

Bargain Bride

EVELYN SIBLEY
LAMPMAN



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Bargain Bride



BY EVELYN SIBLEY LAMPMAN



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This book, written 45 years ago, tells the story of a young girl and her experiences in the Oregon Territory during the 19th century. An excellent storyteller, Evelyn Sibley Lampan provides the reader with the opportunity to explore this time and place through the eyes of the main character, including social customs, religious beliefs, and racial relations. Many aspects of life at that time are foreign and sometimes offensive to us now including specific customs, practices, beliefs, and words. To maintain and provide historical accuracy and to allow a true representation of this time period, words such as Indian, Injuns, savage, colored and Negro have not been removed or edited.

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*Bargain
Bride*

Chapter One

It was still dark when Ginny woke up, but she knew it was morning. Something in her bones told her so. For a few moments she lay doubled into a ball under the thin quilts, then it all came back to her. She began to shiver as though she had an attack of the ague, and the shaking wouldn't stop. It had finally come, the day she had been dreading for the past five years. This was her birthday. Today she was fifteen years old.

Before long she heard Cousin Mattie stirring around in the cabin, ordering Cousin Beau to get out of bed and poke up the fire. Cousin Mattie never talked in ordinary tones like other folks. Her voice was loud, with a nasal twang, and she was generally giving orders. People better jump when she opened her mouth, too.

Ginny could hear her voice as plain as anything because there was only a thin calico curtain shutting off the corner of the room where she slept. There wouldn't have been that except for Julia Bridges.

Two years before when the Bridges had sent Julia to board with Mattie and Beau Danville so she could attend Mr. Lyle's school, Cousin Mattie had hung up the strip of cloth. She said Mrs. Bridges gave herself airs and probably wouldn't pay the two dollars a month board if Julia had to sleep in the same room with Cousin Beau and Cousin Mattie. It was all right for her to share Ginny's bed, though. They were both girls. No one had suggested that Ginny attend school. Schools cost money.

Now Julia must be boarding with somebody else because Mr. Lyle had moved his school to the larger town of Dallas two miles away, the seat of Polk County in the Oregon territory.

Ginny missed Julia, and she was thankful that the curtain was still there. Cousin Mattie kept saying she was going to take it down and make the cloth into something useful. She hadn't got around to it yet.

A spot of yellow, like a baby moon, shone through the printed calico and Ginny knew that Cousin Mattie had lighted one of her grease candles. There was a thumping sound as Cousin Beau turned over the oak log that had been smoldering all night in the fireplace, and more bumps as he threw on dry fir that would catch quickly.

"Ginny!" shouted Cousin Mattie. "Get out of bed! Orville, Willie! Stir yourselves out of that loft and get down here. We got a busy day ahead of us."

Orville and Willie always had to be called twice, but Ginny never stayed in bed after she was called. She was too scared of Cousin Mattie. Not that Cousin Mattie did any more than switch her legs with a hazel bush stick or send her to bed without supper. But she *could* do more if she wanted. She was the meanest woman Ginny knew. At least, this is the last time she can scream at me to get up, she told herself. Whatever was going to happen couldn't be much worse than living with Cousin Mattie.

She put on her old patched dress that was too short in the sleeves and so tight across the chest that it gaped between the buttons. Her good one, the one she would wear when she left, had been washed and starched and was hanging from a nail in the wall. It was a little tight, too, but Ginny would never give it up because it had been cut down for her from one of her mother's dresses. It was muslin, and once there had been yellow rosebuds on it, though they had faded so you could hardly see them. She could remember when Mama wore it and how pretty she had looked. Ginny didn't think she herself would ever be that pretty. She looked more like Papa with her dark red hair and brown eyes and freckles. People used to say she had Papa's

spunk, too, but Cousin Mattie had knocked that out of her. Cousin Mattie said spunk wasn't fitting in a young girl, and maybe she was right. Mama had been sweet and gentle, and people were always trying to do things for her. Nobody tried to do anything for Ginny. They hadn't since she was ten.

"There you are," said Cousin Mattie, when she pushed back the curtain. "Go wash up. Then hurry with the milking. We don't know when Mr. Mayhew will get here, and I shouldn't care to have him catch us all at sixes and sevens."

"I don't figure he'll make it before noon, Mattie." Cousin Beau turned his backside to the fire to warm himself. "Told me he had to collect his wheat at Jim Driscoll's mill, then drive it into Dallas. It'll be noon at the earliest. Maybe later."

"And what are we supposed to do, I should like to know?" snapped Cousin Mattie. "In common decency we got to give the man dinner when he gets here. Do we have to wait around till maybe one or two o'clock to eat ourselves?"

Ginny didn't wait to hear what Cousin Beau said. She knew it would be something to smooth Cousin Mattie's feathers. Cousin Beau spent his life smoothing Cousin Mattie's ruffled feathers.

As she let the bucket down into the well and hauled it up, she wondered again why Cousin Beau had ever married his wife in the first place. Mama and Papa had wondered about it too. Once, when they didn't know she was listening, she had heard them talking about it.

Cousin Beau was Mama's second cousin once removed. His branch of the family had moved to Georgia years before, so the Danvilles who stayed in North Carolina seldom saw them. "Still, they're kissing cousins," Mama had insisted. "We're bound to be civil to them."

Cousin Beau had been sent up north to school, which Papa said was silly since the south had perfectly good schools of its own. Mama agreed and said probably the family was sorry in

the end because while he was there he married Cousin Mattie. He brought her home, but she didn't get along too well with people, so she and Cousin Beau moved away, to Illinois or somewhere.

The first time Mama or Papa ever laid eyes on them was when they appeared in the same wagon train headed west. Cousin Beau's wagon wasn't nearly as good as Papa's, and he didn't have extra stock like most folks, but when Mama heard the name "Danville," which was the same as hers before she was married, she had to speak up. Cousin Beau and Cousin Mattie were glad to meet their cousins, but Papa said Mama should have kept her pretty mouth closed.

The well water was icy cold when Ginny washed her hands and face, and the towel that hung on a peg was clammy and didn't do a good job drying. In a way she didn't blame Orville and Willie, who usually didn't wash with water but just swiped a damp towel across their faces.

Orville and Willie were horrible little boys. Ginny thought about them as little as possible, but Cousin Mattie doted on them both. Maybe that was because they looked more like her than their father and every day they acted more like her, too. They were ten and eleven now, but five years ago, when they first came here, Ginny's chief responsibility had been looking after them. They were always doing something they shouldn't, then Ginny was blamed for letting them do it. Afterwards they'd smirk behind their mother's back and wiggle their fingers in their ears at Ginny as though to say, "Look what we did!" She hated Orville and Willie almost as much as she did Cousin Mattie, and the one good thing about today was that it might be the last time she'd ever have to see them.

It was getting light now. The sky was pink above the stand of firs that Cousin Beau had been meaning to log off for the past five years. There was frost glistening under her old, cracked shoes, and she pulled the gray knitted shawl more closely round

her. It was cold that morning. People said it was always balmy in Oregon, but they were wrong.

It was warmer in the barn though. The neighbors had given the Danvilles a barn-raising, and the men had caulked the logs up good and tight. If Cousin Beau had done it by himself, it wouldn't have been so good a job. Cousin Beau tried. He jumped when Cousin Mattie told him to, but he always petered out before the end of anything.

Dolly was standing in her stall, waiting to be milked. By rights the cow should have been Ginny's. Dolly's mother had been Star, the milk cow Papa brought from North Carolina.

When both her parents came down with the cholera on the Platte and were dead in twenty-four hours, Cousin Beau had taken over Star along with Papa's wagon and everything he owned. He said it was only fitting since he was kinfolks and meant to do for the pitiful little orphan, Ginny, like she was his own. Cousin Mattie drove their wagon and Cousin Beau drove Papa's, but pretty soon the Danville wagon fell apart and wasn't worth fixing. They all crowded into Papa's. There was nothing but trouble afterwards. Indians ran off with most of the stock, and little by little they had to discard things by the way. Ginny didn't know how Star managed to survive, but she had.

And now here was her daughter, waiting to be milked. Ginny felt she owed Dolly an explanation.

"I have to go away, Dolly," she said. "I won't see you ever again. But I'll think about you sometimes, and I hope it's Cousin Beau or maybe Willie who comes to milk you. I think they'd be the nicest to you."

Dolly turned and regarded her with soft brown eyes. It was almost as though she understood and was sorry. For the first time, Ginny put her head against the warm flank and began to cry. How awful to think that the only one in the whole world who cared what happened to her was a cow!

She hadn't cried since they left the Platte where she had

watched Mama and Papa, wrapped in blankets, being lowered into the hastily dug graves. Then wagons had been run over the mounds to flatten them. People said it was so wild animals or Indians wouldn't dig up the bodies. It didn't seem right to leave them there, but there was nothing Ginny could do about it.

The day after the burial she stopped crying, but it was like she was living outside her own body and the things that happened to her were happening to someone else.

When she looked back, she could hardly remember the rest of the trip. Memories of it came only in snatches, like random pages in a book. Over and over the snatches were of Cousin Beau and Cousin Mattie pestering her about what Papa had done with his money. Ginny didn't know, but they kept after her until they reached Oregon.

She seemed to recall walking a great distance beside the wagon and of long waits while the wagons were lowered over cliffs on ropes. She thought there was a cold, wet ride down a swirling river that lasted several days, but she didn't remember much about it. She could dimly remember stopping at a fort enclosed by a stockade, and a tall gentleman with white hair and a flowing black cape who patted her on the head and called her a pretty little girl. He was nice, and she wished she could have stayed there instead of going on with Cousin Beau and Cousin Mattie.

She remembered arriving in Oregon City and how cross Cousin Mattie was. There was free land all right, but it was winter and who could live on uncleared land with no cabin and no food? And the boarding house where they were staying wanted to be paid, and there was no money. What did Cousin Beau propose to do about that?

Then there was the last page out of the book. They had gone to someone's house, Ginny in her least ragged dress and worn-out shoes, Cousin Beau and Cousin Mattie and their sons, Orville and Willie. There were two strange men there, and

one was a preacher. Ginny could tell by his collar. The other was a tall, broad-shouldered man with a red face. He took Ginny's hand and they stood in front of the preacher, who said some words. They concluded with, "Now I pronounce you man and wife."

When the preacher was through speaking, the stranger, who was holding her hand, turned to her.

"They explained this to you, didn't they, little lady? We may be married, but you're still going to live with your folks till you're fifteen. There won't be no difference at all. It's just because of the land. A married man can file a claim on six hundred and forty acres, but a single one, he only gets three hundred and twenty. Come fifteen, you'll find I've made things nice and proper for you. You'll have as good a house as I can build, maybe even planed lumber, not a cabin made of logs. I'll treat you right, little lady. You don't need to be scared."

That's how Miss Virginia Claibourn, ten years old, became Mrs. Virginia Mayhew. It was scary to think of.

Once she had told Julia Bridges about it, but Julia didn't seem to think it was so bad as Ginny did.

"It happens all the time in Oregon," she had said. "You're not the only one. You don't have to live with your husband till you're fifteen. That's a proper age. It's when I intend to get married. I wouldn't want people to start calling me an old maid, and they would if I waited too long. You'll never have to worry about that. I'm going to pick my own husband, though. Mama said I could, so long as I pick somebody that's comfortably fixed."

Somehow Julia's words had done little to comfort Ginny. She'd rather risk being called an old maid.

Right after the wedding, the Danville family moved from the boarding house in Oregon City to land in the lush Willamette Valley. There was even a cabin on it and several cleared acres. A squatter had lived there without bothering to file his

claim, and Cousin Beau had bought him out. There were settled claims close by, each a mile square, and Cousin Beau was delighted to find that their owners were largely southerners like himself. Cousin Mattie wasn't so pleased and made scathing remarks about Colonel Ford, who had brought three Negroes along to do the field and housework. Southerners were all lazy, she insisted. Give her a good, hard-working Yankee any day. She'd got out of the South once, and now here she was surrounded by so many people from Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, and the Carolinas that folks called the area Little Dixie. Still it was land, free land, and she guessed beggars couldn't be choosers.

After they moved in, Ginny's life was no longer composed of brief, unconnected events, but took on a daily monotony of work. She had never done physical labor before, but she did now. Cousin Mattie taught her. There were dishes to do and scrubbing, washing and ironing, candles to make, cooking in pots hung on the crane above the fireplace, the cow to milk and the milk to be cared for, the cream made into butter, and what was left turned into cottage cheese or slopped to the pig. It was work, work, work from can't-see to can't-see, and then fall into bed so tired she could hardly put one foot ahead of the other. If she let up for a minute, Cousin Mattie would yell at her, just as she would yell now if Ginny didn't stop crying and get on with her job.

She wiped her eyes on the gray shawl and resumed the milking, but her mind was still busy. Today Mr. Mayhew was coming to claim his bride. What would her life be like on his claim near the headwaters of the LaCreole? Would it be harder than the one she knew now? Would she wish she were back, listening to Cousin Mattie yell and Cousin Beau make promises he wouldn't keep and the boys' teasing? If only Papa and Mama and Ginny hadn't left North Carolina in the first place!

If only they'd never met Cousin Beau on that wagon train and he hadn't bought out the squatter's claim!

Her hands slowed almost as soon as the milk began spurt-
ing regularly into the bucket. For the first time a horrifying
thought came to her. Where had Cousin Beau got the money
to pay the squatter for his claim? He had none when he arrived,
only enough borrowed from the Hudson's Bay Company to pay
for seed. Most of the settlers had borrowed from the English
company for their first crops, and while Cousin Beau had taken
longer than most to repay his debt, Ginny knew he had done
so. Cousin Mattie, who refused to be beholden to anyone had
seen to that. She didn't want the neighbors to talk. There was
only one person who could have given Cousin Beau the money,
and that person was Mr. Mayhew. It was in exchange for three
hundred and twenty acres of land, a wife's share, of a donation
land claim. How stupid she had been not to think of it before!

"You 'bout done, Ginny honey?" asked a voice from the
doorway. "Your Cousin Mattie sent me to fetch you. She says
the milking's taking a mighty long time this morning, and
breakfast's ready."

"You sold me!" Ginny turned so abruptly that she almost
upset the pail. "You sold me to Mr. Mayhew."

Cousin Beau didn't deny it, and his face above the flowing
black beard flushed red.

"Now, honey, you got to think about that a little. Stephen
Mayhew's a real fine gentleman. He's got a nice claim, and folks
tell he's built a real house, not just a cabin like ours. One of the
first houses in Oregon Territory, so you can see he's got your
interest at heart. Folks say he came back from California last
year with a sizable poke of gold dust, too, so you won't want for
anything."

"But he paid you, didn't he? To let him marry me? That old
man!"

“He’s not so old. Forty maybe. No older. And he don’t look that,” argued Cousin Beau. His voice took on an apologetic whine. “You got to look at it this way, honey. There wasn’t nothing else to do but borrow from Stephen Mayhew. I aim to pay him back, and I will. Rest assured of that.”

“You didn’t even ask me,” she said. “You just married me off.”

“You were too young to know your own mind. And besides, you’re not the only young girl here that was married that way. There’s a lot of them. Been happening since folks learned about that law giving a wife her own three hundred and twenty acres. I did what was best for you. I arranged a good marriage. Why, it happens to kings and queens all the time. Sometimes I wonder if marriages like that don’t turn out better. Oft times young people get carried away, but you can’t tell them nothing,” Cousin Beau concluded thoughtfully.

There was no use arguing with him, Ginny thought. She resumed the milking, her fingers closing and opening so fiercely that Dolly turned in surprise.

“You hurry along now, hear?” Cousin Beau said cheerfully. “Like I say, breakfast’s on the table.”

They were almost finished eating when Ginny arrived at the cabin.

“What took you so long?” demanded Cousin Mattie. “We got no time to dawdle today. Your mush is cold, but you’ll have to eat it that way. I already dished up.”

“She’s all agog. Her husband’s coming to fetch her. Ain’t he, Mrs. Mayhew?” said Orville, snickering.

“No. She’s been crying. Likely she’s skeered he’ll beat her.” Willie’s little black eyes were on her swollen face. For just a moment he sounded sympathetic. Then he glanced at his brother and began to giggle.

“Quiet, both of you,” ordered Cousin Beau sternly. It was so unusual that his sons stared at him in amazement. Generally

their mother was the one who took care of corrections in the family.

Cousin Mattie seemed surprised, too. She looked at Cousin Beau curiously before she tilted her bowl to get the last few drops of sugar-sweetened milk.

Ginny sat down at her place and measured out a spoonful of brown sugar for her mush before flooding it with milk. She wondered if Mr. Mayhew would be as strict about the use of sugar as Cousin Mattie. If he had all that money, he might let her have as much as she wanted.

“We’ll bake up a couple of squash pies,” said Cousin Mattie, changing the subject. “Mr. Mayhew might have a fancy for them. Living alone that way, he wouldn’t get pie every day. And we’ll put a piece of that pork on the spit. You can’t overcook pork, and we don’t know what time he’ll get here.”

“You fixing a banquet, Ma?” asked Orville, grinning.

“Hush your mouth,” ordered Cousin Mattie. “It’s just a family dinner. Mr. Mayhew is family now, and when we go to visit, I reckon he’ll do it up proud for us.”

You’ll never come to visit if I can do anything about it, thought Ginny silently. When I leave here, I never want to see any of you again. Ever.

As usual Cousin Mattie kept her running from one task to another all morning. Not that Cousin Mattie didn’t work, too. Ginny had to say that much for her. Cousin Mattie seldom sat down, and when she did, her hands were busy with mending clothes or knitting shawls or endless stockings for her family.

Today she insisted on cleaning the cabin thoroughly, taking the straw ticks, which served as mattresses, outside and shaking them, scrubbing the board floor, which was about the only improvement Cousin Beau had got around to making in the squatter’s cabin, peeling squash, and mixing dough that would bake in the Dutch oven into crusty, mouth-watering pies,

turning the slab of pork that hung over the fire, and setting the table with odds and ends of crockery.

Once, in the midst of all their bustle, she said an amazing thing. She looked up from where she was scrubbing the floor on her hands and knees and remarked, "Mr. Mayhew will find you're a real good worker, Ginny. Reckon maybe I'll notice it around here when you're gone."

Ginny was so surprised she could only stare openmouthed, and Cousin Mattie frowned and told her to stop gaping and get back to work.

She was so busy that it was almost a surprise when Willie pushed open the door and announced, "He's here. Mr. Mayhew's come for Ginny."

"Quick!" Cousin Mattie ordered. "Leave things. I'll finish. We're almost done anyhow. Go change to your good dress. Mr. Mayhew can't see you looking like that. Comb your hair, too."

Ginny dropped the handle of the spit she had been turning and straightened up. The moment had come. It was actually here, and there was nothing she could do to prolong it. She turned and fled behind the calico curtain to the little cubbyhole that held her bed.