

WAITING FOR A WIFE

Story of a Woman Who Wouldn't, and a Man Who Went Away, and the Sequel

By LAURA L. HINCKLEY

IN a secluded corner of a ragged, neglected orchard, under the slow fall of pink-and-white apple-blossom petals, a young girl lay weeping passionately. Tangles of plum trees gone wild, thickets of dead blackberry canes and a dense grown willow hedge surrounded her covert. Her dress, though of cheap material and now abandoned to the young grass, was as daintily coloured as the apple blossoms. Her slender fingers, flung out above her head, writhed and clinched. Scent of apple and plum blossom sweetened the air around her, but the face half pillowed on her arm turned stubbornly earthward. Her attitude had the frantic abandon of a child's, but she cried like a woman, with slow, silent sobs.

The flowery plum branches parted softly and a young man's face looked through. His expression, meant to be arch and mirthful, changed to consternation as he stared at the unconscious weeper. He visibly considered distressfully whether to go unheard or stay; then he pushed through the tangle of plum shoots.

"Gracie!"

The girl gathered herself into a startled, defensive huddle, drawing her slim ankles under her skirts, her back turned toward him, her face hidden.

The young fellow sat down beside her determinedly. His blue overalls and gray flannel shirt defined well enough his muscular and vigorous frame, the shoulders slightly thickened. His slouch hat, pushed back, displayed his sunburnt face, anxious-eyed.

"What's the matter, Grace?"

"Nothing." Her voice broke like a snapped violin string.

"That sounds like nothing! Tell me, Grace, won't you? You oughta tell me anything—now we're engaged."

Silence.

Awkwardly he put one arm about her. She seemed to shrink into smaller compass to avoid his touch. He hesitated palpably, biting his lip. Then he chose the bolder course drawing her to him, bending his face to her soft braids.

The girl's action was as quick as a snake's strike. She thrust back his face with both hands, straining her own face, pale with repulsion, away from him. He released her, turning as pale as she.

In the silence she sat panting. He grew red and pale again before he spoke huskily.

"Look here, Grace, I got to understand this. You're crying because—because we are engaged?"

Unless her terror-quicken breathing were an answer, she made none.

"Then tell me—honest—I got a right to know—is it—is it some other fellow?"

"Oh, no, no!"

FOR the first time she looked at him, her eyes beneath their reddened lids wide with surprised denial. Eyes so blue, so innocent, so pitifully terrified that the young man's heart, remembering their usual vague, dreamy happiness, smote him bitterly. He asked his next question very quietly.

"Then, it's just—you don't like me?"

"But I do like you, Lewis. I like you better than any other boy. Only—I don't want to be married. I don't want to!"

The words carried a suppressed wail. Tears ran down her cheeks, her small mouth quivered, but she held herself motionless.

"Don't cry!" entreated Lewis wretchedly. "Don't!"

He could not bear to look at her tears. He did not dare to kiss them away. A chaos of misery enveloped him, paralyzing thought. He emerged from it presently, clutching his best hope.

"You mean you want to wait a while?"

"I don't want to be married!" she repeated. "Not yet!"

"Was that why you wouldn't let me—why you ran away last night?"

She nodded, and explained in little gasping sentences:

"I thought I wouldn't care when ma—I thought I'd just as soon. I'd rather marry you than anybody else. And so I said I would. And then—After that I got to thinking about it. And I don't want to! I don't want to be married at all!"

Lewis shifted his position to one directly in front of Grace.

"Look here," he demanded. "I want you to tell me just what your pa said about—about me."

"He didn't say anything."

"Well, your ma, then."

She was silent.

"Now, look here! I'm going to tell you the whole

thing myself, all there is of it. If you've got it in your head you got to marry me whether you want to or not, why, it ain't so. Your pa promised he wouldn't say a word to you, and I didn't think he was the man to get around a promise. No, I ain't saying anything against him. Probably he thought he was all right.

"Well, it's like this. I've been workin' here for your pa pretty near two years now, and every day of that time, except maybe a little at the first, I been figuring how awfully lucky I'd be if I could get you to settle down on a little farm somewheres around here with me. I don't suppose you ever even seen how I felt?"

She shook her head.

"No, I suppose not. Any other girl would 'a' seen. It come kinda natural to take you around to the sociables and so on, being in the house that way, and you never thought anything of it. But didn't they josh you about me?"

"No. Vinnie did once, but I didn't like it, so she stopped."

"The old folks didn't see it, either. Well, now the other part of it. Your pa got kind of run behind on my wages. There wasn't any hurry, and I told him so. The crops was poor last year, as you know. But day before yesterday, when the frost got the corn, he came to me all worked up about the money he owed me. He said he didn't see any way but to let it go on the farm, and that broke him all up because the farm was all he'd have to leave you. So I out and told him if things went the way I wanted 'em to, everything I'd have would be yours. It surprised him but he took to the idea. He said he'd be in favour of us getting married right away. I told him not to let on a word to you till I'd seen you; and he said he wouldn't. You needn't think I'm going to turn your folks out of house and home, because I'm not that kind. Of course your pa and me can make some other arrangements—if you—You—you seemed willing last night."

His voice stopped, choked by a gust of angry pain.

"I ought to marry you," said Grace tremulously, "because you are so good to pa, and other men offered you more wages and you wouldn't leave us. I—I will, if you want me to."

Lewis seemed not to hear. He had wound a plum sprout around his hand and was trying to pull it up, tugging with tightened lips.

"I will marry you, Lewis, if you want me to."

The plum sprout came up with ten inches of root. Lewis stared at it vaguely as if wondering where it came from, threw it away, and turned to Grace with a pleasant smile.

"What you want is more time to get used to the idea in. That's right, ain't it?"

"Yes. I will marry you if you want me to."

"Don't you dare say that again! I—there ain't anything else I want; but you can wait till you get good and ready. Maybe we better wait till fall."

He made the suggestion tentatively, but she seized it with the eagerness of one accepting reprieve from execution.

"Yes, yes! Till fall."

"All right. Don't you worry about the folks. I'll fix it with them. Now you ain't going to be afraid of me any more, are you?"

"No," she faltered, shrinking from the warmth in his eyes.

"Oh, you poor little thing!" he burst out. "What do you think I'm going to do to you? Have I ever been mean to you?"

SHE was hardly aware of the words, only of frightened withdrawal from the mingled passions that fought in them for outlet. Lewis put them away promptly; his two-year apprenticeship had not gone for nothing.

"Well, we'll wait till fall. That's a bargain. Shake hands on it."

Her hand met his readily, but when he would have held it longer than need be, flinched and drew back. When he let it go she seemed to feel herself released, for she got up, saying:

"I must go now. It's 'most supper time."

"Wait a minute! We're good friends, ain't we?" he entreated. "You like me as well as you did before?"

"Oh, Lewis," she cried wistfully, "I wish you were like you were before."

"Well, I will be," he promised. "Don't you feel bad?"

He watched her slip away through the blackberry canes, slight and tender and fair, and his heart cried out for her.

"I got to be patient," he told himself, striding away across the field. "I got to be patient with her. She's just a little girl."

The engagement of Grace Elliston and Lewis Brant became understood in the neighbourhood, where a direct announcement would have been considered indelicate. Not so a direct question. Vinnie Holderman, who lived half a mile down the road and counted herself, as indeed she was, Grace's nearest girl friend, came up to talk it over.

"Well, I heard you and Lewis are going to get married."

"Not till fall," Grace fluttered. "Not for a long time."

"Well, fall's soon enough," retorted Vinnie. "Why, you ain't but seventeen." Vinnie was twenty, and somewhat of a belle among the "boys." "Lewis is a good, steady boy all right, and he cert'nly never looked at any girl around here but you. What are you going to get married in?"

"I don't know," faltered Grace nervously. "I don't have to think about that yet."

"Grace ain't very fond of sewing," interrupted her mother apologetically.

MRS. ELLISTON was a little old woman with bent shoulders and vague, pathetic eyes. Her hair was quite gray and her face deeply lined. Grace had been the sole and late-born child of a long-delayed union.

Later, when the girls were alone in Grace's bedroom, Vinnie complained:

"I don't think you're very friendly, Grace. I've told you things about lots of fellows, and you never said a word to me about Lewis."

"There isn't anything to say. I'm just going to marry him after a while."

"Is he goin' to give you a ring?"

Grace opened her lowest bureau drawer, drew out a large pasteboard box from the farthest corner, took from under a number of other things a smaller ornamental box incrusting with shells, relic of some childish Christmas. From the bottom of this she brought out a jeweller's velvet ring box, pressed the spring in the lid, and passed it to Vinnie.

"Land, ain't it sweet! Why don't you wear it?"

"Oh, I don't want to. It might get lost or something."

"Well, you're queer! You bet I'd wear it."

Grace silently restored her boxes to their original order.

She did not particularly mind having the ring in the drawer. The torture was to have it on her finger. She had been very quiet and pale the night Lewis put it there, and hidden it away before she slept. She was grateful to him for not asking where it was. In a dim way she saw that he tried to bring back her lost friend Lewis; to banish the hated suitor Lewis.

This partially restored Lewis came nearer to her confidence than any other. She could not speak of her revulsions. They seemed to her indelicate and morbid. She hated herself because she could not accept her obvious lot quietly without caring, as she supposed other people did. She had never read a novel or encountered any literary presentment of love, though she had an extensive acquaintance with Sunday-school fiction in which the heroines usually married. The idea of talking intimately with either of her parents did not enter her head. Even if she could have broken her life-long reserve, she had no reason to allege why she should not marry Lewis; and they had cogent reasons why she should.

There was not a phase of the situation Lewis had not pondered. The economic vantage he held by right of his manhood and young strength could not be eluded. He knew that his services were worth more than the wages the old man could not pay. He did not see how the old man could manage without him. The thing to do was plainly to wait. In the emotional game he seemed to hold all the cards, with no rival, a settled place in Grace's regard and incessant opportunity.

He set himself by gentleness and self-control to soothe and lull and win her. A task not without difficulty. He sat opposite her three times a day at one small table; he watched her at all her household tasks, admired her sewing, helped at her gardening; he spent all his evenings in her company, and slept under the same low roof. He was her confessed and accepted lover—and he might not