

MARGAIN BRIDE

CHAPTER XXXVII

that was fantastic—writing, arranging new exhibits, appraising them. He helped Flinders with his plans for an expedition, taking over all the dull details such as ordering tin dip-pers, pickaxes and soap. He found time to write a series of articles. He superintended plans for the gallery of a friend who had long wanted a suitable home for his paintings, bits of jade, predellas and such. And yet he couldn't keep busy enough to forget his heartache.

He thought he would feel some relief with Elinor away. He found, instead, endless worry and conjecture. In the silence of the house which seemed cold no matter what the temperature, he wondered what she might be doing. He wished the year they had agreed their marriage should endure would come to an end. The name of Colin had always been kept free from scandal. Marcia's affair had been underhanded and cheap but legal enough. She had been married to Lon Moore who had abandoned trysts with her when he found she could not give him the wealth he had supposed was hers. Lon had died before Marcia's and Barrett's father left them his fortune.

Elinor was aware that Aiken was a very pleasant place. The sunshine was warming and the air soft, the hills and valleys green and the view from the house they had taken, charming.

Her father was carried to the terrace and sat there for long afternoons. Elinor sat beside him reading words she did not sense, smiling at him when they paused to chat, wondering what Barrett was doing and whether he missed her at all. She tried to seem normal and light-hearted, hoping the letters Barrett directed to her—for effect—would hold some suggestion that his coldness was thawing. They never did.

"It's beautiful here," said Bentwell one afternoon. "I don't know when I've been so contented—so, at peace!"

He was still too weak to think about others or he would have seen his daughter's misery. He was so slow to get well. Elinor thought with deep anxiety. And when she spoke of it to either of the nurses they agreed, avoiding her eyes and murmuring something about "time." Science knows when human batteries are low and waning but science does not always tell.

ELINOR wrote Barrett stilted little notes about the weather, her father's condition, and the routine of the household. He read them thin. He could not help it. He carried them in an inner coat pocket and scorned himself for keeping them. He tried to burn them one night in the library fireplace. Instead he burned the hand that saved them.

Toward the end of April Barrett saw Lida Stafford for the first time since her daughter had gone south. Lida appeared on a Sunday morning, wearing a dress so simple a man would call it plain, though to a woman it bore the unmistakable stamp of Paris.

"My dear Barrett!" she murmured, gliding into the library. Stiffly he took her outstretched hands. He heard her ask, "Lonely?" and responded heavily, "Very!"

"You must dine with me some night Barrett. I would so like to know you better!"

He murmured vaguely about having to get a great deal of work out of the way. He detested the woman! Lida settled by the hearth. She stretched a slender foot toward the fender. Her ankles were still quite as good as Elinor's, she saw happily.

(To Be Continued)

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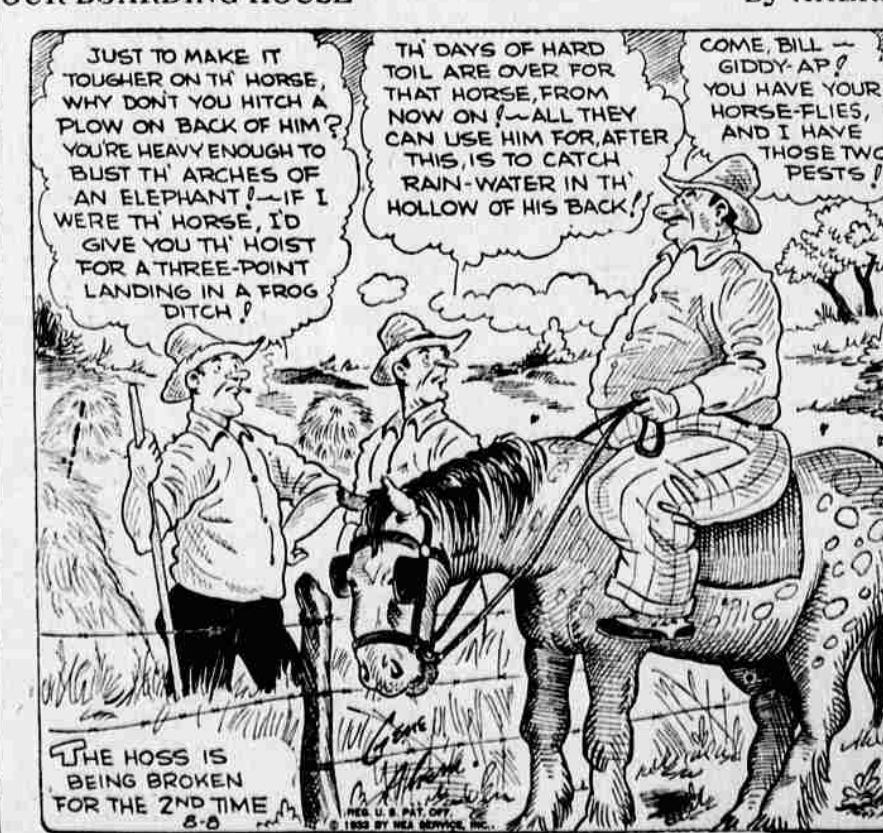
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