BARGAIN BRIDE

by KATHARINE HAVILAND-TAYLOR

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CHAPTER VIII

"Which do you think to be the most deserving of my trust, Barrett?" Miss Ella asked.

"I don't know any of your relatives at all, Miss Ella. They're only acquaintances."

"Ah! That is exactly the point, Barrett. I want you to know them and tell me all you know!"

He was outraged; he flushed darkly. For a moment he could not speak. Then remembering that she was old, he said carefully, "Miss Ella, I cannot spy on them. I wouldn't do that—why, I couldn't do that if I were uncertain where to leave my own money!"

"You misunderstand me!"

"Sorry," he murmured. "I thought—"

"I will explain. I merely want you to drop in; to meet them occasionally; to tell me how you like them—"

He laughed a little uneasily and leaned forward, arms on knees. He shook his head, smiling at her. "Too large a responsibility," he assured her.

Then he saw that she was angry. "I am not accustomed to having people refuse my orders, Barrett!"

"I know, dear," he admitted unhappily.

"The "dear" melted her. "Ah, Barrett," she quavered. "I'm old, so old I sometimes fear they come to see me only because of what I have. I do not want my money, which might do so much good, to be lost in idle pleasure. Lida with her frocks—Beside throwing away good food—Bentwell drinking! I am so distracted! I had thought of leaving Doctor Bold a tidy sum for his work among the poor, but not now. Not now! I have found him to be unworthy, Barrett. He is using candles on the altar!"

Barrett's lips were set. He wanted to laugh and yet it wasn't funny.

"Aunt Ella," said Barrett, "I'd like to help you but I really can't see how I can."

She was staring at her frail old hands which looked like parchment stretched on knobby ivory.

"Will you come when I ask you to see?" she questioned. She would assemble them and Barrett's face would tell the truth for him. Had she not known from it long ago about Marcia's affair with the riding master? She had only to read Barrett's troubled eyes and say to Marcia, "I saw you riding in the park—" to be sure of the whole disgraceful story. And Barrett's father, who had been her young suitor, dying at the very time in the house across the street; dying without knowing how matters lay and leaving his money as he would not have left it, had he known the facts. Life was a cruel maze and full of tricks. Miss Ella was determined that she would not be tricked. She would not be duped by those to whom she left her money as Barrett's father had been.

"Why, of course," Barrett replied to her question about coming to tea. "You know I'll come."

"That is all I ask, Barrett."

"Very well," he said, standing up. The audience had come to an end and he was dismissed.

"Then I shall welcome you to my home soon, Barrett."

"I hope so," he answered. His desire to please her—lonely, uncertain old soul—was sincere.

As Craven opened the street door for him Barrett saw a motor car stopping. Lida Stafford, Miss Ella's niece by marriage, was in the car. Barrett, seeing her, felt that she still deserved the fame for beauty that had been hers years before.

"Ah, Barrett Colvin!" she called prettily. She came forward, stripping off a glove and held out her hand. Barrett took it, bowing.

She was arrestingly lovely in a soft pink-and-white way. A bit too calendar-picture for Barrett, yet easy to look upon. Her beauty was quite different from that of her daughter, Eleanor, yet it was of Eleanor he longed to ask.

Lida said quickly, "You've been to see Aunt Ella, haven't you? How sweet of you! How is she today?"

"She seemed very well to me."

"I'm so glad. I get so anxious about her," Lida went on. "I hope that some day you'll come to see—me? I don't suppose it sounds very alluring but I'm so interested in all you've been doing!"

"May I drop in some day when your daughter too is at home?" Barrett asked. "I met her the other day." He flushed a little and loathed himself for doing so.

Lida's expression did not change but her thoughts did. Barrett Colvin—interested in Elinor? She wasn't going to have that for a moment. No, indeed—and she knew how to put a stop to it!

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THERE was no sign in Lida Stafford's smiling face that Barrett's words had aroused her. She said warmly, "How charming of you! Please do come. I've been anxious about Elinor lately and the sort of young men she seems to prefer. I'd like to have her know you!"

That, Lida thought with satisfaction, was a start and a good one. She wasn't going to have Barrett Colvin paying attentions to her daughter. It would completely spoil her plans. Lida wanted to cultivate Barrett because she knew Aunt Ella thought highly of him. Winning his friendship would impress Aunt Ella, who had the old-fashioned notion that marriage should provide a clear and devoted view of one's husband and blindness to all others.

Furthermore Barrett Colvin was attractive and Lida was not ready to believe any attractive man could prefer her daughter to herself.

She was sure that her words had found their mark. She had seen the stiffening of Barrett's honest face. The thing to do, Lida decided a few moments later as she waited in the airless reception room for Miss Ella, was to make Barrett feel that there was no redeeming Elinor. He was credulous as a child. It would be easy to convince him that Elinor was a member of the wild youngster set. Oh, yes, she knew just how to manage it! And to a man of his sort that would be enough.

Lida moved restlessly. Would the old lady never come? Barrett Colvin had said she was well. Only that morning the manager of a small, select gown shop had asked insinuatingly, listing several purchases, "Your cousin, Miss Sexton—is she well?" The woman's glance had been chilly and it had held a question, too. All those unpaid bills. So many people waiting for the death of the indefatigable old lady.

"So trying—the whole affair!" Lida thought.

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Miss Smythe entered then. "I am sorry," she said (and Lida knew she was not sorry), "Miss Sexton has gone to lie down and begs to be excused."

(To Be Continued)

It is incorrect to say "per day" or "per week," according to grammarians.

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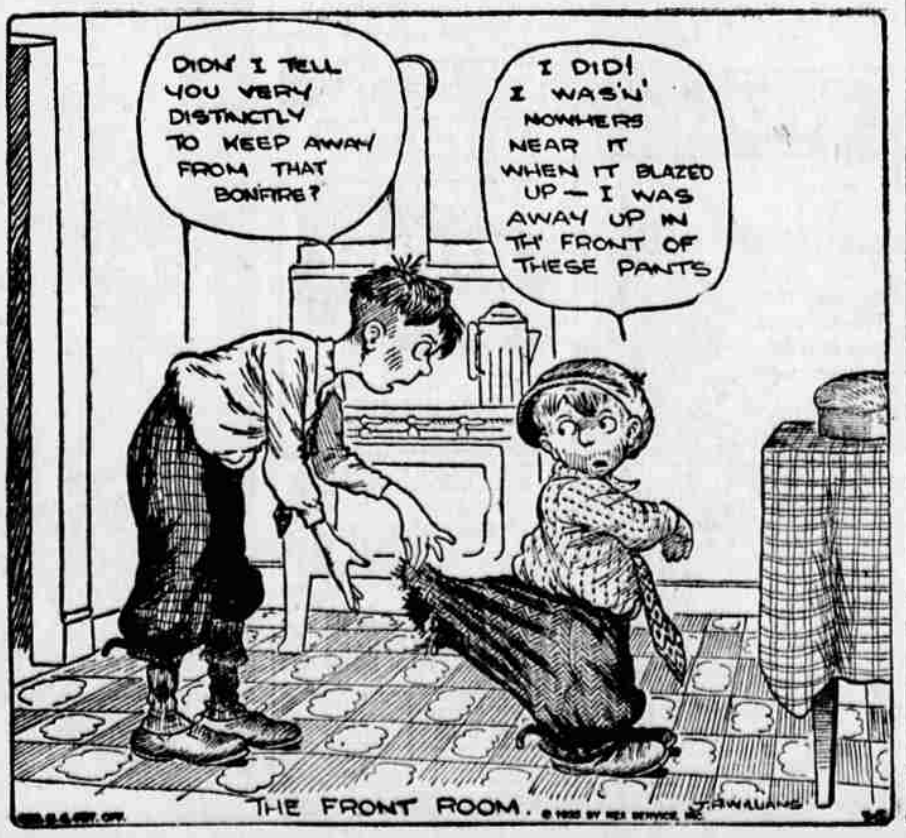

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