

Bargain Bride

by KATHARINE HAVILAND-TAYLOR

BEGIN HERE TODAY
 BARRETT COLVIN, back in New York after years abroad, falls in love with ELINOR STAFFORD. He is 35 and she is 20. Elinor returns his affection but her father, a miserly man, breaks up the romance by convincing Barrett that Elinor was only flirting with him.

Rich Miss Ella Sexton, Elinor's aunt, dies, and to the despair of the relatives, leaves her entire fortune to Barrett. Elinor's father, knowing that Barrett will not divorce her husband, BESTWELL STAFFORD, he shoots Barrett. It is uncertain whether the wounded man will live or die.

Barrett does not want Miss Ella's money but can not give it back to the rightful inheritors because of their pride. Suddenly a plan comes to him. He tells Elinor that if she will marry him and live as a guest in his home for a year he will give her the entire sum to divide between her relatives. Knowing the money may save her father's life, Elinor agrees.

NOW GO ON WITH THE STORY

CHAPTER XXII

BARRETT said decisively, "Show Mr. Streeter to the hall, please. Benson, and tell him that I—Miss Stafford's fiancé—will see him there."

The butler, after one frank look of surprise, stiffly piloted the bill collector toward the front of the apartment.

Elinor had risen. Barrett rose also and stood looking down at her. "There is no other way out of all this for you or me either," he reminded her gently.

"I don't—suppose there is," she agreed.

"I hope you don't mind my making the decision for you?" he added. "No," she answered. "I don't—"

There was a moment's silence. Barrett broke it with, "Elinor—I shall have to call you that, you know—"

"Yes."

"I don't want anyone to know of this arrangement of ours. Least of all, your mother—"

"Neither do I!" she agreed with a gasp.

It was settled, he saw. He had done it! "Because of all that has happened," he went on, "I think we should be married as soon as possible. Would tomorrow be all right?"

"Oh—!"

"At what time tomorrow, Elinor?"

She moistened her lips. "I don't care," she whispered. "Whenever you like—whenever you think best."

"Then noon if that suits you."

"It will suit me as well as any time," she answered. She was deeply shaken, he saw, and afraid.

"HE stepped closer to her. "Look up at me," he ordered. She obeyed. "Do you trust me?" he went on.

"I—think so!" she responded weakly.

"You must, you know," he stated inflexibly. "There must be no 'think' about it, and—you can! I want you to understand that."

She nodded; he saw she could not trust herself to speak.

"I'll see that man now," he said.

"Oh—if you would!" she answered, a little calmed. "I've had nothing but that sort of thing all day. It's been dreadful. It makes me so ashamed. I hate—choking!"

"Do you?" he thought bitterly, staring down at her. But he would not let himself brood so.

"Wait here, will you?" he asked. "I want to see you a moment before I go."

"I'll wait," she promised.

Mr. Streeter, the determined collector, gave Barrett a long, itemized bill headed, "Madame Yvette."

On it were listed frocks, underthings, a sweater, a hat or two, and an amazing total.

"They were bought by Mrs. Stafford," the man explained.

"Um—are you Madame Yvette?" Barrett questioned. He felt absurdly light-hearted.

Mr. Streeter grinned sheepishly. "You have to have some kind of name," he replied.

"I am Barrett Colvin," said Barrett. "Miss Stafford and I are to be married soon. Your bill will be attended to. I'll send you my check as soon as Miss Stafford becomes Mrs. Colvin. Does that satisfy you?"

He heard the man's assurances that it did. In Barrett's mind the words re-echoed, "Mrs. Colvin—Mrs. Barrett Colvin—Elinor Colvin—"

"The engagement is not secret," Barrett went on. "but I do not want this interview reported. Do I make myself understood?"

"Oh, certainly!" Mr. Streeter assured him. Suddenly the collector melted and became human. He saw that Barrett was obviously happy and excited. It took him back to his own courting days.

"Mr. Colvin," he said weightily, "I'm sure you're going to be very happy!"

BARRETT laughed delightedly. "Thanks," he said.

"The signs are right!" Streeter assured him, bowing from the doorway.

When Barrett left a half hour later it was with the consciousness that he was to be married to Elinor Stafford at noon the following day.

He had Marcia to tell, a clergyman to see and a ring to buy—no, two rings to buy. Her room must be arranged in his house. Her room—the one that connected with his own, so that the servants would not suspect how things were.

It was a bit upsetting to realize that within 24 hours he was to be married to a girl with whom he must masquerade every sign of affection, a girl whom he could not respect as he should, a girl who did not love him and whom he did not love.

As soon as he had reached home he said sharply, "Higgins, get Mrs. Radnor on the telephone for me, please."

Marcia, he knew, could direct him to someone who would make Elinor's room as attractive as it should be. He was determined that everything should be made pleasant for the girl during the year in which together they must make the world believe their lie.

Marcia was amazed. She repeated again and again that she was "so happy" for Barrett. He heard her fluttering, excited comment and, after he had put down the telephone again, paused thoughtfully. All this was not going to be entirely easy.

Then, hurrying to the hall, he picked up his hat and set out once more. He had to see Arthur Palmer who was both a personal friend and the clergyman of the church the Colvins had attended for years.

TWENTY minutes later Palmer, a pleasantly athletic type of man with keen, kind eyes, rose from behind a littered desk. "What's up?" he asked. "Another trip to Gobi?"

"Better than that!" Barrett answered, dropping his hat and gloves to the one cleared space on the desk. "Will you marry me tomorrow at noon?"

"Will it? Great hat! Of course I will. Who's the girl?"

Barrett sat down and told him. "Know her?" he asked.

His old friend nodded slowly. "I know of her," he said. "I've always looked on you, Barry, as one of the finest men I know but I'm darned if you aren't lucky. I've never understood how Miss Stafford could be the sort of girl she is. She hasn't had much to help her but she's beautiful inside as well as out. I'm glad for you, Barrett—"

"Thanks, awfully."

"Did it happen suddenly?"

"Rather."

"And for her, too, I suppose?"

"She seems to think I'm all right," Barrett answered, thinking. "If she did I might play the credulous fool again but—she doesn't."

Arthur Palmer wondered whether Elinor Stafford knew of the existence of his friend's ward and the truth of that matter. He hoped so. Otherwise the facts could so easily be misunderstood and lead to difficulties. He had seen Gerald at Barrett's request. He had helped Barrett find a new home for the youngster and had been struck by the fact that the boy resembled Barrett so closely.

Arthur Palmer considered speaking of all this but dismissed the thought. He would mention it later, he decided.

"Now, you said?" he asked, flipping the leaves of an engagement book.

"Yes, if that suits you."

"Great hat, you know you can have your wedding when you want it! I'd do anything to make other matters suit. Want to be married in the church?"

"I would," Barrett said slowly, "if that's what she wants—"

"Why not telephone her?" Palmer suggested, pushing the instrument forward.

Barrett called the number. (To Be Continued)

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