

Angelo's Bargain

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Elizabeth Anne Nelson



A "New Woman" Novel



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ANGELO'S BARGAIN

by Elizabeth Anne Nelson

"I am not proud, Ricardo, I will marry her for her money. Why else would anyone marry such a woman," Angelo Varian exclaimed with an annoyed shrug. "She is built like a man and dresses worse. Six feet tall with the shoulders of a bull."

"She is beautiful," Ricardo observed cautiously. "Her face is that of a queen."

"An Amazonian queen."

Angelo opened his cigarette case to remove a long cigarette which he tapped twice on the case even though it had a filter.

"She is hopeless as a woman. She will take three months just to become civilized. I won't guess how long it will be before she learns how to select proper clothes."

"So, what will you do with her?"

“Who knows?”

Angelo had thought of his question many times before he had proposed marriage Helene de la Verga. Yet, how could he avoid such a marriage? He needed money and Helene was his golden goose. Such a monstrosity should be grateful to have a man. Certainly she would not be unhappy with his service, as long as the money would last. For marriage was to be a sound business deal between them. He furnished her with a title of nobility and his ability to make love - Don Juan offered no more - and she supplied her family's great wealth.

“If you married her for money, you will have done well,” Ricardo acknowledged. “Her family left her one of the largest plantations on the river. They say the de la Verga fortune is fantastic. And she will certainly be glad to have a man around the estate. Although she has done well enough alone.”

“We shall hire a manager,” Angelo countered, knowing all too well that operating a plantation in the back-country jungles would never suit his wishes. His health was too delicate for such things. “Helene has agreed to move to Rio.”

“But you are going to the plantation?”

Angelo lit his cigarette with mock fatalism.

“She wants to honeymoon at the plantation. It is my gift, she claims. At least I shall see that green paradise which shall support me for the rest of my life in wealth and comfort.”

“Yes, you are indeed a fortunate man.”

Fortunate. Such a simple word to express his great luck!

A month before he was almost starving. Mrs. Lock had left him stranded in San Paulo when she met that bull fighter from Spain. His credit was quickly drained at his hotel and only his monthly check from his family estate gave him enough to settle accounts enough to escape the police as he sought cheaper housing.

Angelo would have not eaten that night if it had not been for Senor Rolando's invitation requesting him to serve as an escort for a Senorita de la Verga, Senor Rolando's house guest.

Nor would he have met Helene de la Verga. No one had met the mysterious Helene. It was just known that she had come to San Paulo to purchase new breeding stock and machinery for her estate. Senor Rolando was in the farm equipment manufacturing business. And after Senor Rolando received her letter requesting some aid in her purchases along with a handsome letter of credit, he quickly offered her the hospitality of his house.

Since she was not known but her family money was, he decided to introduce her to his friends.

It was obvious that he had never seen her. For if Senor Rolando had, he would never have had Angelo Varian as her escort. After all, the slender, graceful, almost effeminate, good looks of fair brown-haired blue-eyed Angelo was a good six inches shorter than the rather rough hewn dark-skinned mixed-blooded Amazonian Helene, with her strangely gray eyes and thick jet black hair rolled into a no-nonsense bun in the back of her head.

But, the dinner was too soon for another choice in escorts. So the short fragile Angelo felt slightly insulted by his host's strange sense of humor. Because he could see the rather amused glances of the other

guests, too polite to laugh out loud at the odd couple. But not so polite as to ignore the contrasts. As a professional gigolo, he had learned a long time before that wealth was blind. And it was his duty to his host to entertain the wealthy woman. Even if she looked and acted in social circles as uncomfortable as an elephant in a tutu.

However, blunt Helene seemed far too enchanted with Angelo's wit and worldly ways to take notice of such social lapses. She was totally unaware of the outside world and seemed to cling to his words, while her almost hawk-like eyes studied his features in fascination, as if she was memorizing whatever he said in absolute detail.

That night after supper while walking in the estate gardens, Helene admitted that she was completely helpless in social affairs. She had been raised in the mountain and jungle wilds of her estate to ride and hunt, as if she were a young man. And her *duenna* constantly reminded her of her rather childlike and rough lack of womanly graces. She paused and smiled down towards Angelo with a shrug, saying rather matter-of-factly that she had come to civilization to find a husband. Then to his utter surprise, she kissed him and left him alone in the garden!

Jackpot!

The most interesting part of their courtship was Helene's *duenna's* attitude towards Angelo.

Cecilia de la Verga was a fair young blonde matron of striking beauty. Most certainly a distant cousin to her charge. Cecilia's body was delicate without a trace of hardness. She was very well educated and spoke several languages quite fluently, like Angelo. Her social skills were perfect and most of Senor Rolando's wealthy friends insisted that while she stayed

in San Paulo, she attend their social activities. Her taste in clothes was perfect and most expensive, to say the least.

From what Angelo could see, she spent most of her time in two tasks certainly not expected of the traditional duenna. One, buying huge quantities of lovely clothes for the women and girls of the estate as well as enough furniture, art works, and other household goods and supplies to furnish a palace. And two, arranging it so that Helene could meet him as frequently, as he wished, *alone!*

Cecilia and he became fast friends in a surprisingly short time. They would share morning breakfasts at his hotel. (Which, instead of throwing him out as they had warned, announced that Senor Rolando insisted that he continue to be their most honored guest so long as the *giantess* was in town! She was no doubt buying a great deal of farm machinery!)

Angelo learned that the de la Verga Estate was a huge ranch, farm land and coffee plantation perched on a mountain valley plateau cut by one of the head waters of the Amazon River. Below the plateau the family had extensive jungle plantation holdings. The Estate was self-sufficient. It was almost totally isolated from the outside world except for an airport and a rather landslide or snow slide prone, primitive little-used military road built westward across the Andes.

The Estate hacienda was in fact a great stone fortress town cut from the mountainside, overlooking the valley like a medieval castle. Considering that it was built in the mid-sixteenth century in one of the most hostile remote places in the world, marked *unexplored* on most maps until the twentieth century, the great stone castle suited its strange environment perfectly.

Jose de la Verga, the Iron Don, had served as an officer under Francisco de Orellana, one of Pizarro's officers, who in 1541 explored the course of the Amazon from the Andes to the Atlantic Ocean. In 1549 after Orellana died, the Iron Don led another expedition back up river to build this fortress at a head water to control the Andean pass that led to the Amazon River.

The de la Verga family had occupied the mountain fortress town over the centuries. Cecilia assured Angelo that, despite its isolation, it was very modern with all the basic urban utilities and civilized comforts. It was not at all like the very primitive jungle thatch native Indian villages below the plateau that remained unchanged for thousands of years.

Angelo was not at all certain that he wished to visit either world.

From Cecilia he again learned that Helene was looking for a husband on her trip to San Paulo. He also discovered that Helene felt a husband was needed so that she could crash society, since she was bored with the jungles and wanted to see the outside world. Cecilia was quite attached to Helene and it soon was revealed that it was Helene, not her duenna, who made any and all decisions. Cecilia was an ornament for the sake of helping to smooth over Helene's rough ways in polite society.

The duenna's life was of passing interest to Angelo.

He was surprised to learn that she had six children, and that she was indeed responsible for the educating of all the de la Verga children, a clan which was quite large.

But it was Helene who was the keeper of the family fortunes. And that was really all he needed to know.

Cecilia's most desirable trait was a godsend to Angelo. She loaned him money! How she discovered that he needed money, he did not know. But one morning at breakfast during the first week, she outlined a brief bargain and he received from her a loan that was quite enough to conduct a lavish courtship with the understanding that he would repay her over a number of months once he was married. And if the marriage did not take place, the loan was considered simply a loss.

She further stipulated two requests. One that he take a medical examination by a doctor she had chosen to be certain that he was healthy. And secondly that he have a complete new wardrobe to replace his old clothes made at a certain tailor shop, thought to be the very best men's shop in San Paulo.

Of course he complied.

And Cecilia was not at all disappointed at the great church wedding arranged by Senor Rolando. She and Senor Rolando conspired together and made all the elaborate arrangements. Poor Helene complained and sulked like a tomboy forced into a party dress.

It almost seemed that Cecilia was bent upon making Helene's wedding a feast of femininity with Helene looking ever so much like a giant white frosted wedding cake or a huge fancy doll, in her white satin and clouds of antique silken lace classical Spanish wedding gown. Under the gown there were layers of petticoats and the miserable tomboy was cinched in at the waist by a corset more like body armor with its steel stays. But the suffering Helene dutifully submitted to her duenna's wishes like a small child.

The great cathedral was filled.

The Cardinal stood enrobed before the couple. Angelo wondered how the old man could stand the formal ceremony that seemed endless; from time to time the Cardinal seemed confused, or uncertain. Such is how it is with great age.

Although the ritual was flawless, he was confused with the order of the vows and an amused Angelo found himself promising to *love, honor and obey* while Helene promised to *protect and defend*, with some polite laughter from behind them. But, all in all, it went well, except for poor Helene almost tripping on her gown and complaining in an somewhat masculine voice about damned skirts.

Yet, despite her complaints to Cecilia, she seemed to hold Angelo more responsible for what she had to do for *love*. At the wedding portrait the photographer had her sit like a queen in her wedding gown while Angelo stood at her side to hear her mutter something about waiting until they got home where *he would pay for this*.

But when he glanced at her to hear her words better, she laughed and arranged her white satin and lace skirts, as the photographer required while a greatly amused Cecilia looked on, insisting that the photograph be just perfect and that Hellene smile sweetly, like a properly dutiful young bride. at her husband.

Angelo was not at all pleased about flying with his new bride to spend his honeymoon at her, now his, Estate.

But he rather grimly considered the fact that the trip had at least postponed the nuptial bedding with the Amazon.



He was not particularly fond of the idea of sleeping with the huge woman, although he had seen his share of big fat rich matrons in bed. For this woman was not fat, and since he had never seen her in a swimming suit or brief attire, he half-imagined that she actually was built more like one of those musclebound modern women weightlifters since he had actually seen her lift a young bull when they were on a trip to buy breeding stock for the Estate!

Trying not to think about the fact that he too might be a part of her new breeding stock, he looked out of the airplane window at the dense jungle far below. They landed at night on a modern concrete airstrip well-lighted by huge floodlights. A Rolls-Royce limousine driven by a woman chauffeur pulled up to the Lear jet's passenger stair. She helped to load the car while glancing from time to time at Angelo, as if enjoying a private joke.

The de la Verga 's giant castle's smooth white walls arose out of green semitropical forests to tower in the moon. Before its walls stretched a wide blue green moat which, like a lake, surrounded the mountain-side fortress island. A narrow stone bridge crossed the moat, ending at a massive drawbridge completing the strange isolation Angelo felt as their car crossed the bridge.

"The Iron Don chose this spot because the Indians were very hostile," Helene murmured as her pale hawk-like gray eyes watched the portcullis slowly raise to admit their car.

"It took twenty years just to build the walls and moat. But the task was the measure of the man. He died of a spear wound while trying to get timber supplies up river when he was eighty-five years old."

The car drove through a silent, sleepy street lighted medieval town of barrack-like row houses, with only grated doors marking the stonewalled first floor along the wide stone paved road, under the arbor of shade trees to pass through an inner fortress wall to stop before the front courtyard of the main inner castle.

“Such magnificence,” Angelo noted aloud, staring in wonder at the beautiful Moorish gardens that filled the castle courtyard. In the moonlight he could see fountains of carved marble on all sides that arrayed the path from the castle gate to the front stairway to the palace.

“The Iron Don built the palace in 1569 to be the capital city of a Spanish Viceroyalty east of the Andes to the junction of the Rio Negro and the Rio Madeira. His passion was Moorish history. That is why he built the palace like it is, a miniature Alhambra. My father told me that every stone was hand-cut from the mountains about us. Every piece of furniture and every object in the castle was sent from Spain. They packed it over the mountains on the backs of natives and llamas.”

Angelo could not believe his eyes as the large arabesque carved wooden doors swung open to reveal the palace’s grand entrance.

In silence he walked along the white marble floors, gazing at the beautiful tapestries, each one a masterpiece portraying scenes of the Moorish invasion, conquest, and rule of Spain.

“There is a legend that these tapestries were taken from the Spanish by French troops during one of their many wars. And the King of Spain actually sent an army out just to recover them. A later king gave

them to the Iron Don, as a reward for his services to the crown.”

Angelo nodded as they entered an Arabic-styled grand chamber. At the far end of the room he observed a large ornate golden throne. High above the throne hung a massive single-edged battle axe which was suspended by two gold chains. “A throne?”

“Ah, yes,” she laughed with a sweep of her hand towards the chamber at large. “The Iron Don felt he was a sultan.”

She ran her fingers over the gold and jeweled chair.

“He was.”

“And the battle axe?”

“A servant girl killed his great great grandson with that axe.”

“But it must weigh close to eighty pounds. No woman could swing such a weapon. He must have been caught off-guard.”

“I could use that axe,” she replied, glancing at Cecilia, who bowed her head.

“You see, my dear, his servant girl was his first wife, my great great great grandmother. She fought him in this chamber when he refused to surrender the castle to the revolutionaries.”

“Equal combat?” he asked, slightly awed by the thought that a woman swung that great Spanish two-handed battle axe in some distant revolution that pitted wife against husband.

Helene smiled slightly.

“Come, let me show you something.”

Cecilia opened a side door for them, allowing Helene to take the lead as they entered a portrait gallery. He began to wonder over the fact that he had not seen a single servant except for the chauffeur. Well, it was late at night.

“This is the Iron Duke with his wife, Helene,” she announced standing before the first portrait.

Angelo looked critically at the portrait to discover to his amazement that it was painted by El Greco! It was formal court painting portraying a powerful old man dressed in the uniform of the Spanish military grandee. His courtly dress, although quite foppish, gave no distraction from his obvious strength. He towered over his wife who, gowned as a court lady, was made quite delicate in appearance by the artist.

“And this is my great great grandfather and his wife, Diana,” she noted, passing by other generations of Spanish grandees and their rather stiff-looking wives.

Diana was quite well-named, it would appear. She was equal in height to her husband who shared much family resemblance with the Iron Don’s stature. He also wore the uniform of a grandee but his wife wore a simple, almost severe-looking ball gown, which did much to detract from her femininity.

And then Angelo noticed her eyes and skin tone.

“Why, she is a native woman.”

“Yes,” Helene remarked, looking at him with a wry smile, causing him to realize his *faux pas*.