BARGAIN BRIDE

by KATHARINE HAVELAND-TAYLOR

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CHAPTER XLIII

e smiled wanly and turned from to hurry to the hall and up the . Alone he considered the situa- She was pitably dependent and He had not helped her. In- he had hindered her. A little ness to her faults, a greater ap- ation of the good that was hers haps with a few years of this leaning to "affairs" would be ed and they could have a decent of life together.

er all, he thought, all life seems a compromise. "Never the whole, al quietude." He loved her. It ove he felt—love that had made ers sting when she was crying arms. But he did not, could respect or trust her.

ntwell Stafford did not leave his that day. "On of the bad days," ated to Barrett who wandered to oom to visit him. The nurse, Bar- noticed, kept attentive fingers on ersist. Elinor remained in her own . The rain fell slowly, dismally. e came from Lida to announce she was coming.

ilight settled early and the night followed was velvet black. Miss mingway telephoned for the phy- who was attending Bentwell ford. At dinner, the first meal of day Elinor had eaten with Bar- the girl was abstracted, worried er father's condition and wilted e emotional tension that she had n during the last 24 hours.

arrett, who could not forget her ations, was conscience-stricken. could not take his eyes from her. seemed so weary and so badly re by her father's loss of con- sness.

arrett could sense the strain that e it impossible for her to do more ing with her food. He decided he would see to it that the doctor a look at the daughter as well as father. His heart caught at the ght of her being ill.

the clock struck midnight the hurried down the stair. At the of the living room she paused, ened hard and then spoke.

Mr. Colvin," she said, "please sir, Hemmingway wants you to come Mr. Stafford has gone—"

ARRETT arose with a jerk and ook the stairs two at a time. nurse was waiting for him in the e hall. She whispered, "Perhaps can help Mrs. Colvin. We're ried about her. They were so ick—"

e opened Elinor's door without ing to hear more, stepped into room and closed the door after elf. A small night light was ing by the bed. Elinor lay there ged and too quiet. He crossed room swiftly to lean above her. Child—!" he whispered.

haven't anyone now," she said ly.

You have me as long as you want So long as there is anything I do for you," he assured her.

e sat down on the edge of the and took one of her small hands ven his. It was cold, twitching. laid a hand on her bared shoulder noticed that it was as cold as hand. She looked questioningly him.

You're cold, Elinor."

Am I?"

e rubbed her hands, suddenly ed her and held her in his arms. a moment she was rigid. Then relaxed and he heard the first sob that shook her.

Darling!" he whispered. "Dar- "

half hour later Miss Hemming- entered the room after Barrett's ne!" answered her knock. He was ing in a deep chair before the fire had started. Elinor, wrapped in blankets, was in his arms. She had been crying. Miss Hemmingway saw with relief. That reaction was normal and reassuring. The girl had seemed too unnaturally contained.

"I brought another sleeping powder for Mrs. Colvin—"

"Good!" said Barrett. Elinor sat up, drank it and then lay back. Miss Hemmingway saw the man's arms tighten as she closed the door.

"Am I tiring you?" Elinor asked.

"Dearest, you could not tire me this way."

He stroked her hair with a hand that had grown unsteady, bent his head until his cheek touched her cheek that was hot from tears.

"Elinor—"

"Yes?"

"I want to ask you to give me another trial. Let me show you that I'm not so changeable as you think. I won't bother you in any way, I promise. Do you believe me "

"Yes—"

"What I want most from life now is to take care of you. Nothing else matters to me—"

Her hand moved and for a second he felt that it pressed his hand faintly. He touched her soft hair with his lips, stared blindly at the leaping fire.

"I want a chance to make you care for me without feeling ashamed."

"I'm sorry I said that, Barrett. I know it's my fault that you can't care steadily—"

"But you'll find I can!" he promised. Why, he asked himself, had he expected the impossible from her? There were no women who did not, in some way, let men down. Marcia had and so had her fiery, sullen mother. Elinor's mother had been brutally frank in her revelations of the failings of her sex. Miss Ella had felt that no form of spying was beneath her. They were obviously all alike, yet sometimes a man found one woman who compelled his love and thus a compromise. He had found Elinor. Doubtless Bob Telfare had held her as he did now but he told himself he must not think of that.

He moved gently so that he could look down at her face, pressed against his shoulder. She was so white, so pitiably white. "If I could kiss you," he thought, "and know you kissed no one else!"

She whispered softly, "You must be tired—"

"No!"

"You're very good to me," she said in a drugged tone that is the result of pain and shock.

"I love you," he told her.

* * *

The small French clock struck two sharp notes. Elinor slept and then woke with a cry to sob anew. He soothed her, felt her relax, and trembled, knowing that his touch could comfort her. At four he put her into bed without waking her. Then, lowering the night light, he settled in a small chair that stood near. The fire died, the room turned black.

It seemed to him, waiting there for any need that she could have of him, that he had never been so close to a human soul a she was to her and without the faintest, physical touch. Perhaps, he reasoned, it was because for the first time he was thinking only of another.

When she woke he was sleeping and the first dim morning sunlight was printed on the floor. As she looked at him Barrett opened his eyes and stared at her wonderingly for a short space and then remembered.

He rose from the chair with a stiffened jerk and, hand on her shoulder, looked down at her.

"Elinor," he said, "I want you to know that I'll do everything I can to help you."

(To Be Continued)

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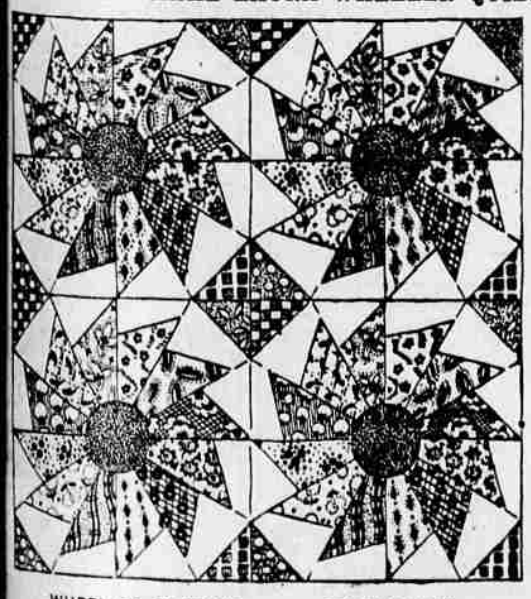

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