. Jesus-inspired guidance.

"Maybe." he answered.

Sean stared at him in shock. "Maybe?"

"I should consider all my options."

"How adventurous of you, Queen Victoria."

Sean's face shared how much he believed Zenus was capable of doing something different. It pricked. Court a mail-order bride. Take out a loan. What else did he need to do to prove to Sean he was open to change? And he *had* changed.

Zenus withdrew his pocket watch, holding it in his palm. "The problem is the MacKenzie brothers' offer was made before rain created a hole in my roof," he said calmly, restraining the twinges of irritation from growing into a roar. "Would be foolish to presume their offer stands as-is."

"Then take a lesser offer and be done with—"

"Boss," his foreman called from the exit doors, "I'll get some mill hands to start clean-up here and at the warehouse."

Zenus nodded and hollered back, "I'll lock up." He looked to Sean.

"No. I can't risk my employees losing their jobs. A quarter are unmarried women—" His gaze shifted to Aimee long enough for Sean to understand his silent *with children.*

Sean leaned against the loom, his shoulder slightly touching Zenus's. "All right, Coz, selling isn't an option then. Insurance will help you through a month, maybe two. Then what?"

"You could ask Great-Aunt Priscilla," Aimee cheerfully offered. "She likes helping people."

If his eyes rolled, Zenus would not admit to it. His aunt was the last person he'd go to for aid.

"Thank you for the suggestion, sweetheart." Zenus gave her hand a little squeeze. "But I can't ask her."

"Why not?" she asked.

"I'm not allowed back into her home."

"Until he apologizes," Sean tacked on.

Aimee's confused gaze shifted between them. "For?"

"Being me," Zenus answered.

Sean, to his credit, did not snicker.

Aimee looked at Zenus with some surprise. "I don't understand. What's wrong with you?"

Sean chuckled. "His sentiments exactly."

Zenus quirked a brow. "Flaws, I have, as everyone does, and I can admit—"

"Confession is good for the soul." An unusual edge tinged Sean's words. His gaze never wavered from Zenus, never flickered, never stopped hammering nails right there in the center of

Zenus's chest. He couldn't know. Couldn't.

Zenus looked away. Not everything needed to be confessed.

"The problem is," he said to Aimee, "Aunt Priscilla sees flaws which do not exist. She is quite secure in her opinions, thus she and I are at an impasse."

"Impasse?"

"It means when neither person can win," Sean answered. "What about the girl from Boston you've proposed to? Maybe her family could loan—"

"No." Zenus's response sounded a little tight, which betrayed a lot of emotion to anyone who knew him well, and Sean did. Fact was being emotional about another failed courtship would not do, considering Zenus had not yet formed an attachment to the lady in question. "No," he repeated this time in a lackadaisical tone. "My courtship of Miss Boesch has reached a mutual conclusion."

"You proposed in your last letter." While Sean didn't add a *didn't you*? the implication was clear.

Zenus checked his pocket watch. He needed to get to the next item on today's agenda. "Yes," he answered, pocketing his watch again. He began the slow walk back through the mid-calf-deep flood water to the mill's entrance, Aimee clinging to his hand.

Aimee looked over her shoulder. "Papa, can we have ice cream for lunch?"

"Certainly. Your mother would have insisted," Sean said, the water sloshing against his boots as he caught up to them. "I'm confused. The time line doesn't make sense. You mailed the letter on Wednesday, three days ago. Mail doesn't travel overnight even to Boston."

Moments like this were when Zenus wished his cousin was less tenacious. He gave Sean a bored look. "She mailed her proposal acceptance before I mailed my proposal offer."

Sean's frown deepened with his continued confusion. He grabbed Zenus's arm, halting him. "Explain."

"The proposal she accepted was from a Wyoming rancher to be *his* mail-order bride."

"Ouch."

Ouch, indeed.

"Do you mean you aren't getting married?" Aimee asked, brow furrowing.

Zenus shook his head.

"Are you sad?"

He ignored the interest on Sean's face from Aimee's innocent question. Irritation, not sadness, was his more prevailing emotion.

"Things always work for our good." Believing that didn't ease his sour mood. He resumed their trek, the water splashing and rippling, Aimee singing "Row, row, row your boat."

Five months of courting Miss Boesch through letters. Five months of weekly correspondence. Five months of examining his schedule for the next year and finding the best date for a wedding and honeymoon to Niagara Falls so he wouldn't miss . . .

(1) a Thursday Canoe Club meeting, or
(2) a Friday symphony attendance (both had free nights on the fifth Thursday and Friday of a month), or
(3) a Saturday hunting trip (off-season), and
(4) he would have been home in time for Sunday morning worship.

Five months wasted. Why? Because even when he'd had hours—days even—to plan what to say in his letters, she chose another man over him. He was cursed to remain a bachelor.

And someone with his qualities and assets shouldn't remain a bachelor. Women should be fighting with each other to marry him. It was a logical and self-possessed—not vain—assessment.

His current financial quandary aside, he was well-to-do; owned his own business, house, two canoes, and a box at the opera house; faithfully attended church, where he taught a Sunday school class for boys; and dutifully gave to charities. Yet, upon at least two occasions, he'd overheard women describe him as "a Gothic rogue, so aloof and cold." Even though he and Sean had the same dark-hair-with-blue-eyes coloring—not surprising considering their mothers had been identical twins—Sean always earned a sigh and a "he's *so* charming."

A man's appearance should not define him as a rogue.

Nor should his past forever delineate him as one.

He should count it joy God spared him from the wrong match with Miss Boesch because there was a better-suited woman for him. If only he could find a way to convince the lovely and vivacious Arel Dewey to see him for the charming, devoted man he truly was.

"Too bad you couldn't figure out a way to repurpose the damaged fabric," Sean said, breaking into Zenus's thoughts.

"What?"

His voice raised an octave. "I said it's too bad—"

"No, I heard you." Zenus stopped at the opened double-door entrance and met his cousin's gaze. Repurposing the fabric? He should have thought of it on his own. "I could cut up the fabric to sell as packaged scraps and then I could charge at least the minimum market price. Or . . ." Think. He closed his eyes and pinched the skin between his brows.

Aimee kissed the back of his other hand, then let go. Sloshing. Humming.

There had to be some way he could repurpose the fabric and get a better return.

"I should introduce you to Miss Corcoran," said Sean.

"Uh-huh," Zenus muttered.

What if he added something to the fabric? Like a bonus. The prime buyers of his textiles were women who purchased them at the mercantile who bought them from the distributor. He needed to become the distributor himself to increase his profits. He needed something to entice his prime buyers to buy small pieces of fabric instead of yard sections.

"You aren't such a bad catch," Sean continued.

"Uh-huh."

With his eyes closed, Zenus could hear the fire marshal yelling to his men to leave. Could smell the dirt in the floodwater. Both distracted him from focusing. Think. Ignore Aimee's humming too. Find something to lure buyers. Who wants fabric even if it's water-stained? With a little washing, the fabric would look like new anyway. He needed a woman who would settle—no, who actually desired something less than perfect. A cast-off. Leftover.

" . . . my new transcriptionist."

Zenus opened his eyes, absently noted the pirouette Aimee performed with all the grace her mother used to have. "What?"

Sean was grinning. "I said I am going to introduce you to my new transcriptionist."

Aimee didn't stop pirouetting to say, "She's nice."

Zenus kept his grimace internal. The dozen of secretaries and transcriptionists Sean had hired in the five years since his wife's death all looked the same: lackluster black hair with unmemorable faces that had forgotten how to smile. "Does she look like your last one?"

"She's not married, knows how to read and write, and is still within childbearing age,"

Sean said in a most pitying tone, “and it makes her the prime matrimonial catch for you.”

Aimee nodded. “And she’s nice.”

Zenus let out a low growl. “Having Aunt Priscilla fail to match-make me last Christmas with the niece of her quilting friend was humiliating enough. You were there. You saw how—Whoa! That’s it.” He held his hand up, stilling his cousin from speaking. “Wait. Quilters use every textile known to man. They love scraps.” He snapped his fingers and pointed at Sean. “They’re what I need.”

Sean’s brow furrowed. “A quilter?”

“Quilters. Plural.”

“Trust me, you don’t want more than one wife.”

“I’m not talking for marriage, Sean. I’m talking about buying my textiles.”

“Miss Corcoran doesn’t look like the sewing type.”

Aimee stopped pirouetting. “What’s a sewing type?”

Sean scratched his dark bristled jaw line, having clearly not taken time to shave this morning like Zenus did. He didn’t appear to have any more of an idea of what the sewing type looked like any more than Zenus did, beyond being the female sort and domesticated.

Zenus stepped to the threshold. He patted the top of Aimee’s head, murmured “Keep dancing, sweetheart,” and then reached in his suit pocket for his set of keys. “Sean, I need you to hire a couple of guards today to watch over the mill during the night, while I go arrange for the roof repair.” He withdrew the keys, finding the one for the lock. “Offer a week’s pay, although I doubt I’ll need them so long. Hopefully when I return, the mill can resume operations.”

“Return from where?”

“Belle Haven. I’m leaving early Monday morning. Return Wednesday.”

“Why not leave today?” True to lawyer form, Sean focused on the least significant detail in what Zenus had said.

“Why doesn’t matter,” Zenus bit off.

“I think it does.” A knowing smirk on his face—

With a growl under his breath, Zenus grabbed the left door’s iron handle and drew it closed.

Sean let out a bark of laughter. “Church is tomorrow, and you don’t want to lose out on another perfect attendance pin. Aren’t eight enough?”

Zenus grit his teeth. “It’s not about the pin.” He drew the right door closed then threaded the chain through the handles. “As a Sunday School teacher, my responsibility is to model faithfulness to those boys.”

“You have a point there.”

For as many years as they’d known each other, Zenus couldn’t consistently tell when his cousin was being sarcastic. It was disturbing.

Zenus knelt down and kissed Aimee’s cheek. “See you tomorrow, sunshine.”

Her curly hair and bubbly effervescence were all her mother’s. Aimee should have been his daughter, not Sean’s. Clara Reade should have been his wife, not Sean’s.

She kissed him back. “I love you, Cousin Zenus.”

“I love you too.”

Sean held out his hand and Aimee took it. “So you are actually going to your Aunt Priscilla for help?” was what he asked. Unstated was *Have you forgotten what she said to you last Christmas?* and *I’m glad I have no blood relation to her.*

Zenus stood and gripped the iron lock, cold against his palm. He hadn’t forgotten. In fact,

what Aunt Priscilla had said spurred him into deciding to stop playing life safe. The next day he'd filled out a loan application and begun the courtship of Miss Boesch, the niece of a deacon in his church. He'd been determined to disprove Aunt Priscilla's assessment of him and his apathetic (pathetic, according to her) approach to finding a wife. His first two risk-taking attempts both ended in setbacks, which he wouldn't bemoan. Every failure brought him one attempt closer to success.

Despite his optimism, Zenus did nothing more than nod his response to Sean. The thought of having to grovel before his aunt soured his mouth, churned his stomach, and warmed his cheeks with embarrassment. Her last lecture included "mule," "pig-headed," and "scaredy-cat." Nothing like being viewed by a woman as a barnyard animal.

But she was his best hope. No one knew quilts like Priscilla Dane Osbourne.

No quilter had national name recognition like her either.

To save his business, home, livelihood, and future, all he had to do was the impossible: Convince a fiercely protective quilter to give him one of her precious patterns. This was one wooing at which he could not—would not—fail.