

ARMSTRONG, H.D.
A PRETTY BARGAIN

NOT FOR LOAN

CAM HOWARD
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ORIGINAL MS/TS

SECTION V

Pen n's Play writing Competitions
1939 Series

12th Prize - "A Pretty Bargain"
by H. D. Armstrong

"A PRETTY BARGAIN"

ms 7th
Page

BY

MORGAN.

H. D. Armstrong

MAY NOT BE BORROWED

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CHARACTERS:

JULIUS HANSON.

ELLEN HANSON, his wife.

SAMUEL HANSON, Julius' brother.

JENNY HANSON, Samuel's wife.

MRS. JANE HUMPELDINCK, Aunt to Julius and Samuel.

ALICE, parlourmaid to the Julius Hansons.

Julius Hanson is a pompous, florid man of 47, quite a successful estate agent, whose dignified manner and lack of humour make him a popular chairman at public meetings. He never presides in his own home, but makes way for his wife Ellen, a thin, sour woman of fifty, much given to organized charity.

Samuel is twelve years younger than his brother, and has a farm a few miles out of town. He and his wife Jenny, a pretty girl in her early twenties, are not very popular with their sister-in-law.

Alice, the Julius Hanson's parlourmaid, is a recent acquisition, and is justly regarded by Mrs. Julius as a step in the right direction.

SCENE: The drawing-room of the Julius Hanson's suburban villa. It is very smart with spindly chairs in embossed velvet, handsome china, shining brass, spotless curtains, and the aloof air of a room never desecrated by comfortable human occupation.

Ellen is seated on a most relentless chair, knitting a drab garment of coarse wool, destined to brighten the life of some poor woman. Julius presents a dignified back to the fireless grate.

ELLEN: What o'clock is it Julius?

JUL: Seventeen and three-quarter minutes to three, my dear. High time Samuel and his wife were here, if they are coming.

ELLEN: Oh they're coming! Never you fear! That wife of Samuel's, with her made-up face and reddened lips, has her eye on the main chance, believe me! I must say I think it's a great pity - (pause).

JUL: What is a pity, my dear?

- ELLEN: Do wait a moment, Julius. Can't you see I've dropped a stitch? There! - a pity of course that the Samuels were invited this afternoon. It would have been far better if we could have talked things over quietly first with your aunt.
- JUL: My dear Ellen! Aunt Jane expressly - er - desired me to summon them.
- ELLEN: Oh I know, I know! But there are more ways than one of bringing pigs to market!
- JUL: (In mild protest.) My dear, are you - er - suggesting -
- ELLEN: (tartly) No, I'm not! A fat lot of use suggesting now! Can't you hear that old bone-shaker of theirs coming down the Boulevard? All I say is this - if that grasping little chit thinks she's going to get your aunt and her money into her clutches, she'll find she has me to reckon with. I don't care about the money - thank heaven no one can call me mercenary - but to see that dear old soul hastened to her deathbed with bad cooking and worse house-keeping I cannot, and will not, endure!
(Noise of a very old car drawing up outside with the shriek of brakes and the wild squawk of a horn). A pretty noise outside a respectable house, I must say.
(The squawk is repeated.)
- JUL: Shall I -
- ELLEN: Certainly not, Julius! Since when have you been obliged to attend to the front door? If your brother likes to forget himself, there is no need for you to follow his example. Kindly sit down and allow Alice to admit the visitors and announce them, as I have taken some pains to train her to do.
(Samuel's hearty voice outside: "That's all right, my girl. No need to stand on ceremony. We'll announce ourselves." Sound of door opening.) ENTER SAMUEL & JENNY
- SAMUEL: How are you, Ellen? Hallo, Jule old chap. That's a pretty little housemaid you've got, Ellen. No end of a bit of style - wanted to call out our names, just like Government House!
- ELLEN: How do you do, Samuel? You are welcome, Jenny. Alice the parlourmaid, has her instructions, but by all means make your own arrangements.
- JENNY: Do forgive us, Ellen. We really are shockingly ill-mannered! But Sammy's a dreadful fellow - just because we haven't a front door at the farm, he thinks nobody else bothers about them.

- ELLEN: (Stiffly) Quite so.
- SAM: Here, what's this? Have I been putting my foot in it again? Barging in, I suppose - Well I'm frightfully sorry -
- ELLEN: Not at all - pray don't mention it.
- SAM: (Rather sharply, thinking it a lot of fuss about nothing) Well, since you're so pressing, I won't. And having, so to speak, cleared the atmosphere, suppose you tell us all about Aunt Jane, Julius. Isn't she father's eldest sister - the one that married the Dutchman?
- JUL: (Clearing his throat, pompously) Eldest surviving sister - married a Dutchman named - er - Humpeldinck, and has lived abroad most of her life, chiefly in - er - Java.
- SAM: Didn't she pay us a visit when I was only a little kid? Good lord, yes! Of course I remember! Looked as if she'd swallowed a packet of starch - had a nose like a parrot, too. (Laughing.) I hope she doesn't remember the trick I played on her.
- JEN: What was it, Sammy?
- SAM: Best forgotten, darling - but perhaps I'll tell you some day, if you're good.
- ELLEN: If you have finished your very interesting reminiscences, Julius can continue with the matter in hand.
- JUL: Er - where was I? - Yes, a Dutchman named Humpeldinck, a merchant, reputed extremely wealthy. No encumbrances - er - ah - that is to say, no children. She did not keep up a correspondence with her relatives in England. The last letter received from her was on the occasion of our father's death, fifteen years ago. Since then we had completely lost touch with her.
- SAM: Dashed short-sighted of us, with all that money lying round loose.
- JEN: She might have adopted us, Sammy darling, especially as I'm almost named after her.
- ELLEN: We are not all concerned with filthy lucre!
- SAM: Still, no harm in keeping right side up.
- ELLEN: We digress!
- SAM: Too true - carry on Julius.

- JUL: Her husband died about five years ago, and according to the letter received last - er - Tuesday -
- SAM: Oh, you had a letter?
- ELLEN: These interruptions!
- JEN: Oh but Ellen, it's only natural - all we know is the note from Julius asking us to come in this afternoon to discuss matters in re our Aunt Jane - which is concise, but not very informative!
- ELLEN: All the more reason to attend quietly to what Julius is endeavouring to tell you.
- JUL: As I was saying, in her letter - but perhaps I had better read you the letter, I have it here. Hem! (reads:)
"Dear nephew Julius,
I break a not unfriendly silence of years to broach to you a project that I have been turning about in my mind since the death of my honoured husband. Over half a lifetime spent in the society of blacks and foreigners, the last five years without a settled home, has convinced me that, at best, I might pass my declining years with more comfort amongst my own people, and, at worst, that there's not much to choose between the frying-pan and the fire." Hem! I take it she means -
- JEN: (Laughing) Oh Julius! Out of the frying pan, of course!
- ELLEN: It is immaterial. Pray continue, Julius.
- JUL: (reading) "I therefore suggest that you and your good wife, and Samuel and his, if he possesses one -
- SAM: Not a good one!
- JEN: Sammy! She's never heard of me!
- ELLEN: Please!
- JUL: Hem! Where - oh yes - "if he possesses one, should meet me, at an appointed hour and place, for mutual inspection, and for consideration of the question of my future home.
Believe me,
Your affectionate aunt,
Jane Humpeldinck."
- SAM: Sounds an old girl of decided views!
- JEN: Sounds a very rude old girl to me!
- ELLEN: Candour is not necessarily rudeness.

- JEN: At least no worse than blacks! Well, she isn't expecting too much!
- JUL: And let us trust that she will not be disappointed. You will conclude, rightly, that after preliminary - er - discussion, by letter, to-day has been fixed on for the happy meeting, and -
- SAM: By the way, Jule, old boy, why didn't you tell us about it before?
- JEN: Yes, we could have been thinking up schemes for running off with her.
- SAM: Thinking up schemes for not running off with her, you mean, Jen. Look here, she's got money, why can't she take a house somewhere near, and we keep an eye on her? I call it a perfectly rotten idea having her to live with any of us - if that's what she's aiming at.
- JUL: My dear Samuel! One's aged Aunt! Surely it should be our joy to cherish her, to - er - brighten -
- ELLEN: And let me remind you Samuel, you don't have to have her. It will be, as Julius says, our pleasure to give her a home with us -
- JEN: No, no! Fair does! Don't be an owl, Sammy, of course we want to take our share. I'm not laying claim to any high-flown motives, but I'm quite prepared to cherish her with the best of you.
- ELLEN: (bitterly) You are at least frank!
- JEN: Why not? You wouldn't believe me if I pretended I wanted her out of pure loving-kindness. Sammy and I have been very happy on our own, but - now don't groan, darling, think of the lovely rolls-royces in store for us!
- SAM: Oh have it your own way, all of you. But it'll mean rows - you see, it always does.
- ELLEN: There are some of us who are trained to bear and forbear.
- SAM: Poor old Anntie! I expect she'd rather have rows.
- JUL: My dear Samuel! Such jests are a little - er - ill-timed. But hark! Do I hear wheels?
- JEN: (excited) Yes! a taxi! Here she comes! (Samuel begins to whistle "Here comes the bogey man")
- ELLEN: Samuel! Let me beg of you to control your ribald tendencies!

(Door opens). ENTER ALICE, followed by Aunt JANE

ALICE: (announcing, rather nervously) Mrs. Hum - Hump -

AUNT: (in a strong harsh voice) Humpeldinck - otherwise, Aunt Jane.

JUL:) My dear Aunt!
ELLEN:) Dearest Auntie!

[Ex. ALICE]

AUNT: Well, well! You must be Julius, of course - a little balder and stouter than last time I saw you, eh? And who's this? Your wife?

JUL: My beloved wife Ellen.

AUNT: Humph! Well, no doubt it's suitable! There, there, we'll omit the kissing till we know one another better - then we'll probably be biting.

ELLEN: (she adopts a playful tone) Oh Auntie! You are naughty!

AUNT: Aunt, if you don't mind - not quite so girlish. And this of course is Samuel.

SAM: How are you, Aunt? I'm sure you can't remember me - I was only a bit of a chap when you were here last.

AUNT: (grimly) I remember you only too well! The last time I stayed at your home you put a frog in my bed!

SAM: Oh lord! I did hope you'd forgotten that.

AUNT: Never! I detest frogs. And I suppose you have married some one as frivolous as yourself. Is this your wife? Humph! I thought so - pretty and no doubt useless. What's your name?

JEN: (laughingly meek) Jenny, please.

AUNT: Jenny! Plain Jane not good enough for you, I suppose.

JEN: Not my fault - blame my parents and godparents.

AUNT: Pert, too - you ought to suit Samuel.

SAM: She does! And as for "useless", make no mistake, there's not a smarter housekeeper in the district, and a great little cook - now isn't she Ellen?

ELLEN: (sourly) Considering she has spent most of her life in offices, she does quite well.

JEN: Dear Ellen! You quite embarrass me with your bouquets.

AUNT: Humph! Offices! Nice training for wives!

- SAM: Here, I say -
- AUNT: Now, don't get touchy. I always speak my mind, you'll learn. That's why I wanted a plain talk with you all before we came to any arrangement. So let's get to business. Mind if I smoke? I can talk better that way.
- ELLEN: (with a gasp) Oh! (hurriedly) Of course - Julius - cigarettes -
- JUL: We - yes - yes
- AUNT: Don't trouble. I always smoke my own - more like a little cigar, aren't they? Any of you try one? Julius?
- JUL: Er - thank you, no - very seldom smoke - daytime -
- AUNT: Ellen? - too strong for you perhaps?
- ELLEN: (with dignity) I have not yet acquired the tobacco habit!
- AUNT: I'll wager that's more than you can say, Madam Jenny. But I suppose you have your own special brand of iniquity.
- JEN: (lightly) Oh yes, I smoke - and drink too, of course. But not here - Ellen doesn't approve.
- ELLEN: (quickly) I don't approve because I think it a pity to see any one as young as you, Jenny, a prey to self-indulgence - and Julius prefers not to smoke in the house. (Bitterly) But pray smoke if you wish it - and Samuel too.
- SAM: (drily) I think not, thanks.
- AUNT: I see. Well, I'll have my cigar just the same. If you put up with me, you'll have to put up with my bad habits - and lord knows I've plenty of 'em.
- ELLEN: Dear Auntie - Aunt, I mean - you must do just what you like - I want you to feel absolutely at home here.
- AUNT: Good - I will. And how do you all feel about taking in an elderly relative and soothing her declining years?
- ELLEN: Julius and I ask nothing better than that you should make your permanent home with us. We will know how to care for you. Julius!
- JUL: Of course, my dear Aunt - our house is - er - completely at - er - your disposal.
- JEN: Oh but Sammy and I want you too. We live on a farm, you know, and I'm sure you'd just love it - wouldn't she, Sammy?
- SAM: (gloomily) Oh, rather! Lots of chickens, and calves, and

lambs for pets - and frogs!

AUNT: (snorts) Frogs! As for pets, let me tell you I've some of my own. A cat and a parrot - how does that strike you?

ELLEN: Julius and I love all animals. Pampus, does he? That

JEN: I never knew -

ELLEN: (tartly) You don't know everything, Jenny.

JEN: Thanks! And any way just think how they'd enjoy the farm - wouldn't they, Sammy?

SAM: (sulkily) I like cats - but parrots -

JEN: You've never known one, so you can't say.

AUNT: Also a dog.

ELLEN: A wee doggie!

JUL: (heartily) Good dog! A - er - wee Puggie?

JEN: (rapturously) Oh Aunt Jane! Not a Sealyham?

AUNT: Certainly not. A poodle - a highly accomplished creature, can do everything but talk.

ELLEN: Fancy!

AUNT: I am never parted from him. He sleeps on my bed -

JEN: (mischievously) Think of your quilts, Ellen!

ELLEN: Don't be absurd, Jenny!

AUNT: - and comes to table for his meals. He sits up on a chair, and eats off a plate, and has his cup of tea, like any other civilized being. My beautiful Pompom!

ELLEN: Isn't that wonderful! Julius! - Pompom.

JUL: Dear me! Most - er - surprising!

JEN: Oh what fun! Sammy, wouldn't you love that?

SAM: (loudly) No! No! I can't do it! I'd have swallowed the parrot and the cat - God knows I don't grudge anyone their pets - but a dog that sits up to table with us, and licks our china - no, I couldn't stand it! I've too much respect for dogs, let alone anything else!

JEN: (despairingly) Oh Sammy!

JUL: Love me, love my dog, you know my boy.

ELLEN: To object to a dear little doggie!

AUNT: Humph! So Samuel objects to my Pompon, does he? That certainly simplifies matters.

JEN: Oh Aunt Jane, he didn't mean -

AUNT: Yes he did - I know a meaning when I see one. Well, a poor old relation is no great loss, I daresay. If it had been in my prosperous days -

ELLEN: Your prosperous days!

AUNT: No use dwelling on the past - let us get down to brass tacks. I wish of course to pay for my board - hush, don't interrupt, let me finish - but you realize, no doubt, that it will be the merest pittance, barely enough to cover the food I eat - I'm a good doer. And when I die, there'll be nothing - the money's an annuity. Still, in this snug little house of yours, Julius and Ellen, I have no doubt I can make myself very comfortable.

JUL: But - but -

ELLEN: (sternly) What is this that you are trying to tell us?

AUNT: That I'm a poor woman, Ellen.

JUL: But - but -

ELLEN: I was always given to understand that you had a fortune.

AUNT: Had - and lost it.

JUL:)
ELLEN:) Lost it!

JEN: Lost it! How dreadful! Oh poor Aunt Jane!

ELLEN: (Icily) It is a pity there was not a little more of the plain speaking you're so fond of, before matters were allowed to go as far as they have.

AUNT: Would it make any difference in my welcome whether I were rich or poor?

ELLEN: You must see that the conditions are entirely different -

AUNT: Oh entirely! What do you say, Madam Jenny?

JEN: I think it's too dreadful. Sammy! Sammy! Do you hear? Poor Aunt Jane's lost all her money!

- SAM: What's that? No, I wasn't listening. What? Lost all her money! Good God! Aunt, why didn't you tell us sooner?
- AUNT: Then it would have made a difference to you?
- SAM: Of course it would! Lord! What a surly brute I must have seemed to you! I thought if you could pick and choose - but if it's a home you're wanting, there's always a warm corner for you down on the farm, and a hearty welcome.
- AUNT: And Pompom?
- SAM: Oh lord! Pompom! Look here, Aunt, be a good chap and meet us half way. Have Pompom, of course - I know what it is to have to give up a pet - but not at table, eh?
- AUNT: A compromise? Well - perhaps - But first what has your wife to say to your fine scheme?
- JEN: (gently) You will be very welcome, dear Aunt.
- AUNT: (in a softer voice) Why, that's prettily spoken, child. But we mustn't forget Ellen and Julius' kind offer of a home - that would be too ungracious, wouldn't it, Ellen?
- ELLEN: Oh pray don't let that stand in the way of accepting Samuel's magnificent offer! Indeed, considering your present circumstances I should think you would find the plan far the most suitable.
- AUNT: How is that?
- ELLEN: As a woman of the world, you must realize that you would be far more comfortable in the free and easy life at Samuel's farm than in this house, where, when we entertain company -
- SAM: Mothers' meetings!
- ELLEN: Samuel! - you would be made to feel your position as a dependant, however, much Julius and I might wish to the contrary.
- AUNT: The bitter fruits of charity! Humph! Yes, I think I prefer the cottage loaf. What do you say, Julius?
- JUL: My dear Aunt! Always welcome, of course - still, as Ellen says, very awkward - but perhaps visits - visits, Ellen?
- ELLEN: Oh certainly. We would be very happy to receive you whenever our spare room should be unoccupied.
- AUNT: Why then, everything's satisfactorily arranged. Samuel! Jenny! The bargain's yours. Give me a little time to

settle a few odds and ends of business, and tomorrow afternoon I'll drive out, bag and baggage - and pets - to take up residence at the happy farm.

Splendid.

We'll be at the gate to welcome you.

JULIUS: Then goodbye Julius - Ellen -

ELLEN: I'll ring for the maid to show you out. (rings)

AUNT: Too good of you. And be sure I won't forget the spare room - whenever it is unoccupied!

[ENTER ALICE]

ELLEN: The door, Alice.

AUNT: No, don't come with me, Samuel. No doubt you'll like to talk things over in my absence. Goodbye, once again.

(Goodbyes from the others. ~~Sound of closing doors.~~ EX. AUNT JANE & ALICE)

ELLEN: Upon my word! Pretty fools you two have made of yourselves. You must be mad to let that old pauper come sponging on you! Downright dishonest, I call her, passing herself off as a wealthy woman, and then -

JULIUS: But, my dear Ellen, I don't think she ever actually represented herself as - er - wealthy.

ELLEN: The less you have to say the better, Julius. If you hadn't allowed yourself to be imposed on -

SAMUEL: It's all very well, Ellen - but she's got to live somewhere - and for all your fine talk a while back, you didn't seem too willing -

ELLEN: Don't be childish, Samuel. A respectable elderly relative is one thing, but a woman who comes here under false pretences, and is probably as disreputable as she's dishonest -

SAMUEL: Oh come!

ELLEN: Disreputable, I say, with her filthy cigars, and no doubt her whiskey bottles! A nice thing you've let yourselves in for. I'm not surprised at you, Samuel, you always were a fool - but I did think that Jenny, if she had nothing else, had at least some business sense!

SAMUEL: Not your sort, thank goodness.

ELLEN: You are trying to be insulting, Samuel, but I shall not quarrel with you. You have enough on your hands without

that. You'll live to rue this day, believe me.

SAM: Cheerful isn't she, Jen?

JEN: Oh I know it won't always be easy, and sometimes, I suppose, we'll wonder why ever we did it, but (with a little note of fear in her voice) Ellen! One day it might be you or me!

ELLEN: Thank you for nothing! I'll take very good care I'm never a burden on my relations.

JEN: How can you be sure? There may come losses, sickness, accident -

SAM: Here! I say, old thing, you're getting positively morbid. Come along to the pictures for a final bust before the deluge.

JEN: Oh Sammy, you are a darling!

(Sounds of a car outside)

SAM: That's the Aunt's taxi! What on earth's the old girl been doing brooding on the front door step all this time?

ELLEN: (grimly) Running up bills for you to pay, no doubt.

JEN: Help! Hurry, Sammy, or there'll be nothing left for the pictures! Goodbye, Julius.

JUL: Er - goodbye, Jenny.

JEN: Goodbye, Ellen, and thanks for the party.

ELLEN: Goodbye, Jenny, and give my love to Pompon.

JEN: And mine to the visitors in the spare room, dear. We won't wait for Alice to show us out, thanks. Come along, Sammy.

SAM: Goodbye, everybody!

EX. JENNY & SAMUEL
(door closes, and presently there is the sound of their car.)

ELLEN: Thank goodness they've gone. That wretched girl grows more ill-bred every day. What a narrow escape we've had! That wicked, intriguing old woman! You may thank me for getting you out of your mess, Julius. A bargain, she calls herself! A pretty bargain they'll find her!

JUL: You don't think, Ellen, that perhaps we have been a little - er - ruthless? Our own relation -

ELLEN: Are you presuming to criticize me, Julius?

No, No, my dear. I only thought -

S: Then kindly regulate your thoughts a little better. (Knock)
Come in, yes, what is it Alice?

ALICE: The lady asked me to give you this letter, ma'am.

ELLEN: Lady? What lady? What are you talking about?

ALICE: Mrs. Hum - Hummedick, ma'am.

ELLEN: A letter? Give it here. That will be all, Alice.

ALICE: Thank you, ma'am.

ELLEN: It's addressed to you, Julius. She must have written it in the taxi. Changed her mind already, no doubt, and eating humble pie. Well, let her! What are you looking like that for, Julius? Why don't you read it aloud?

JUL: It - it - er - rather a shock, my dear.

ELLEN: Shock? Oh, stop talking, Julius, do, and read the letter.

JUL: Very well, my dear. Hem! (reading)

"My dear Julius,

I don't suppose it can matter two straws to me once I'm dead, but while I'm still alive I like to think that when I have moved on my money will be both enjoyed and made good use of by those to whom I leave it. As to-day's interview has convinced me that you and your wife have no capacity for enjoyment left in you - if indeed you ever had any - and that you are too busy looking after yourselves to be of much benefit to anybody else, I am altering my will, and instead of sharing my quite considerable fortune between you and your brother, I am leaving it all to him and his wife ---

ELLEN: Oh this is too much!

JUL: - "They may not be as smart as some people, but they're kind.

In haste,

Your affectionate aunt,

Jane Humpeldinck."

ELLEN: Affectionate aunt! The miserable hypocrite!

JUL: There is a postscript - shall I - er - read it?

ELLEN: Read it? What else would you do? Eat it?

JUL: No, my dear, no, certainly not. Hem! (solemnly)

"P.S. I wouldn't have a dog like Pompon on my mind."

MILLEN: Oh the wicked, scheming old wretch! To think how she
lied to us, cheated us! This is all your fault,
Julius! If you had made proper enquiries - What are you
muttering to yourself?

JUL: I - er - excuse me, my dear, I only said - er -
"A pretty bargain"!
