

The Dollar Bride

by Mary Inlay Taylor

TWENTIETH INSTALLMENT

"I can't tell you, Rod, don't ask me!" she begged.

"But you must tell me—Angie, what is it? Something's wrong! Tell me—you shall tell me!"

But she shook her head. "No, no!" He dropped her hands and snatched up his hat. "I'll find out!" he said.

She ran after him, sobbing. "It's nothing—it's nothing—don't ask, Roddy, don't ask!"

Angie's tears could not avail now, she had loosed the whirlwind. Roddy was in no mood to reason with Angie's hints. Something was wrong.

He would go straight to Richard. Man to man they would settle it. He was grateful to him, he was loath to behave ill to him.

Mammy Polk was back again. "No, Mist' Roddy, de doctah ain't in—be back d'rectly, walk in, dere's a lady in de office—waitin'."

"A lady?" Roddy hesitated. Roddy thought of it a moment. He did not mind Helena. If there was any talk of Richard, Helena would tell him. She would be jealous. Roddy had found out a good deal about jealous women!

"Why, Rod Gordon!" she exclaimed and gave him her hand. Roddy swallowed hard. He drew a chair close to hers and sat down.

"Mrs. Haddon, I think you'd know about any—any gossip, wouldn't you?" Helena shrank a little. What in the world was coming?

"Oh, I don't know—what do you mean?" "I've just been told—" he stammered, then he straightened himself ruthlessly to his question. "Is there any reason why I should have a quarrel with Richard Morgan—about my sister?"

"Don't ask me!" she gasped in sheer panic. She thought he knew that she had told.

But, to Rod her confusion was only the damning proof of Morgan's guilt. There was something. He became deadly quiet and calm.

"Mrs. Haddon, we're old friends. You were always kind to me," he said, "I—as a friend, I ask you to answer me. I have a right to know what is said of my sister."

Helena tried to collect her thoughts. The boy was not angry with her. She saw that; then he did not know. And this would be a way to get at Nancy herself.

"There's some talk, yes," she admitted reluctantly. "A small place, Rod, and gossip. You mustn't be too angry with me if I say so—your sister has been indiscreet, that's all."

But he was more of a man than she thought. "How indiscreet? My sister? Good God, if a man had said that! Who's the man? Richard Morgan?"

Helena nodded, tapping her foot on the floor.

"Mrs. Haddon, I wish you'd tell me," he pleaded quietly. "See, I'm not excited. I want to take care of my sister. What's the story? It's a lie, you know it. I know it, but tell me—what is it?"

She panted a little; she was frightened. He looked suddenly a man and she had thought him a mere boy.

"I—I can't tell you!" she said in a low voice. "I'm going—let me go, Roddy!"

But he had caught her by the wrist. "You shall tell me!" he said between his teeth, "what is the—darned lie they're telling?"

She dragged back from him, her green eyes suddenly blazing with fury. "I'll tell you—but don't blame me—let go my hand."

He let go as if she had struck him. But his eyes still burned into hers.

"Your sister went to Washington with Morgan. She stayed there a day and night. A man who registered at the same hotel told it—they were there as man and wife. That's the story—now, are you satisfied?"

"I'm quite satisfied," he replied simply, thank you, Mrs. Haddon. Good night."

Mr. Gordon had spent his evening alone. His wife had given up early; a headache brought her the relief of going to bed. She was in terror of her husband's remarks about Roddy's return. Nancy was out on the piazza now, sitting on the steps. No one knew that she was there, and she did not speak when Roddy sprang up the steps and bounded into the house. He did not see her at all.

A moment later Mr. Gordon looked up into the boy's face. "By gosh!" he ejaculated involuntarily, "what's wrong? Drunk again, sir?"

Roddy laid his hand heavily on the back of the nearest chair and straightened himself.

"Father, do you happen to know about the scandal—the story they're telling here about Nancy Virginia?"

Mr. Gordon sat up straight. "Make yourself plain, sir."

"Did Nancy ever go to Washington without you—or mother?"

Mr. Gordon's face changed. "She did."

Roddy made an inarticulate sound in his throat, his hands clenching on the chair back.

"When?"

"In the Spring—after your first escapade," Mr. Gordon was staring hard at him, his anger rising.

"They say she went with Richard Morgan and stayed there twenty-four hours. They—" Roddy gasped, his eyes blazing—"that fellow—Morgan—registered them as man and wife."

To his amazement his father said

nothing. He merely nodded his head slowly, his face stern.

"Do you hear me?" Roddy shouted, "do you take it in? Nancy—Nancy Virginia and Dick Morgan as man and wife. Some one saw it, read the register!"

Mr. Gordon regarded him sternly, something like grim humor showing in his eyes. The young fool did not know what a sacrifice the girl had made for him. Then he remembered the intolerable implication against his poor girl. He turned on his son angrily.

"They're married," he said shortly.

"Married?"

Roddy's jaw dropped, he stared at his father like a zany.

There was a long moment of silence. In it Mr. Gordon's anger gathered force. And who had dared to start it? Roddy getting his breath, broke out again.

"Married? Why didn't I know? Why didn't you tell me before—tell other people?"

Mr. Gordon gave him an exasperated glance. "You're not the one to find fault," he replied dryly, "they're married—secretly."

Secretly? The word was like a torch of flame, it set Roddy on fire.

"Why?" he demanded fiercely, "is that fellow ashamed of my sister?"

His father said nothing. "Do you hear me?" Roddy strangled with anger. "My sister!" he began to walk up and down. He thought of the family honor. His father must be breaking down in a premature dotage! What else could it mean. Did Richard know it? His eyes shot fire.

"I know," he said chokingly, "you've told Morgan about me—it's because she's my sister! Nancy Virginia scorned for me—my God, I'll—I'll—" he seemed to strangle again. He ran out of the room and out of the house.

Bare-headed and disheveled, he ran to the gate. He never once looked back. He did not hear the half-smothered cry that pursued him. He vaulted the gate and was gone.

But Nancy stood there, clasping her cold hands against her breast. "Oh, what shall I do?" she sobbed to herself softly. She had heard almost all that Roddy had shouted at his father, "what can I do?"

A sharp sound startled Morgan; some one had run up the front steps.

He rose slowly to his feet, went to the door. On the steps stood Rod Gordon.

"What's wrong, Roddy? Any one ill?"

"No one's ill. I've got to see you, that's all!" Roddy's voice was utterly changed.

Richard looked at him sharply. Had he been drinking again?

"Come in," he said quietly, "go into the office."

Roddy stopped short by the table and faced him, folding his arms on his breast.

"I've come—" he got that far and seemed to be choking. The boy in Roddy had leaped up again. He was a boy in his passion of blind rage.

"I've come to demand an explanation," he panted. "I—father just told me—you've married my sister."

"Sit down," said Richard quietly, "let us talk it over."

"Talk it over? Hell!" Roddy struck his hand on the table with such force that every article on it crashed and spun around. "You've married my sister and let people talk about her. Do you happen to know what they say of it—of her?"

Richard's face whitened to the lips. "I know nothing. Who dares to say anything about her? Or about me?"

Roddy laughed wildly. "Dares? When a man hides his marriage people talk, don't they. I'll tell you what they say; They know nothing of this marriage—this secret, marriage of yours, you—you coward! They say she's your—" he strangled again, "—your mistress, dam' you!"

Richard rose to his feet. "Who says it?" he demanded hoarsely, "who told you that?"

"The whole town says it!" shouted Roddy, "it's seething like a caldron. Lomax knows it, Haddon knows it, everybody knows it! You took her to Washington and married her secretly and ruined her good name!"

"If you were not a boy and her brother," said Richard, "I'd wring your neck!"

"Wring my neck, would you? You haven't got the courage!" Roddy screamed, flinging out his arms. "Do you think I don't know what ails you? Father told you I was a thief—you're ashamed to say you married my sister—my sister, Nancy Virginia Gordon! She's an angel and you're a devil, you're a black-hearted, cowardly scoundrel! You'll fight me, or, by God, I'll call you a coward on every street corner in the town! I'll publish you—you can't hide any longer behind my sister. I—" he stopped again, and suddenly drawing himself up to his full height, spoke with a new tragic dignity. "I challenge you, Richard Morgan, to defend yourself or die in your tracks like a dam' coward!"

Richard had scarcely heard him. "Yes, I'll fight you," he said dryly. "I admit you've got a right to demand it."

"Come on out now—the moon's like day—I'll get a gun—we can fight it out now. I can't wait, I won't wait!"

"Now? Out there?" a grim smile twisted Richard's lips. "If one of us dies out there tonight it would be called plain murder. That won't do. Roddy, we must keep to the code. Get a second, then I'm ready any time."

"I wouldn't care a copper what they called it," Roddy snapped, "but since you're particular—oh, the code, of course! I'll get a second, you can get yours—over the phone. I give you the choice of weapons, Dr. Morgan."

Richard bowed his head gravely. "Pistols. Mine's here on my desk, but you can bring two. I'll be waiting for you when you come back. Where is it to be?"

"Out there!" Roddy pointed at the moonlit lawn. "I understand," Richard answered grimly, and he opened a long window on the moonlit piazza, "you can go this way. I'll wait." (Continued Next Week)

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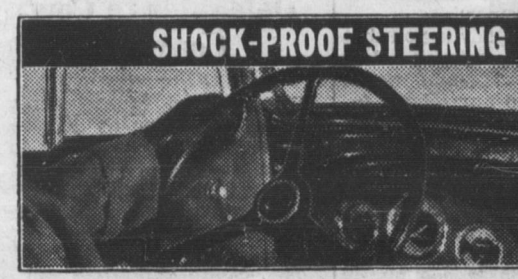
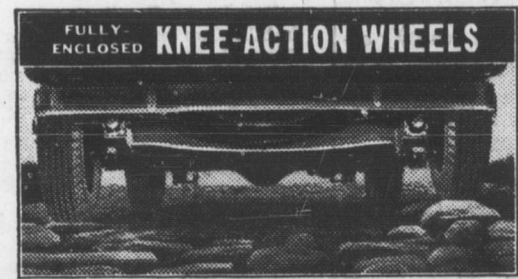
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