

# ARGAIN BRIDE

CHAPTER XXIII  
"Jim," she called steadily, "take Elinor into the front room and show her that nice little footrest Sexton made at school. Then she turned again to the telephone. "Just a minute, Benson—"

Elinor followed docilely but she was troubled, almost alarmed. Her aunt's tone had been sharpened by some real shock. Elinor was afraid something unpleasant had happened. She admired the footrest generously but she continued to wonder and worry.

Bessie was slow to appear. Elinor heard her calling her husband, heard him coming down the stairs. Then there was an interval punctuated by the sibilant, buzz-broken silence that means a whispered colloquy.

Elinor tried to reassure herself, told herself she was becoming absurdly nervous. Nothing could have happened.

But why was Aunt Bessie waiting? Why didn't she come?  
Elinor said, "It's the nicest footrest I ever saw, Sexton. It really is!"

Then Bessie came. Jim Senior followed her, carrying a glass of wine in his unsteady hand. Bessie was smiling rather stiffly. Elinor's heart went cold.

"Sexton," Bessie said, "run upstairs now, please—"  
"Aw!" Sexton murmured rebelliously, but he went. Bessie drew Elinor down beside her on the sofa.

"Benson telephoned," she began. "To say that your father—ah—has had an accident. Now don't be alarmed, darling! It may not be serious—"

"What?" Elinor moistened her lips. Jim offered the glass, patted her shoulder as she drank.

Bessie was holding one of Elinor's smooth hands between her work-scathed, roughened ones. "Well, it seems—Benson thinks it may be only a slight injury—that Vance Carter came to your apartment. He'd been drinking and he had a gun. He shot at your father—"

Elinor had never fainted before but the day had been too much for her. Within a few hours she had witnessed the horror of death, had seen her father bitterly disappointed and crushed by her aunt's failure to remember him, had heard her mother's hysterical accusations that Elinor herself was to blame. She had left Barrett Colvin's chill glance, brief and heart-breaking. Only a moment he had looked at her, then turned his eyes away.

That, more than anything else, had haunted her, making her utterly and completely miserable. A dreadful day!  
"Put her down flat, Jim!" Bessie ordered. She knelt clumsily beside Elinor to fan her with the water-spotted, darkened apron she still wore. "I told Benson you'd take her home—"

"Of course."  
"Have you enough in your pockets for taxi fare?"  
"I don't know—"  
"Jim Junior has some change."  
Elinor opened her eyes. There was a dazed wonder in them for a moment. Then she remembered.

"There, there, darling!" Bessie murmured. She thought, "If worse comes to worse we can manage—we'll have to manage—to take her in! Poor child, if Bentwell goes she'll have no one—"  
Jim Junior ordered the taxicab. A little later Sexton stood on the step, wondering if any of the neighbors would happen to see the cab chugging before their door. Bert, the only one of the boys who was not stiffened by the tragedy, hovered near Elinor, patted her shoulder and murmured, "Goah, I'm sorry!"

"You are all so kind—" Elinor faltered unsteadily.  
She clasped a fold of her uncle's coat during the long drive home. As she thought of the warmth of the home she had just left and the fears that lay ahead her eyes filled.

(To Be Continued)

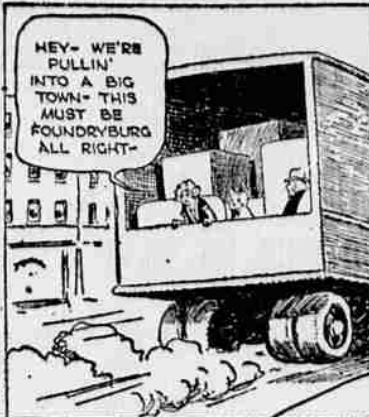
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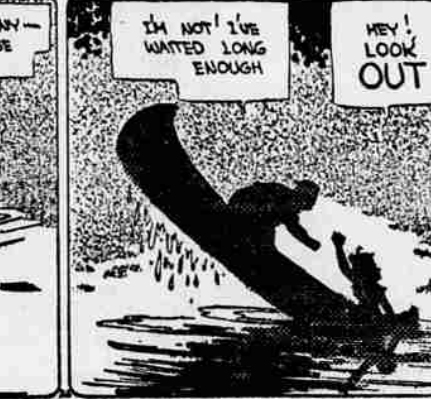
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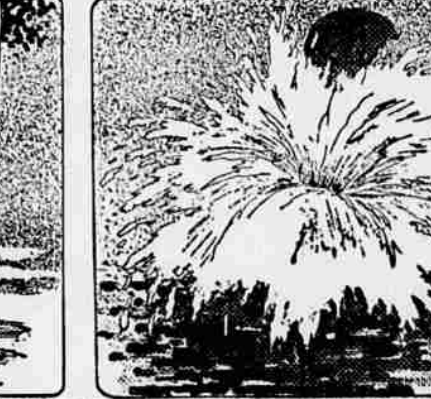
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