

The Story of Waitstill Baxter

[Continued from page 6, Col. 4] bits of ribbon, her collars of crocheted thread, her adored coral pendants and her pile of neat cotton handkerchiefs, hemstitched by her own hands. Waitstill, accordingly, with an exclamation at her own unwonted carelessness, darted into her sister's room to replace in perfect order the articles she had disarranged in her haste. She knew them all, these poor little trinkets—humble, pathetic evidences of Patty's feminine vanity and desire to make her bright beauty a trifle brighter.

Suddenly her hand and her eye fell at the same moment on something hidden in a far corner under a white "fascinator," one of those head coverings of filmy wool, dotted with beads, worn by the girls of the period. She drew the glittering, unfamiliar object forward and then lifted it, wondering in her hand.

It was a string of burnished gold beads, the avowed desire of Patty's heart—a string of beads with a brilliant little stone in the fastening. And, as if that were not mysterious enough, there was something slipped over the clasped necklace and hanging from it, as Waitstill held it up to the light—a circlet of plain gold, a wedding ring!

Waitstill stood motionless in the cold, with such a throng of bewildering thoughts, misgivings, imaginings, rushing through her head that they were like a flock of birds beating their wings against her ears. The imaginings were not those of absolute dread or terror, for she knew her Patty.

If she had seen the necklace alone she would have been anxious indeed, for it would have meant that the girl, urged on by ungovernable desire for the ornament, had accepted a present from one who should not have given it to her secretly. But the wedding ring meant something different for Patty—something more, something certain, something unescapable, for good or ill.

A wedding ring could stand for nothing but marriage. Could Patty be married? How, when and where could so great a thing happen without her knowledge? It seemed impossible. How had such a child surmounted the difficulties in the path? Had she been led away by the attractions of some stranger? No, there had been none in the village. There was only one man who had the worldly wisdom or the means to carry Patty off under the very eye of her watchful sister, only one who had the reckless courage to defy her father, and that was Mark Wilson. His name did not bring absolute confidence to Waitstill's mind. He was gay and young and thoughtless. How had he managed to do this wild thing, and had he done all decently and wisely, with consideration for the girl's good name?

The thought of all the risks lying in the train of Patty's youth and inexperience brought a wail of anguish from Waitstill's lips, and, dropping the beads and closing the drawer, she stumbled blindly down the stairs to the kitchen, intent upon one thought only—to find her sister, to look in her eyes, feel the touch of her hand and assure herself of her safety.

She gave a dazed look at the tall clock and was beginning to put on her cloak when the door opened and Patty entered the kitchen by way of the shed—the usual Patty—rosy, buoyant, alert, with a kind of childlike innocence that could hardly be associated with the possession of wedding rings.

"Are you going out, Waity? Wrap up well, for it's freezing cold. Waity, Waity, dear! What's the matter?" she cried, coming closer to her sister in alarm.

Waitstill's face had lost its clear color, and her eyes had the look of some dumb animal that has been struck and wounded. She sank into the flag-bottomed rocker by the window and, leaning back her head, uttered no word, but closed her eyes and gave one long, shivering sigh and a dry sob that seemed drawn from the very bottom of her heart.

CHAPTER XXIII. The Confessional.

"Waity, I know what it is—you have found out about me! Who has been wicked enough to tell you before I could do so? Tell me—who?" "Oh, Patty, Patty!" cried Waitstill, who could no longer hold back her tears. "How could you deceive me so? How could you shut me out of your heart and keep a secret like this from me, who have tried to be mother and sister in one to you ever since the day you were born?"

"God has sent me much to bear, but nothing so bitter as this—to have my sister take the greatest step of her life without my knowledge or counsel!" "Stop, dear, stop, and let me tell you!"

"All is told, and not by you, as it should have been. We've never had anything separate from each other in all our lives, and when I looked in your bureau drawer for a bit of soft cotton—it was nothing more than I have done a hundred times—you can guess now what I stumbled upon—a wedding ring for a hand I have held ever since it was a baby's. My sister has a husband, and I am not even sure of his name!"

"Waity, Waity, don't take it so to heart!" and Patty flung herself on her knees beside Waitstill's chair, "not till you hear everything. When I tell you all you will dry your eyes and smile and be happy about me, and you will

know that in the whole world there is no one else in my love or my life but you and my—my husband!"

"Who is the husband?" asked Waitstill dryly as she wiped her eyes and leaned her elbow on the table.

"There ever been any one but Mark?" "If I should have said that there were several in these past few months."

Waitstill's tone showed clearly that she was still grieved and hurt beyond her power to conceal.

"I have never thought of marrying any one but Mark, and not even of marrying him till a little while ago," said Patty. "Now do not draw away from me and look out of the window as if we were not sisters or you will break my heart."

"Turn your eyes to mine and believe in me, Waity, while I tell you everything, as I have so longed to do all these nights and days. Mark and I have loved each other for a long, long time. It was only play at first, but we were young and foolish and did not understand what was really happening between us."

"You are both of you only a few months older than when you were 'young and foolish,'" objected Waitstill.

"Yes, we are—years and years! Five weeks ago I promised Mark that I would marry him. But how was I to keep my word publicly? You have noticed how insultingly father treats him of late, passing him by without a word when he meets him in the street? You remember, too, that he has never gone to Lawyer Wilson for advice or put any business in his hands since spring?"

"The Wilsons are among father's aversions, that is all you can say. It is no use to try and explain them or rebel against them," Waitstill answered wearily.

"That is all very well and might be borne like many another cross, but I wanted to marry this particular 'aversion,'" argued Patty. "Would you have helped me to marry Mark secretly if I had confided in you?"

"Never in the world—never!" "I knew it," exclaimed Patty triumphantly. "We both said so! And what was Mark to do? He was more than willing to come up here and ask for me like a man, but he knew that he would be ordered off the premises as if he were a thief. That would have angered Mr. and Mrs. Wilson and made matters worse. We talked and talked until we were hoarse; we thought and thought until we nearly had brain fever from thinking, but there seemed to be no way but to take the bull by the horns."

"You are both so young you could well have bided awhile." "We could have bided until we were gray. Nothing would have changed father, and just lately I couldn't make Mark bide," confessed Patty ingenuously.

"He has been in a rage about father's treatment of you and me. He knows we haven't the right food to eat, nothing fit to wear, and not an hour of peace or freedom. He has even heard the men at the store say that our very lives might be in danger if we crossed father's will or angered him beyond a certain point.

"You can't blame a man who loves a girl, if he wants to take her away from such a wretched life. His love would be good for nothing if he did not long to rescue her!"

"I would never have left you behind to bear your slavery alone, while I slipped away to happiness and comfort—not for any man alive would I have done it!" This speech, so unlike Waitstill in its ungenerous reproach, was repented of as soon as it left her tongue. "Oh, I did not mean that, my darling!" she cried. "I would have welcomed any change for you and thanked God for it, if only it could have come honorably and aboveboard."

"But, don't you see, Waity, how my marriage helps everything? That is what makes me happiest; that now I shall have a home and it can be yours. "Father has plenty of money and can get a housekeeper. He is only sixty-five, and as hale and hearty as a man can be. You have served your time, and surely you need not be his drudge for the rest of your life. Mark and I thought you would spend half the year with us."

Waitstill waived this point as too impossible for discussion. "When and where were you married, Patty?" she asked.

"In Allentown, N. H., last Monday, the day you and father went to Saco. Ellen went with us. You needn't suppose it was much fun for me! Girls that think running away to be married is nothing but a lark do not have to deceive a sister like you nor have a father such as mine to reckon with afterward."

"You thought of all that before, didn't you, child?" "Nobody that hasn't already run away to be married once or twice could tell how it was going to feel. Never did I pass so unhappy a day. If Mark was not everything that is kind and gentle he would have tipped me out of the sleigh into a snowbank and left me by the roadside to freeze."

"I might have been murdered instead of only married by the way I behaved, but Mark and Ellen understood. Then the very next day Mark's father sent him up to Bridgton on business, and he had to go to Allentown first to return a friend's horse, so he couldn't break the news to father at once, as he intended."

"Does a New Hampshire marriage hold good in Maine?" asked Waitstill, still intent on the bare facts at the bottom of the romance.

"Well, of course," stammered Patty, somewhat confused. "Maine has her own way of doing things and wouldn't be likely to fancy New Hampshire's."

But nothing can make it wicked or anything but according to law.

"Besides, Mark considered all the difficulties. He is wonderfully clever, and he has a clerkship in a Portsmouth law office waiting for him, and that's where we are going to live, in New Hampshire, where we were married, and my darling sister will come soon and stay months and months with us."

"When is Mark coming back to arrange all this?"

"Late tonight or early tomorrow morning."

"Where did you go after you were married?"

"Where did I go?" echoed Patty in a childish burst of tears. "Where could I go? It took all day to be married—all day long, working and driving hard from sunrise to 7 o'clock in the evening. Then when we reached the bridge Mark dropped me, and I walked up home in the dark and went to bed without any supper for fear that you and father would come back and catch me at it and ask why I was so late."

"My poor, foolish dear!" sighed Waitstill.

Patty's tears flowed faster at the first sound of sympathy in Waitstill's voice, for self pity is very enfeebling. She fairly sobbed as she continued:

"So my only wedding journey was the freezing drive back from Allentown, with Ellen crying all the way



"My poor, foolish dear!" sighed Waitstill.

and wishing that she hadn't gone with us. Mark and I both say we'll never be married again so long as we live."

"Where have you seen your husband from that day to this?"

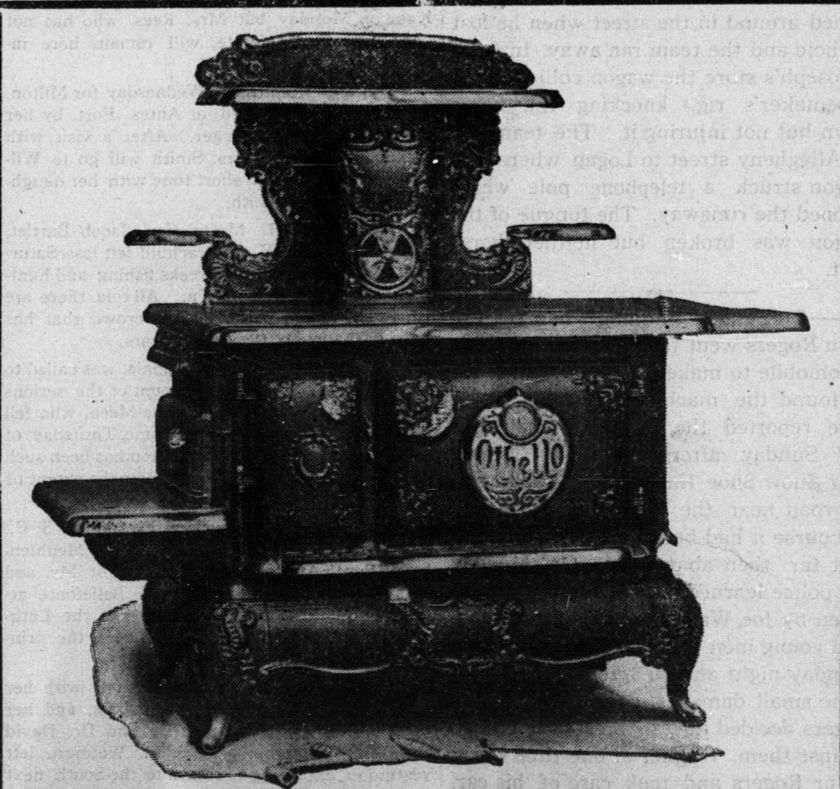
"I haven't laid eyes on him," said Patty, with a fresh burst of woe. "I have a certificate thing and a wedding ring and a beautiful frock and hat that Mark bought in Boston, but no real husband. I'm no more married than ever I was. Don't you remember I said that Mark was sent away on Tuesday morning? And this is Thursday! I've had three letters from him, but I don't know till we see how father takes it when we can tell the Wil-

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sons and start for Portsmouth.

"We shan't really call ourselves married till we get to Portsmouth. We promised each other that from the first. It isn't much like being a bride never to see your bridegroom; to have a father who will fly into a passion when he hears that you are married; not to know whether your new family will like or despise you and to have your only sister angered with you for the first time in her life."

Waitstill's heart melted, and she lifted Patty's tear stained face to hers and kissed it. "Well, dear, I would not have had you do this for the world, but it is done, and Mark seems to have been as wise as a man can be when he does an unwise thing. You are married, and you love each other. That's the comforting thing to me."

"We do," sobbed Patty. "No two people ever loved each other better than we, but it's been all spoiled for fear of father."

"I must say I dread to have him hear the news," and Waitstill knitted her brows anxiously. "I hope it may be soon, and I think I ought to be there when he is told. Mark will never understand or bear with him, and there may be trouble that I could avert."

"I'll be here, too, and I'm not afraid!" and Patty raised her head defiantly. "Father can't unmarry us; that's why we acted in this miserable, secret, underhanded way. Somehow, though I haven't seen Mark since we went to Allentown, I am braver than I was last week, for now I've got somebody to take my part."

[Continued next week.]

Graded All Right. Harold had discovered a new playmate in a boy who had recently moved into the neighborhood. "What sort of a boy is this Johnnie you talk so much about?" asked the careful mother. "Oh, he's not an angel—that isn't his specialty—but he's all right," replied Harold.

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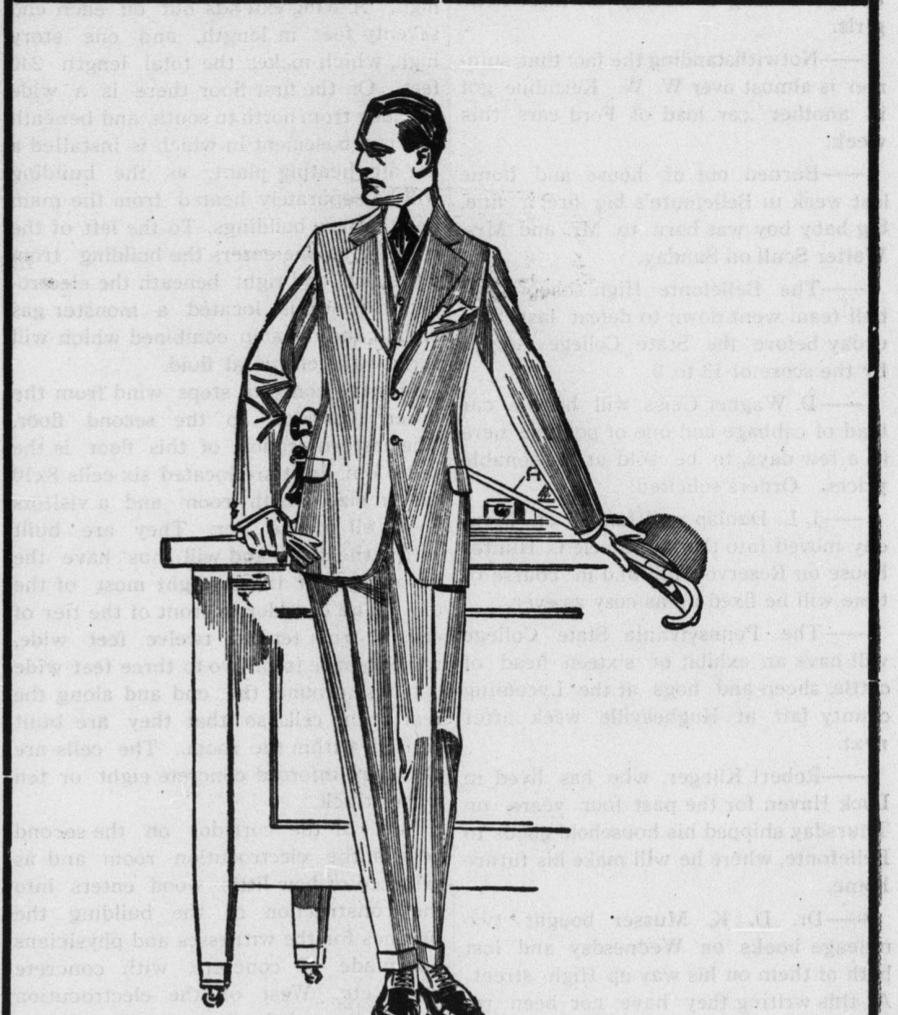
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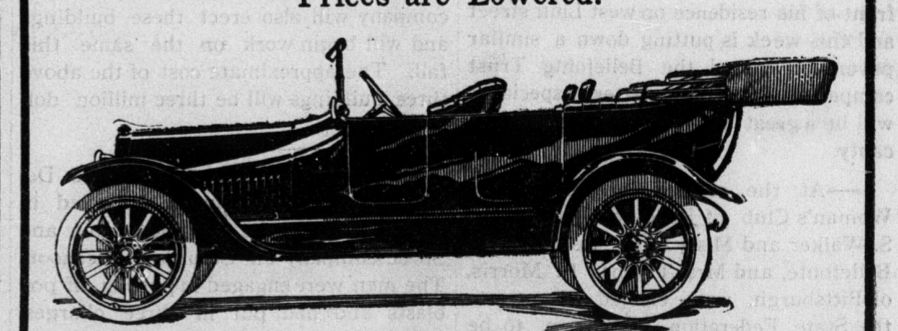
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