

# The Dollar Bride

by Mary Inlay Taylor

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**FIFTEENTH INSTALLMENT**

Nancy understood. With a gasp she wrenched her hand out of his and stood up, staring at him. She saw no one but him. She did not even see that Helena Haddon had risen from her table and was coming toward them. She looked only at Roemer.

"Oh!" she gasped, "what have I done—that you should think me like this?"

He rose, too, staggered by her look. "Nancy, I swear I adore you—I—"

"Hush!" she cried fiercely, "hush—never say such things to me again! I—"

He rose, too, staggered by her look. "Nancy, I swear I adore you—I—"

Aghast, Page stood still. He was aware, too, that Helena was coming idly toward him. He turned to face her—he had to cover Nancy's retreat. What on earth would this woman think?

Nancy stood only a moment on the piazza, then she slipped the bolt on an unused window-door in the half-enclosed porch, opened it, and dropped softly to the ground.

The rush of the rain was welcome. She felt it as if it might wash away the contamination of Page's thought of her. She did not care where she went. She turned, and was swept along the new road, beyond the inn, farther and farther from town. It did not matter!

Her clothing was so drenched that it weighted her down, and the rain continued in torrents.

At last her mental anguish began to give way to her physical weakness; she could go no farther, and she did not know where she was. She climbed down a muddy bank and looked out through the mist and rain. There was a house—not twenty yards off! She drew a long sigh of relief, gathered herself together, and breasted the storm.

It was a mere shanty, a tumbled-down house. But it was shelter from the storm. Dripping and breathless, Nancy knocked at the door. A woman opened it; there was a glimpse of bare interior, a spark of fire dying in the old stove, a close smell of cooking and medicine, and the fretful cry of a sick child.

Not a word was spoken. The wind and the rain swept the storm-beaten girl in. The woman slapped the door to, struggling, her shoulder against it, shot the bolt and ran back into the room where the child was moaning.

Nancy moved over to the stove and began mechanically wringing the water out of her dripping clothing. After the rush of the wind and the cold driving rain, it was suffocatingly hot in the wretched little room, but gradually her mind cleared. She began to heed the wall of the child and the woman's sob of a prayer.

"Please th' Lord, ain't I hed enuff? Don't take him, Lord, I ain't done nothin' ter make ye!" she choked, sobbing aloud, and evidently turned back to the child. "Thar, thar, honey, yo' drink et, yo' ain't goin' ter die—the Lord ain't goin' ter take yo'—I've been a-talkin' ter Him."

Nancy's mind came back sharply. She moved swiftly across the room to the open door and looked in.

The storm had darkened the place, and the woman had set a candle in

a bottle on a table beside the low cot in the corner. The flare of it fell full on the flushed face of a very sick child. The woman, on her knees by the bed, did not even look up.

Nancy went in. "Let me help," she said softly, "you're tired out. You must rest."

The mother's head sagged forward. "Tired? Me? I ain't s'lep' fo' days—Tony's thet sick. Honey, git well, sit up, honey, yo' ain't real sick now—yo' ma's prayin'—prayin' helps him a sight," she added.

The girl took the cup out of her limp fingers and sat down on the edge of the bed.

"Tony—is that his name? Tony dear, drink this for us," she coaxed.

The child opened his glassy eyes and stared at her. His face was hot with fever and there were white rings around his mouth and eyes. Nancy lifted him, pressing the cup to his lips. It was only water and the child tried to drink, but he could not. He strangled, gasping, falling limp on her arm, his little hot fingers holding hers, clinging tight.

Nancy gasped. "He can't swallow!" she cried, "where's the doctor?"

The woman was crying softly, drawing her sleeve across her eyes. "Th' doctor ain't come—I sen fo' him—but he ain't been here. Yo' all gits doctors easy, but I ain't got no money, I—"

"Money?" Nancy straightened up sharply. "Whom did you call?"

"Dr. Simmons—th' ole un—he useter come, he took care of my man when he was a-dyin'."

"Simmons? Why, he's ill, he doesn't get out any more. You must have a doctor—" Dying? Yes. Death was at the threshold. "You've got to have a doctor," she said sharply, "Dr. Richard Morgan."

The woman stood, numbed with misery, her hollow eyes on the gasping boy. "I ain't able ter leave him noway. I reckon th' Lord'll help me—I ain't got no un—Tony honey, sit up, tell yo' ma yo' ain't sick, honey, honey!" her voice rose in a crescendo of terror, she fell on her knees, moaning, burying her head on the child's pillow.

"Tony, I'm going to get you a doctor," she said, lifted his little hot hand to her cheek, put it down again, and ran out, tears in her eyes.

A doctor? She must have a doctor! She tore open the front door and faced the drive of the rain. It was like a caress, it cooled her own face again. But it was fearful still! Richard—she must get Richard. At another crisis he loomed up at the very gateway of life. Suddenly, without thought of herself, she knew that he was the man she must reach.

She did not matter—Death had come to the door. Richard could fight death. She must reach Richard. She knew where she was now, almost five miles out of town. Through the gleaming sheet of the rain she could see the fields opposite the shoulder of a hill, and some low buildings—barns? She remembered with a start, it was part of Kingdon Haddon's farm.

It was a long way to the barns, but there must be some one there. She could get help! She struggled, breasting the wind, with her head down. She was almost half way there when a figure came out of the barn, swung the big door shut and turned to meet her.

Through the storm she heard a rich young negro voice.

It was Henry, old Johnny Floyd's boy, sixteen years old and as black as coal. Nancy knew him well. He did chores for Major Lomax, ran errands, carried horses.

"Henry!" she called, "Henry!"

At first he did not hear her between his own music and the storm. Then he looked up, saw her drenched clinging to a fence.

"Gee, Miss Nancy!" Nancy caught his arm in both her shaking hands and poured out her story.

"We've got to have Dr. Morgan, Henry, and you've got to get him!"

The boy stared at her helplessly. "Dat's Kinney's kid. I knows him—but, gee, Miss Nancy, it's two miles an' mor'n dat, an' de tel'phone's broke clar down—I can't walk no ways—it's awful muddy—an' look at de rain—ugh!"

Nancy shook him. "Henry, you've got to go. You'll save a life, won't you? You've got to!"

Henry's eyes rolled. "Fo de Lawd, Miss Nancy, dere ain't no horse but Polestar!"

"Get him!" Nancy cried, on fire with zeal, "we need a racer. Polestar can do it in half the time! Can you ride him?"

Henry's grin widened ecstatically. "I'se trainin' fo' er jockey—sho, I can ride him!"

"Then get him quick!"

"Lordy, Miss Nancy, I'se afeard—"

I reckon de boss'd skin me alive, yessir!"

"Never mind the boss! It's a life, Henry. You know Dr. Richard Morgan? He must come if you get to him!"

"Sho de doctam's come—he ain't skeered ob noffin, he'll come—but I'se skeered. Deed, I can't go, Miss Nancy!"

Nancy held out her hand imperatively. "Give me that key!" she snatched it from his hand, "now— you come with me!"

"Deed, Miss Nancy!" Henry gasped. "Dee, Miss, I can't ride no horse out of dis yere stables, de boss he'll kill me, he sho will!"

"He won't, I'll make it right with him. There's a child dying for a doctor, you hear me? That's all that matters, you've got to go on Polestar!" As she spoke she unlocked the big barn door.

The wind swung it open but she held it. In the dim corner she discerned the box-stall of the racer.

"Henry! Get Polestar out this minute!"

Her sharp tone of command, the flash of power and authority in her eyes awed the boy. He sidled away from her, but he sidled toward the stall.

"De boss get my hide!" he said, half whimpering, "deed, Miss Nancy, I can't—I ain't got no orders, I—" "I give you the order!"

She stood outlined against the fury of the storm, her eyes glowing, a flush on her face now. The negro boy stared at her, fascinated. He undid the bar. In a moment the great racer came out, quivering, eager, tossing his splendid head; he strained at the halter in Henry's hand.

"Get on him!" Nancy held the door open. "You've got to, I'll make you, it's a child's life—get on that horse!"

Henry obeyed. He had to obey. He made a wild snatch at Polestar's mane, grinning, and flung himself astride the racer's bare back.

Nancy jumped from Polestar's head and flung the door back.

The boy, clinging to Polestar's mane struck his heel in the racer's flank. In an instant the horse shot out past Nancy, plunging and furious. Nancy trembled with anxiety. Could the black boy keep his seat? Then—like an arrow from the bow—Polestar shot away into space.

Nancy pressed her hands over her eyes. Dripping again, she turned back to the house and heard the woman wailing aloud.

Nancy opened the door quickly. The stove fire made the room stifling and she seemed to feel the child's gasps for breath. The mother was walking up and down, rocking herself and crying.

"He ain't able ter breathe—he ain't"

able ter breathe muc' longer—I reckon God's clear forgotten me!" she wailed, "an' I ain't got no doctah fer him!"

"Yes, you have, one's coming—the best in town," Nancy said softly, taking hold of her and trying to still her. "Don't act so, you'll frighten Tony—the doctor's coming, I've sent for him. We must have towels and hot water ready. Where are your things?"

The girl was roused; every nerve in her body tingled. Here was work she could do. Get ready for the doctor: Richard would find it as ready as she could make it.

"I ain't got no towels, I ain't ironed 'em, I ain't done nothin' but take care o' him. I—I reckon's I do have er clean sheet, I kep' it," she lowered her voice, "I kep' it in—case he died."

"Give it to me, please!" she held

out her hand, the same power and authority came to her that had frightened Henry.

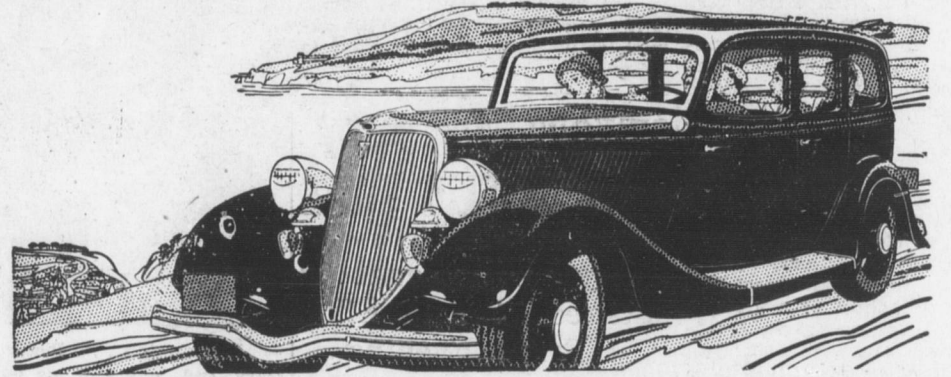
Mrs. Kinney felt it. She stumbled to an old dresser and found a sheet, clean but ragged at the edges, and a couple of rough-dry towels.

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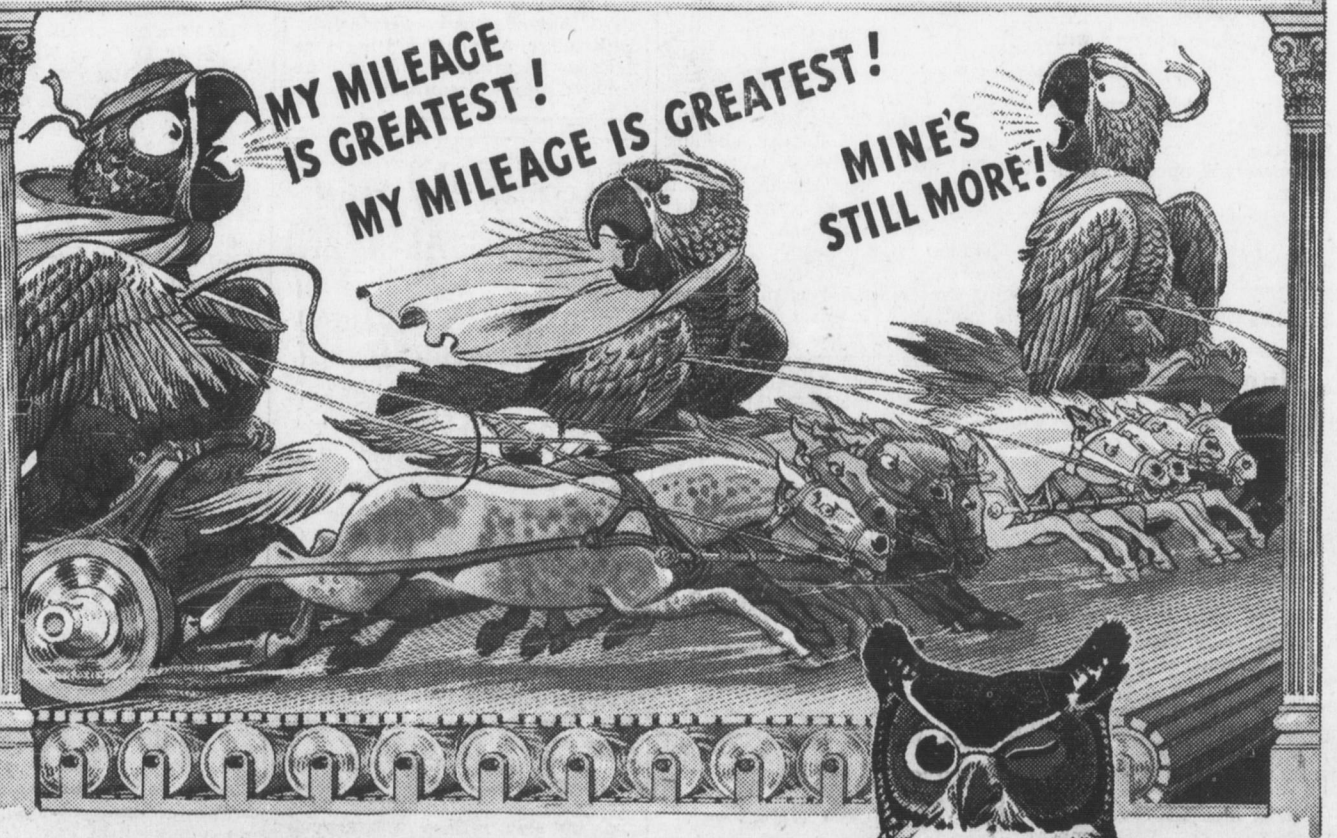
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