

BARGAIN BRIDE

KATHARINE HAYLAND-TAYLOR

CHAPTER I

BARRETT COLVIN, bronzed by sun-baked miles of sand, sat forward so that he might see the windows of fifth Avenue. It was a bit earlier than mid-afternoon but many windows were warm with the yellow glow that is a rare by night. The skies were sullenly grey and there was a drizzle in the chilly air. The English, Barrett reflected, would call it "a dirty day." To the average New Yorker, it was rotten weather. Those folks upon whom he had recently turned his head back would call it "the will of Allah." Well, the folk of the East was the most comfortable but Barrett didn't share it.

He moved uneasily and lit a cigarette. It was always unsatisfactory to come back. Memories that seared his mind would leap from embers. A corner of an uptown street or an old building would brush away 10 years to make him see Marcia, his tempestuous little sister, the daughter of his father's second wife. Marcia, violent in her trap, Marcia crying, "Barry, you must help me; I've no one else!"

He had intended to help her, but with the passing of years he had been less and less certain about what he had done by putting himself between her and the storm. He had said it easy, without meaning to, for her to evade her responsibility and to live a lie.

And now Marcia was married. She had written Barrett, "Of course Dick doesn't know." And here, from her evasion, was another problem and one of the oldest ones—a problem discussed often in "Advice to the Lovelorn" columns in answers to letters usually beginning, "Shall I tell the man I am going to marry, etc." Almost always the description of the unfortunate affair ends with a wistful, "I was so young."

Barrett Colvin tossed his half-smoked cigarette from the lowered taxi window to lean back, already weary of civilization which is not always so ordered as it seems.

He hoped Dick Radnor deserved the devotion he had won from Marcia. The facts might so easily come out in time, Barrett reflected, and unless Dick were the man Marcia thought him to be there would be the devil to pay.

He must go up to see the boy, Marcia's boy, Barrett decided, as soon as he could manage to get away from town. Marcia did not care for him as she should and it wasn't fair to the youngster. He must have grown a good deal, Barrett reflected. It was four years—a broad four years—since he had seen the child whom Marcia and he had adopted.

Barrett Colvin felt a little tingling when the taxi turned into a sedate old street where brown-stone-fronted houses told of other times and other manners. This was getting home. No matter how far one wanders or how insistent the call of distant countries, for every man some one house or some one woman meant "home."

The door was opened as the taxi came to a sudden halt. Higgins, the butler, appeared, obviously excited to have "Mr. Barrett" home again. The chauffeur swung several scarred, bulging bags from the car to the walk. Higgins' eyes were fixed upon his master, his voice almost tremulous.

In a window across the street, Barrett saw the imperious head of Miss Ella Sexton, saw her nod stiffly and wave a handkerchief so black-bordered as to suggest a death of yesterday.

Barrett, after bowing deeply, went up the brown stone steps of his home. So little was changed. The glimpse of

Miss Ella, the characteristic tilt of her aristocratic nose, told him that she still ruled sternly and coldly over all those who waited her death.

At the door, which Higgins held open, Barrett turned again and as he did so saw a girl hurrying up the steps of Miss Ella's house. A pretty picture she made with her young grace and demerol.

"One of the Thorpes?" he asked Higgins.

"No, Mr. Barrett. That is Miss Elinor Stafford. She's grown a deal these four years, sir."

Barrett nodded. His smile widened. He remembered Elinor Stafford dimly as a gawky youngster with a brace on her teeth, a youngster with an especial talent for stumbling. He had met her at Miss Ella's house—the golden shirins for all those relatives who felt they should be remembered in the Sexton will.

The hall and Higgins shutting the world away with a closed door. How good it was to be home! The same dimed, lovely tapestry. The same ancient hat rack that Barrett kept because, looking at it, he could sometimes fancy he saw his father's hat on the black marble surface, his mother's small gloves and card case.

"It's good to be here again, Higgins."

"And it's good to have you, sir!" Barrett saw that Higgins' eyes held tears and he laid a strong hand on the old man's arm. With a gentleness, becomen to many weak mortals his way, Barrett asked, "I hope you've been well, Higgins?"

"Yes, Mr. Barrett. Now and again a bit lonely—not that I mean to complain, sir! I think you'll find everything as you want it, Mr. Barrett."

"I'm certain everything's in fine shape."

"The harbor was foggy, I presume, sir?" Higgins asked as he took Barrett's coat, weighted by the wet in the day's air.

"Pretty thick—"

"Quite four hours late, you are, sir! I've been watching by the window."

"Lucky to get in, at all."

"I presume so. You've lunched, sir?"

"Yes; thought I'd better. By the way, are there any letters?"

"A number, sir. On your desk—"

A few minutes later when Barrett was poking through his mail—frankly and naively surprised at its bulk—Marcia came hurrying in. "Darling!" she called from the doorway of the big, dark room. He turned, rose and she was in his arms, crying, laughing, clinging to him.

"The same huge thing," she exclaimed breathlessly, standing away, "and so famous, dear! You don't know what you're in for! I haven't been to a dinner this winter that someone hasn't said, 'So Barrett Colvin is your brother? How remarkable!'"

"I don't suppose I do look as though I could possibly be related to anyone so brainy. Oh, it is good to see you, dear!"

She pressed close again and for a moment hid her face against the top button of his waistcoat. Then she drew away and raised her face to let him see her smile and her mistle eyes.

"I'm so frightfully happy," she admitted. "Dick's such a perfect husband! And to think you haven't even met him! Darling—may I have a cocktail?"

Barrett rang for Higgins, at the same time studying Marcia. She had grown lean, hungry-looking, nervous. He hadn't remembered those sudden, angular mannerisms.

(To Be Continued)

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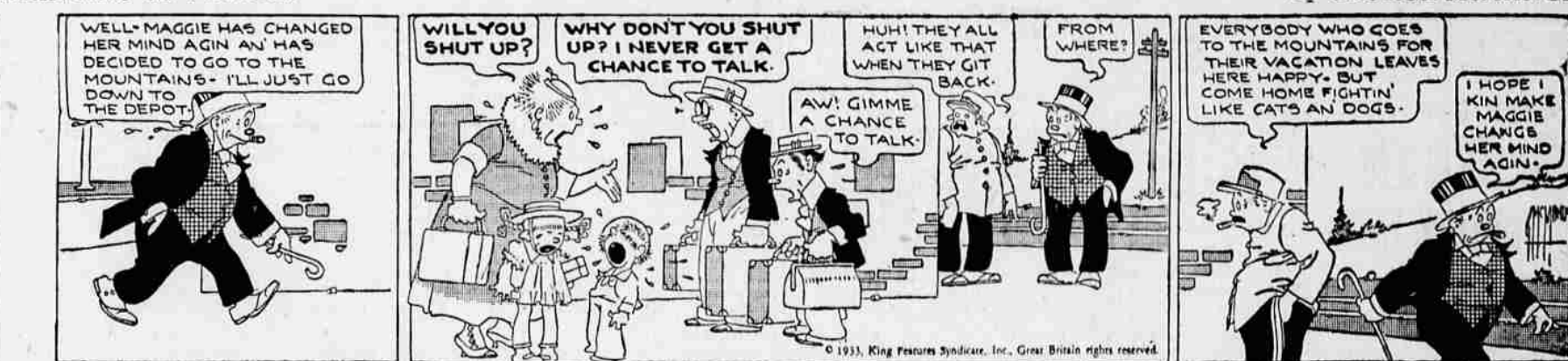
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