

Rules of Being a Lady
by Marian H. Griffin

Buxton James Worth, IV appeared out of his depth. He had looked forward to testing himself in Texas but why couldn't it start with something easier? Maybe a runaway team with a beautiful woman clinging precariously to the seat of the wagon? But, no. He had to face stagecoach robbers.

Buxton held his hands in the air. The robbers had insisted upon it and aimed shotguns at the passengers to prove they were serious. There was no woman to rescue—especially not the New York beauty his father had hoped to betroth him to—and the other passengers looked far more capable of rescuing Buxton than he did of rescuing them. But looks were deceiving.

Stagecoach robbers!

“Shut up over there!” a voice barked.

Had he spoken out loud? A glance at his fellow passengers' faces confirmed it. He bit his lip and tucked in his chin. The sun, setting in a flood of red and gold, cast deep shadows at his feet. His gaze lingered on the shadows as they blended and separated, creating fanciful shapes. Deciphering arms from legs kept his mind busy and his mouth shut until one long, thin shadow stealthily pulled out the shadow of a handgun.

Hmm. Buxton took a quick peek to make sure he hadn't *hmm*'ed out loud but no one spared him a look. The others had agreed no one would play hero—but not Buxton. His clothes—cutaway coat and tailored pants—shouted 'citified' and there wasn't a single man in this desolate patch of desert that considered him a threat.

The shadow took aim at the big, silver-haired man to Buxton's left.

I refuse to stand and watch an unarmed man die.

Buxton shifted his weight onto his right leg and, in a sudden move, whipped his left leg up, knocking the silver-haired man down. A bullet tore through the pocket of empty air. In another lightning fast move, Buxton kicked the hand with the handgun. The commotion caught the attention of the other two mounted robbers but before they could take aim he threw himself to the ground, rolled twice, leaped to his feet between their horses and jerked them out of their saddles. They hadn't hit the ground before he turned to deal with the handgun sneak. Buxton relieved him of the shotgun before it cleared the leather. Glancing behind him, Buxton saw that the passengers had taken care of the other two while he'd been occupied. Everyone stared at him.

“Well,” Buxton said companionably to his fellow passengers. “Sorry about that but I just couldn't risk losing my daddy's watch.”

Regina Argeau stared at the clothing draped over every piece of furniture in the bedroom. A traveling trunk, its lid propped open, stood in the middle of the room. Corsets, stockings, pantalets, petticoats, and gloves were carefully packed. Several hats in hatboxes sat on the bed because they wouldn't fit in the trunk. She couldn't bear to leave any behind and no proper lady appeared in public without a hat.

She eyed the gowns covering two chairs. The trunk was the only piece of luggage she was allowed and, no matter what she did, it only held eleven gowns.

“Miss Regina?” Bitsy swept into the room without knocking.

Regina's personal maid had quit when Regina decided to go to Texas. The fifteen-year-old had become hysterical at the thought of living among savages, risking her life, her scalp and—horrors!—her honor. Not that the girl thought she'd live very long. Regina's move was a

once-in-a-lifetime adventure and dragging a hysterical maid along would dampen the excitement a bit. So for now, she had to suffer Bitsy's ministrations.

But this afternoon, for the first time in her life, Regina would be on her own. She could hear her mother's voice repeating one of her Rules of Being a Lady. 'No lady appears in public without an escort, preferably a maid but a footman or valet will do in a pinch.' A lance of pain shot through Regina at the memory. Her mother had been her best friend even before her father had passed away. Losing her had knocked the starch out of Regina and the year of mourning had taken its toll. Jeremy Johnson's attention and comfort had helped end her grief at her mother's death. He had also ended her hopes, dreams, virginity, and honor, when he claimed *she* had seduced *him* and then refused to marry her.

The fact that they had been mostly naked—with Regina on top—leant credence to the lie and society accepted his refusal.

Aunt Marla bemoaned Jeremy Johnson had destroyed any chance of Regina marrying at all, never mind well. Regina inferred she was no longer welcome in her aunt's home. She didn't care. Besides, it wasn't just her aunt. Manhattan was as conventional a city as Boston when it came to disgraced, unmarried orphans. After a life marred only by the loss of her parents, she might be disgraced but remained unbowed. She was taking control of her life. Shaking off her attack of melancholy, Regina turned to face Bitsy.

"What is it, Bitsy?"

"Your train leaves in four hours, miss."

Bitsy looked her up and down. She looked at the piles of clothing. "You're not dressed yet, miss."

Regina forced herself to not react to the condescending tone. "I've been waiting for you to lace my corset." She turned her back on the snooty maid. Bitsy retaliated with a sharp tug that effectively cut off Regina's breath.

"Hell and damn," Regina muttered as the door shut behind Bitsy. She felt a small satisfaction at her unacceptable language.

The rest of the packing, dressing, getting to the station and boarding, went as planned. Most of her bonnets were safely loaded onto the train, along with her trunk, after Regina successfully argued that hatboxes were not luggage.

The train chugged west then south, spewing sparks and raising enough dust to change the color of everything to dull brown. Regina was dismayed that, the further she went, the more haggard the women looked. Dresses as plain as dust, with ragged bonnets and threadbare shawls predominating, Regina knew there would be no hope for her. Once again she would be accused of being an outspoken and adventurous peacock. She had heard that accusation long before she'd been caught in the arms of Jeremy Johnson and long after her mother said it would end up getting her in trouble.

Grinding her teeth in helpless frustration, Regina started when the conductor shouted from behind her, "Last stop!"

"Now the adventure begins," Regina breathed. She supervised the unloading of her trunk then followed the conductor's directions to the stagecoach office only to discover there was no one about. She finally tracked down two disreputable looking men to haul her trunk and hatboxes. By the time everything was transferred from one station to the other, Regina was hot, tired, her feet hurt, her corset was cutting her in half and the only relief she had was imagining inventive ways to make Jeremy sorry he'd ever unbuttoned her bodice. Ten months had passed since that fateful night. She would never marry because of him. But she had to thank him for at

least introducing her to the frustrating and magical sensation of sex. She closed her eyes and plopped onto the hard wooden bench outside the ticket booth and let her eyes close. A few minutes of quiet and rest and she'd...hear thunder? Opening her eyes she peered through half-closed lids at her trunk and down the only street in the town.

Buxton Worth was having the time of his life. In the months since the holdup, he had bought a boarding house with the reward money and accepted a job with the coach line. Never one to forgo a grand entrance, he stood tall in the stage box, one foot braced on the footboard, and let the drama unfold. The team of horses was held to a trot for the journey but now, encouraged by Buxton, they picked up speed as they entered town until he brought them to a plunging, dust-raising stop at the station.

Merchants poked their heads out and cheered. Laughing, he waved and jumped to the ground.

Unfortunately, a woman sitting on the station's bench wore half of the dirt road as a consequence of his entrance. She looked like a little brown puppy, her eyes ringed with white. He choked back a laugh knowing it would be the worst thing he could do. Buxton shook out a handkerchief, wet it in the horse trough and handed it to her.

"Ma'am?" He offered her the handkerchief.

She glared at him with one eye. She patted her face with the cloth and managed to turn dust into mud.

Chuckling softly, he took the cloth and wiped her face. Closing her eyes, she held still while her scent washed over him. He held his breath against an unexpected physical reaction as he cupped her chin and removed as much dirt as he could. As the dirt gave way to porcelain skin, Bucks felt dizzy. The dusty lady was none other than Regina Argeau, the belle of New York society when he had left. At one time, she had been his father's choice as the perfect daughter-in-law for his only son. She had been delectable then and was more so now and he was almost sorry his father hadn't lived long enough to get them engaged.

Why was she traveling unchaperoned? He had a sudden memory of her floating across the dance floor with Jeremy Johnson at the White's Ball and clenched his fists. Had that womanizing bastard acted true to form? He knew Johnson's reputation and it turned his stomach. He wanted to ask but couldn't. Regina didn't recognize him and probably wouldn't; he had dropped out of society after his father's sudden death that had revealed the family had been living on the edge of bankruptcy.

He gazed at the dusty face between his hands. Bucks had to discover the lady's secrets before she left for Dallas. But first he had to finish wiping her face.

"Sorry about that, ma'am, but everyone knows to stay clear when the stage is due."

"Not everyone." Her voice was soft and full of venom.

"Yes, ma'am," he said grudgingly. "Excuse me." He admired her spunk as he climbed back on top.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm putting up the team. This is the end of the line."

"But the stage is supposed to go to Dallas."

Buxton propped an elbow on his knee. "Yes, ma'am. In two days." *By then I should know how you ended up in my town. Alone.*

"But I... need to go to Dallas."

"And you will," Buxton said. "Just not today." Without looking back, he drove the team

toward the livery.

Regina had never been so insulted in her life. Not even Jeremy had made her look so foolish. And he certainly hadn't laughed at her. And this annoying, frustrating—infuriating—man, didn't even recognize her. Finding out the stage to Dallas didn't leave for two days was annoying but it stuck in her craw that Buxton Worth did not know who she was. Fascinated by the man since her mother had told her of his father's request, Regina had been devastated when the family dropped out of society after the father's sudden death. Then there had been rumors of a financial scandal.

"Ma'am?"

Regina froze. He was back: Buxton James Worth, IV. Composing herself, she looked into the deep brown eyes of the man that had captivated her long before he'd appeared out of the cloud of dust. Jeremy had blonde good looks, pale blue eyes and a tailored wardrobe that was the height of fashion. Buxton—this Buxton—was dusty, disheveled, and dressed like a cowboy... and he set her heart pounding.

"Yes?"

"Since the stage won't leave for a couple of days," he said with a slow grin, "I assume you're in need of a place to stay."

Incensed at his presumptuousness—and the fact that he didn't recognize her—Regina prepared to flay him with words but didn't get the chance.

"There's a nice boarding house just outside of town."

Regina was slightly mollified. And greatly disappointed. She thought that he too had felt the jolt of desire when his hand cupped her chin. She glanced at her trunk and hatboxes.

"I'll bring your trunk, ma'am. I am rightly sorry about all the dust." He hefted the trunk onto his shoulder and, bent over, started down the street. Regina watched him march easily under the weight of her trunk and swallowed hard. If Jeremy picked up her trunk he'd have been flattened. Gathering her hatboxes she wondered if all adventures were so, well annoying.

With her skirts and her feet dragging, and the hatbox strings strangling her fingers, she trudged behind him until they approached a white clapboard house.

When it was in shouting distance, the driver shouted.

"Whitey! Get your bu—yourself out here!"

A burly man sauntered from the barn then hurried to help the driver with her trunk.

"You tryin' to kill yerself, Bucks?"

Bucks?

The driver, still bent at the waist and breathing hard, shook his head. "Just helping the lady."

Whitey looked at her as if he hadn't even noticed her. "Who's she and what she doin' here?"

Bucks slowly straightened his back. "Fraid you'll have to ask her, Whitey."

Whitey turned to her. Regina didn't give him a chance to ask anything. "Is there a room available?"

Whitey stared with his mouth open. Bucks nudged him with his elbow. "Yes'm."

"Would you be so kind as to bring my trunk to my room? I need to freshen up." She turned and headed for the house. There had to be a woman somewhere or else Regina couldn't stay.

The ridiculousness of her concern had her choke on a laugh.

Whitey, amazingly fast when he wanted, passed her in a blur and bounded inside yelling at the top of his lungs, "Ma! Ma! We got us a lady!"

"Don't get many of them around here."

Her heart fluttered when Bucks appeared suddenly at her side. He was big, dark, powerful, and silent as a cat. Regina could picture his hands undoing the buttons on her traveling jacket. His hands wouldn't be soft like Jeremy's, they'd be rough and calloused. She suppressed a delicious shiver.

"Howdy." A plump, gray-haired woman stood on the porch.

Thank Heavens. "Hello. My name is Regina Argeau. My stage doesn't leave until the day after tomorrow."

"Mrs. Henly, would you draw a bath for Miss Argeau? She's had a tiring journey and would like to freshen up."

"Of course."

Regina wondered why the woman would take orders from a stagecoach driver but wasn't about to jeopardize a hot bath. Whitey carried her trunk without obvious effort up the stairs while Mrs. Henly disappeared into the house. Bucks held out a tin cup full of water.

"Did it come from a horse trough?"

He grinned again, slyly this time, and she melted. The man was dangerous. She was starting a new life. A quick surge of desperation had her briefly consider claiming widowhood.

"No, ma'am." He pointed to a well she hadn't noticed. "Fresh from the well."

She gave him a tentative smile and took the cup. This time she thought she was prepared for his touch but her skin contracted and her breath caught in her throat. Bucks' gaze burned.

She slipped her hand from his grasp and broke the spell. Bucks took a step back.

"I'll be in the barn should Mrs. Henly come looking for me."

He walked away. Regina wanted to wipe her brow. She wanted to fan her face, loosen her corset and open a lot of buttons.

"Yer bath is ready," Mrs. Henly called from the back door.

Regina entered through the kitchen. The smell of beef cooking made her mouth water. Mrs. Henly chuckled.

"Dinner'll be ready soon's yer done with yer bath. Second room on the left, upstairs."

Regina thanked the woman and hurried toward the salvation of a wash. She entered the room and found a big copper tub full of water. She noted the dark, masculine furniture but steam curling into the air completely distracted her. The only thing missing was her lavender scent. Without hesitation, Regina stripped off her clothes, struggling with her corset laces. She'd need help putting it back on but she was sure the good Mrs. Henly wouldn't mind.

Sinking under the water, Regina reveled in the sensual comfort of the warm bath soothing the red marks pressed into her skin by the corset. But she couldn't think about corsets and clothes while ensconced in a tub of steamy luxury. Taking the bar of soap, she washed her hair and her body, rinsed and slid down until bubbles tickled her chin. She sighed and relaxed for the first time since she left New York.

Bucks had no idea how long it took a woman to bathe but hoped he'd given the delectable Miss Regina Argeau enough time. He heard Mrs. Henly yammering away in the kitchen and was glad he had figured correctly. He tiptoed through the front door and up the stairs. He didn't dare catch so much as a glimpse of Regina.

"Thirty years old and sneaking into my own house," he muttered. He headed straight for

his room where he knew a tub of steaming water waited.

“One look at the prim and proper Miss Argeau and I’m hard as a rutting bull.” Opening the door to his room, he swept inside. Savagely ripping open the top drawer of his dresser, he pulled out clean underclothes and tossed them on the bed. “Dusty, dirty and madder than a wet hen and she’s still the most beautiful—” *No*. “Alluring woman I’ve seen in a decade.” The buttons on his shirt annoyed him so much he pulled the shirt over his head. “Perfection in high society *and* on a dusty street in Texas.” He shook his head in admiration. “And breasts...and a waist I can put my hands around.” Shaking his head again, he toed off his boots. “Face like an angel and the temper of the devil.” He chuckled. “But the lady has marriage written all over her under those proper clothes and she’d have nothing to do with a hell-raising pauper like me. Too bad Daddy had to go and lose everything except his watch.”

He jammed his fists on his hips. “And why is she here alone?”

Bucks turned and saw his door was open. “Damn.” He strode across the room and peeked into the hall. It was clear. “Talk about distracted,” he groaned. He pushed it shut as he turned back to the bed. “But she is a treasure to be cherished.” He smiled. “And loved.” Stripping off his underclothes, he sauntered back to the alcove with his head down.

“How can I get her into my bed?” he asked rhetorically. He lifted his head and froze. The tub was ready and in a short moment, Bucks was too.

Miss Regina Argeau stared at him from his tub. Her eyes wide, her mouth frozen in an O of surprise, she sat perfectly still. Bucks, naked and aroused, stared as little bubbles burst, one after another, slowly revealing her breasts. He didn’t lift his gaze until she spoke.

“You could ask her.”

I must have counted the doors wrong. But how she ended up in the wrong room wasn’t as important as what she had heard. Buxton Worth knew who she was and he wanted her. He thought she was beautiful—no, alluring—and was afraid she wouldn’t want anything to do with him because his father lost the family fortune. Well, she’d lost the family honor.

And she wanted him as much as he wanted her. Later she would have to think about them recognizing each other but neither saying a word. It was curious.

“Ask her?” He sounded both shocked and hopeful.

Regina, dropping the surprised virgin pose, looked up and down his very impressive body. He rippled with muscles. His chest and legs were dusted with dark black hair and his arousal put to Jeremy to shame—several times over.

“Yes,” she replied. “Ask her.” He stood there with his blood beating visibly and his mouth closed. The swirling in her stomach inched up into her aching breasts. It didn’t appear that Buxton was going to make a move anytime soon, so she would. *Adventurous peacock indeed.* She placed her hands on the edge of the tub and pushed to her feet. Conscious of the water sluicing over her bare skin, she watched as he made his move. Problem was, it was away from her, not toward her. Buxton James Worth, IV grabbed the bed cover and pulled it in front of him. Regina wanted to laugh.

“It’s a little late for that, isn’t it?”

He stared. She stepped out of the tub and picked up a towel. Forcing herself to not hide behind it, she daintily dabbed at the moisture beaded on her shoulders and strolled toward him.

“I’ve never seen you speechless, Buxton.”

He jerked his head up to look at her face. “Huh?”

With a brazen smile and her heart in her mouth, she dropped the towel. “I knew who you

were the minute you jumped off that stagecoach.” She pushed her wet hair over her shoulder.

“When did you recognize me?” she asked and sidled a little closer. He didn’t retreat but lifted his chin defiantly. After all, she assumed, it wasn’t every day he stood naked in a room with a naked woman to have an ordinary conversation. At least she hoped it wasn’t.

“As soon as I wiped off enough dust to see your delicate skin.”

Even a naked woman could appreciate a compliment. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

My, my, she thought. *How polite we are.* But she wasn’t going to lose this opportunity.

“Ask me, Buxton,” she whispered.

He swallowed hard and hesitated but finally dropped the covers. “I want—would you…”

“Yes.”

He didn’t make a move so she held out a hand. He pulled her close enough that her nipples grazed his chest. Her stomach quivered.

“Are you a virgin?” he asked holding her hand and staring at her breasts.

Regina’s stomach quivered for altogether a different reason. “No,” she said bracing herself for rejection.

“Ahh. Good,” he mumbled.

Good? She had been so shocked by his arrival in the room that she hadn’t even considered her situation. She wondered if he knew about Jeremy but realized he didn’t, or he never would have asked the question. Knowing she had to tell him, she again braced herself.

“Do you want to know—”

“No.”

“But—”

He trailed a finger across her lips, then across her breast. The first touch of his tongue shocked her. No one’s mouth had touched her anywhere but her hand and occasionally her mouth, but it wasn’t long before she was holding his head to her breast and his rough hands blazed paths of fire over her body. His arms enclosed her and she caressed his back. He exhaled heavily and lifted his head to look at her. Holding her gaze, he pressed her down onto the mattress and slowly came down on top of her. The contrast of the thick, soft feather mattress and his hot, hard body sent streams of pleasure through her. His hands trailed down her sides, up her arms, and between her legs.

Bucks shifted over her. Regina sighed and opened her legs. It was going to be over soon. *Damn and blast! Why are men in such a hurry?*

But Bucks just murmured against her skin. He cupped a breast and teased the nipple with his thumb then exchanged the finger for his mouth. He sank down between her legs but didn’t jab at her.

He sucked a nipple deep into his mouth and practically pulled her off the bed. Her back arched and he whispered praise and encouragement. He played with her, teased her, and had her writhing in sensual agony. It took her a moment to realize Bucks had eased a finger inside her. It thrilled her and she lifted into his hand. He gave a moan. She wanted more. He gave.

She was slick with passion when he slid into her. Almost shrieking in frustration because she still wanted, she slowed her movements. The rest of it was for the man. She sighed heavily.

“What is it, sweetheart?” he murmured. He slid his hands behind her knees and lifted. Immediately, he thrust deeper and Regina gasped. “Come with me,” he pleaded softly.

She wanted to please him but didn’t know what to do.

“Wrap your legs around me, Regina,” he directed, still gently rocking against her. She did

as he asked and groaned at the warmth flooding through her.

“I want you to come with me.” He pulled her knees higher on his waist and Regina was stunned at the sharp stab of yearning it brought about.

He rocked and rocked until she splintered into fragments of color, light, and sound.

“Oh, that’s it, sweetheart,” Bucks moaned but he didn’t stop. Regina wallowed in sensations until her insides wound tight again. His tempo changed and she felt him swell inside her. His murmurings became jumbled until all she could hear was his ragged breathing and the pounding of her own heart.

“Come with me.”

Regina fell over the second cliff and took Bucks with her.

“I never knew,” she said. Completely satisfied, she stretched and held him to her. As her heart slowed, Bucks mumbled against her neck.

“What was that?” she mumbled back.

He lifted his head. “I said marry me, Regina. I’ve loved you for years.”

Not believing, she tried to freeze him out. “You don’t know me.”

“I’ve known and admired you for years. I’ve loved you since you tried to find me after my father died. My mother got your note. It meant a great deal to her. If you marry me, I promise you’ll never regret it. If you’re unhappy, I’ll let you go.”

Regina looked into his eyes and saw the truth. Her mother had promised her that she would never have to marry out of duty but would be free to choose her own husband even though it was against every Rule of Being a Lady.

Regina made her choice. “I’ve loved you for a long time too.”

He smiled and kissed her. She threw her arms around his neck and kissed him back.