

BARGAIN BRIDE

By KATHARINE HAYLAND-TAYLOR

CHAPTER XXX

ready?"

"Thank you, Higgins," Elinor said. He disappeared and after a deep breath she stepped into the upper hall. Barrett was standing at the foot of the stairs, one hand on a newel post, looking up at her.

"Look out for that treacherous step!" he called warningly. He found he could not keep his eyes from her as she came down. He had never seen her looking more beautiful.

"I've good news for you!" he announced. At his words she paused, two steps up, her face level with his. "Your father's nurse—Miss Hemmingway, I think—answered my call and said that for the first time your father has shown real improvement."

"Oh!" she whispered on a deep intake of breath. "I'm so glad!"

"I wanted you to know right away because I understand what it means to you."

"It means—everything," she stated in a hush.

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He smiled down at her. "Suppose we go into the library," he suggested. "You haven't seen it yet, have you? Odd how old houses insist upon having libraries, isn't it? Remember the husband, important way Miss Ella always spoke of her library?"

The girl laughed, nodding.

She liked the room to which he led her. Its solidity spoke of all she had missed without knowing it. The room had a look of plenty and of peace. She could not imagine her mother whining for money in that room or anyone planning to deceive an old lady in order to be remembered in a will.

"I think you must have been very happy in this house," she said as she sank into a chair.

For a moment his face clouded. "I don't suppose," he said, "that there are many old houses without some unhappy echoes. Let's hope that we shall not add to them."

The table in the stately dining room had been arranged with the best the house afforded. Higgins had seen to it that the bowl of faint pink roses in the center of the table was a low one across which hungry, eager eyes might meet. "You're looking beautiful!" Barrett reflected, seeing Elinor above the soft confusion of bloom.

They were served a clear soup, deliciously seasoned. Higgins appeared, disappeared silently.

"Your feet don't touch the floor when you're perched on that chair, do they, dear?" Barrett asked as the butler re-entered the room.

He did this masquerading very nicely, Elinor thought. She flushed. "No, dear, they don't," she admitted.

Higgins had been standing at his elbow staring at the contents of a dish he offered. "Souffle, sir," he reminded after a cough.

Barrett said, "Oh, yes, to be sure! Souffle." She had said that "dear" quite convincingly, Barrett reflected. "This is one of cook's special dishes," he went on. "We are being honored, darling."

Higgins had never heard "the like of it." Most young married people hid such moods and tried to seem only casually interested in one another at first, hid them even from their servants. And Mr. Barrett was usually so slow to voice a feeling!

"Higgins," said Barrett, "can't you hunt up a small footstool for Mrs. Colvin? I want you to be perfectly comfortable, dear," he added across the table.

"Thank you, darling, you are so thoughtful!" she murmured. Suddenly they both laughed and then, as suddenly, sobered. In light moments it could seem a joke but for both of them, for one shaken stretch, it had been too real.

Higgins came back to raise the Venetian cut work cloth and push a small stool in place for Elinor's feet.

"Is that better, Mrs. Colvin?" he asked.

"Yes, thank you, Higgins." (To Be Continued.)

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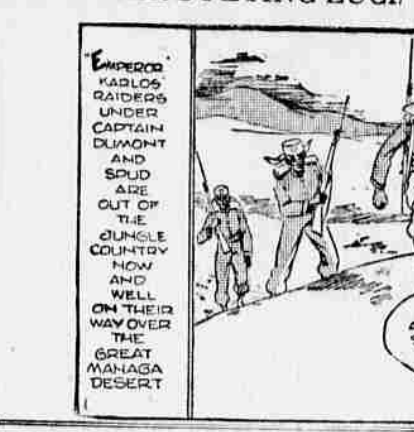
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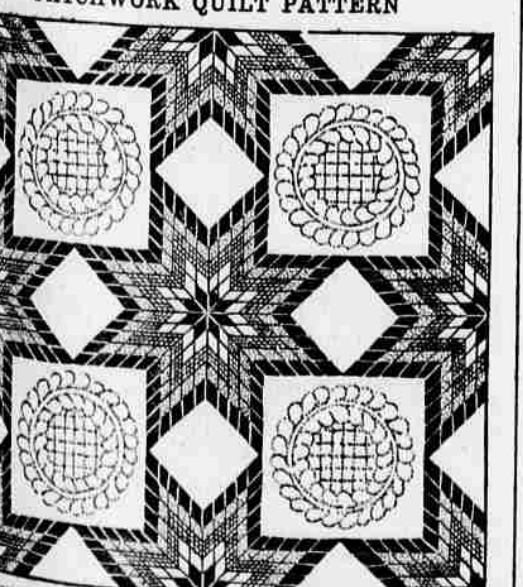
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