

# ARGAIN BRIDE

CHAPTER XXIV

Barrett had been cleaning the refrigerator, trying through activity to work off her anxiety and worry. When Maggie gave her the card on which was engraved, "Mr. Barrett H. Colvin," she cast a stricken glance down at her dress. She wished she looked neater. But after taking off her apron, folding it and laying it on a chair, she hurried to the parlor where Barrett still stood, too restless to sit down.

"Mrs. Thrope," he began miserably, pressing her water-soaked hand.

"Sit down, Mr. Colvin. No—not in that chair. The springs are broken. Isn't it terrible—I mean about Bentwell? You've heard of course—"

He nodded, frowning. He sat down. Bessie smoothed her house dress over her fat knees and waited. She saw his teeth set on his lower lip. Brows drawn, he stared at the worn patch in the rug. She knew he wasn't really seeing the rug, that he was miserable. She felt real pity for him.

"I came to know what I can do," he said abruptly.

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BESSIE said honestly, "You can do anything for Lida Stafford; nothing for Elinor."

Barrett Colvin looked up quickly. "You mean—Miss Stafford has pride."

"An immense amount. I don't know where she got nor all the lovely qualities she has, though I always liked Bentwell when he was a boy." She turned her head to hide hot tears.

"Would Miss Stafford resent my offering her mother help?"

"I think it would kill her!"

She heard him mutter, "God—I!" Bessie disapproved of blasphemy but she understood his need for it.

"I've got to get around this damnable will," Barrett said. "I want you to let me put your boys through college. You will, won't you?" For the first time he saw the room and read the need that was apparent everywhere. He must manage to help them somehow.

"I don't know, Mr. Colvin. I'd have to talk with Jim, my husband. We don't take help very easily. We aren't—just that kind," she answered uncertainly.

"But this isn't help, Mrs. Thrope. It isn't my money. It belongs to you and the Staffords!"

She shook her head. "Aunt Ella was in her right mind," she reminded gently. His colorless face stiffened. He was doomed to a fierce battle with pride, he saw. Perhaps his arguments would do no more than strengthen the pride he saw before him in a frayed wash dress that had cost \$2. If the battle were futile he would be haunted by the shabbiness of that room; by the chair that he could not sit on because the springs were broken; worse—by three boys who must go to work before they should have stopped their schooling.

"Mrs. Thrope," he confessed, "this whole thing makes me miserable."

"I've no doubt of that, Mr. Colvin," she agreed in her kind way. "But you wouldn't help it and it's done and over!"

"But," he protested, "one can right a wrong—when it's as simple as this one!"

"I don't know about that, Mr. Colvin," she said slowly, uncertainly.

He rose. "You're going to think it over," he urged, "and the needs of your boys."

Bessie rose too, a little stiffly. It always "took it out of her knees" to clean the refrigerator, a household god before which she must kneel.

"I never forget the needs of my boys," she answered. "But you see, Mr. Colvin—it's difficult to explain—it's this way. I feel that the boys' biggest need will be answered by their knowing that we made our own way in the world, that even if we failed we didn't beg."

(To be continued)

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