

# ARGAIN BRIDE

CHAPTER XXI

she seemed to. I suppose—she was all upset. I know you didn't scheme and— Aunt Ella had every right to leave her money where she pleased.

Then, turning, she was gone.

Lida was approaching hysterics. "I shall take this to every court in the land!" she threatened, voice shrill and rising. "Everyone here knows I stayed with Bentwell only because that old hag hated divorce so. Bentwell's a sot. He's made my life—!"

"Silence!" boomed the lawyer.

"Silence, please, Mrs. Stafford," said Miss Smythe crisply. "So many years she had been ground down by Mrs. Stafford and all that time she had known how Mrs. Stafford cheated Miss Ella, of whom Miss Smythe was fond. She had looked forward to this moment with the keenest pleasure but now—she could not forget the way Ellnor had smiled at her and said, 'I'm glad, Miss Smythe, that Aunt Ella remembered you so well. You deserve it more than anyone else.'"

Barrett went home and paced the living room. He ran nervous hands through his hair, across his brow. Twenty millions of dollars or more—his from the old lady—and the Thropes close to starving. He could still hear Bessie sobbing. And unless he took it the money would go to that absurd cause—a vicious cause!

How could that child be different that she was with that woman for a mother and a drunkard father? Lord—if he could only forget Bessie Thrope's sob! And for some way in which he could make it up to them all!

Ellnor Stafford had looked pitifully white at the burial ground. He had thought for a moment that she was going to faint and had forgotten his anger to think only of her need for a staidier arm than her father could offer her. She had been decent—more than decent—to speak to him as she had.

He lit a cigaret with hands that shook. What was there ahead for her, Ellnor Stafford? He knew her father's business was ill-managed and neglected. Now the creditors would close in on them. Accounts would not be extended; credit would be gone.

Barrett wished he could stop seeing Ellnor as she stood looking at the yawning grave. She had stared at it as a frightened child would. Watching her, he had longed to pick her up, hold her close and comfort her.

"Lord, I can't do it!" he said, half-groaning. He was thinking of taking the fortune that had been left him, a fortune he could never feel to be his.

He must give it back to them in some way. But how? How?

Ellnor had given him one glance filled with reproach. Why had she looked at him thus, he wondered. Why couldn't he stop thinking about her?

In a Park Avenue apartment Lida was screaming. "You—you! You did it!" She was pointing at Ellnor. Bentwell was drinking from a glass that trembling in his hand. Ellnor looked from one to the other. She began to laugh a little and then she began to cry.

Bessie Thrope sobbed convulsively, going back to Brooklyn. Jim Thrope, small, underweight, prematurely gray, kept her arm pressed against his side. "Never mind," he said as they waited in the subway for their train. "We'll manage!"

(To Be Continued)

He had tried to speak heartily but his voice sounded hollow and as he spoke he saw himself in a long, narrow mirror above a slot machine.

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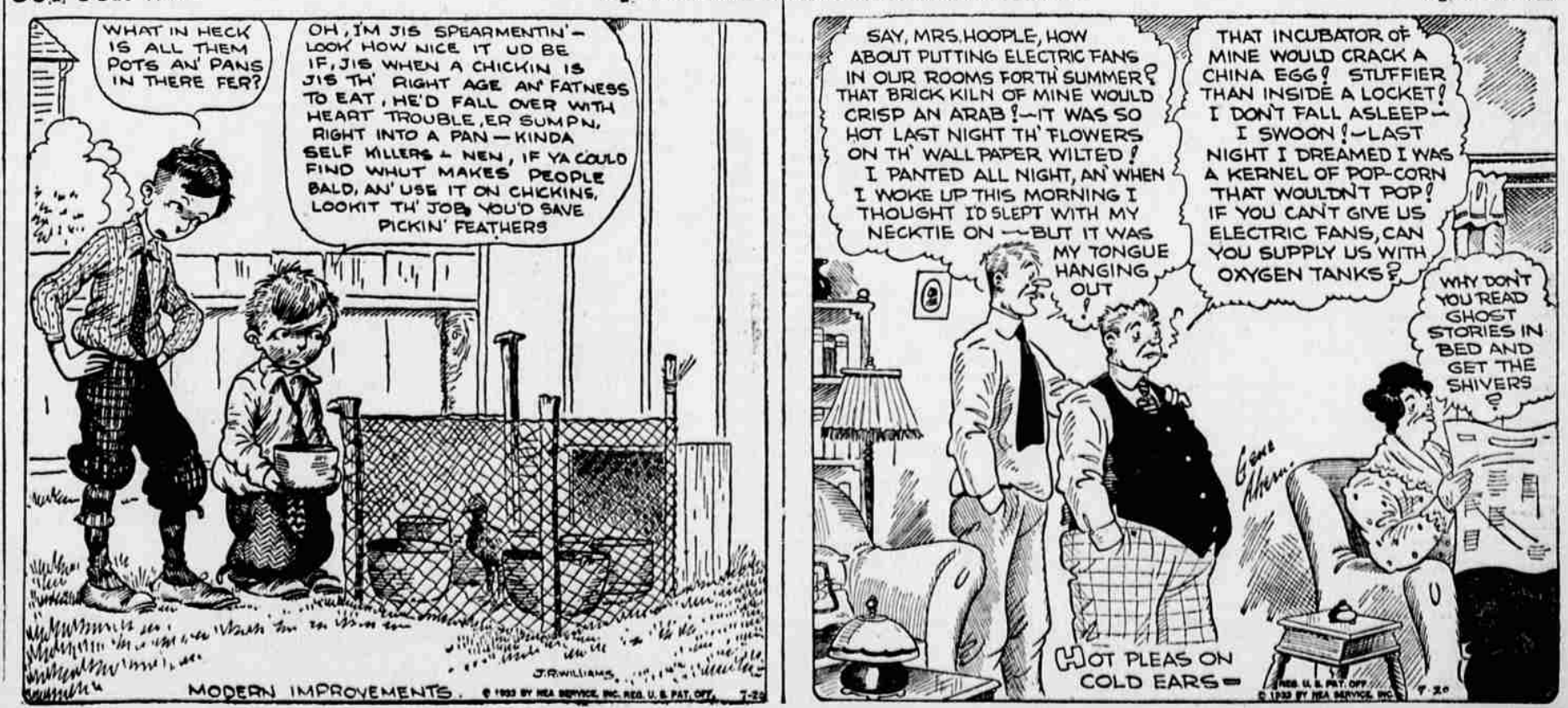
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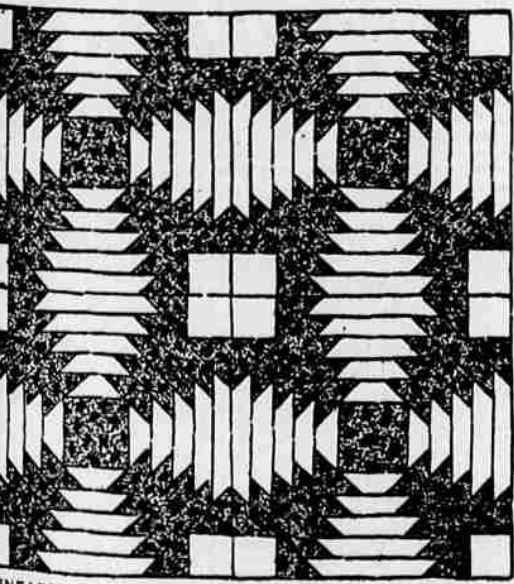
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