

[The Sheltered Life]

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Mari Tomasi Men Against Granite

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THE SHELTERED LIFE

She lived in one of Barre's oldest houses. A gracious, red-brick Georgian structure, misplaced, it seemed, in the confusion of stores, office buildings and beer taverns that crowded the busy Main Street.

Miss Wheaton sat in a straight backed chair, her feet primly crossed, her thin, white hands caressing a bowl of sweet-peas. "These flame colored ones are my favorites," she said. "They seem to radiate life and warmth. One corner of my garden is ablaze with them." She spoke in a low, clear voice. Under the tight bodice her breathing was slow and easy. Her full, old-fashioned skirt of black moire fell in shiny folds to the floor. A kerchief of tan satin was knotted at her throat. The only touch of color in a somber costume. The fine white hair was drawn back neatly from a broad forehead. Her eyes were still beautiful, large and unusually lustrous in a delicately moulded face. Except for the pert, bird-like movements of her lips, she might have been sitting for a photograph.

"Newell Kinsman, a lawyer, built this house in 1828," Miss Wheaton said. "It was two years in building. In those days doctors' and lawyers' offices were small, individual buildings. Lawyer Kinsman's office was directly across from here. He employed local men for the labor. Barre boasted skilled carpenters and stone masons. There's 2 a house out in

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Chelsea identical to this one even to doorway and window frames. The owners say it was built by a man who bore Mrs. Kinsman's maiden name. It seems logical to assume that the same man was the master builder of this house. When my father was a young man he studied law with old Lawyer Kinsman. Eventually they formed a partnership. Later when Lawyer Kinsman went West my father bought the house on easy terms. Father was a struggling young lawyer at that time. Only the two families have lived here, the Kinsmans and the Wheatons." Miss Wheaton's eyes traveled the room slowly. She said simply, "I would hate to part with it.

"My great-great-grandfather on my mother's side was Barre's first settler. That was in 1786. There is another man whose name is mentioned in some Barre histories, but he cannot truly be called one of the original settlers since he merely came here prospecting and left shortly after completing his business. My great-great-grandfather organized the first church in Barre, and he was one of the committee to give us Elmwood Cemetery.

"You've heard, of course, how Barre received its name? Barre was born fighting. Originally it was called Wildersburg. In 1793, seven years after my great-great-grandfather settled here, that small group of settlers decided that the name Wildersburg was coarse and rude. Sherman, a man from Barre, Massachusetts, was in favor of changing the name to that of his home town. Thompson was just as strong for his 3 home town Holden. They agreed to fight it out in an old barn. And fight they did. Blows rained and fists smacked until Thompson was thrown exhausted to the floor. Sherman, the victor, shouted, 'There, by God, the name is Barre.'

"My grandfather was Captain of the Washington Guards, men chosen from" Miss Wheaton smiled, "the aristocracy to escort the Governor. I still have part of his uniform. The guards wore blue pants trimmed with red; red tunics edged with blue; high leather hats topped with a short brush plume. Chains were looped around them to button on the sides. When I was a child I'd take the hat by its chin strap and use it for gathering butter-nuts. There

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were trees then towards the back of the house. I miss them." Miss Wheaton added wryly, "There's a steam laundry there now.

My mother used to say that the 1830 period was a very expensive day. The higher classes vied with each other in elaborate entertainment. Sideboards were always filled with wines and whiskies.

"Sunday amusements in the old days?" Miss Wheaton's eyes twinkled. "There was no such thing. The afternoon or evening was usually spent with an open prayerbook before you. But we didn't lack social diversions during the week. Parties, entertainment in the homes, were more popular than today. I've often wondered if rural Vermonters did not build such large, rambling houses for that very reason - entertainment. And, too, "for their large families. Early 4 Vermonters were famed for that, you know. Hotel and home dances were popular. They started at three in the afternoon. At six or seven supper was served, then the dancing began again. I've always thought of them as marathons. The young people were pretty husky. They'd dance until the small hours, until they were all danced out. Yes, square dances, of course. And they had good spring floors. The hotels made a good thing out of elaborate balls. That was before the days of railroads. Hotels were necessarily short distanced, this for the four tired coach horses that had to be rested, or exchanged for fresh ones. Aristocrats formed the committees for these balls. They were gala affairs.

"We had our sports, too. We had golf early. No, the Scotch certainly had no part in introducing it in Barre. We did it ourselves. All Yankees we were. I was one of the committee that started the first golf club in Barre. I'll tell you how it came about. A young printer - he's now owner of the Bennington Banner - had gone to Florida for his health. When he returned he spoke enthusiastically of a sport he had enjoyed in the south. That was golf." Miss Wheaton paused. She passed a thin hand over her forehead as if to stir up memories. "Wait," she said softly, "I believe a little, a very little Scotch blood did creep into that first committee. There was a Canadian, a minister in the Presbyterian church,

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who admitted to one-fourth Scotch blood. We got together - a small group of us - and selected a location. We invited a very well known golfer 5 to give his opinion of the course. I remember the day he came. It was a wet, miserable day. We went with him to the church. None of us, except two, had ever held a golf club in our hands. This golfer lined us up in the vestibule of the church, umbrellas in our hands for clubs, - and there we had our first lesson in golf. We original members of that committee are too old for golf now. We've given up the club. It's that one that stands above Dodge's crossing half way to Montpelier.

"I used to like archery and croquet." She pointed to the bow-and-arrow over the door. "They were given to me by my brother. They were made and presented to him by an old Indian. That was years ago when we were both little children. Archery in a fine sport, good for the eyes and the muscle. Two years ago a Scotch minister here in Barre tried to revive the sport. But no Clubs, to my knowledge, have been formed. The modern sports have their good points. They're more active. They give you plenty of exercise. I believe I would have enjoyed tennis. On nice Sunday afternoons we'd have snowshoe parties. That pair up there beside the bow-and-arrow were the ones I used when I was of school age.

"Living here on Main Street I've seen Barre grow and change color, you might say. So many foreigners rushing to the sheds and quarries brought color and varied interests to what was a staid, sleepy valley town. I wouldn't like to say they made Barre 'wild,' I prefer to say 'progressive 6 and cosmopolitan.' But it suffered the usual growing pains that every progressive town experiences.

"Those first Scotch were not skilled workers; that is, not in the same class with the artists and fine statue cutters who came a little later. I mean the Italians. The first Scotch did rude bulk work. They were an uncultured, ignorant group, and they had no respect for women. I can remember then standing three and four abreast in the streets, - and the streets in those days were narrow. They'd make no move to allow a lady to pass. Many was the time - and it seemed an experience cruelly fated to rainy weather - that we'd see a line of them ahead of us. If there happened to be two or three of us girls together we wouldn't

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mind it so much. We'd pick up our skirts and step through the mud to the backyards of the houses, and in this roundabout fashion finally reach our destination. There were questionable women that came into Barre at this period. Perhaps these Scotch were to be blamed. They were a bad lot. Most of the Scotch had left their wives and families in the old country until such time as they could afford to send for them. The later Scotch immigrants were fine people. Today their descendants are some of Barre's foremost citizens. As I remember it, those first Scotch attended the Congregational church. As soon as they could they organized the Presbyterian church. I don't remember any children of these immigrants being at school with me. They must have started a few years later. 7 “No, I wouldn't begin to compare those early Scotch with the Italian and Spanish. I've always felt that the Italian and Spanish were a more refined people. Even today I'd say that of these foreign groups they are the most eager to educate their children.

“Their children rate high in school work. Whenever possible after high school they complete their education in colleges or professional schools. There's a Spanish family here that has worked for me several years. Three boys and the father. The oldest boy did odd work for me around the house and in the garden during his four years of high school. When he got a job as draftsman, the second boy came to me. Eventually he found a good job as truckman, and the third brother started to work for me. This summer he had an opportunity to stay on a farm so he sent his father to me. He's a fine old man. A treasure. The best gardener I ever had.” Miss Wheaton touched a finger to a healthy, flame-colored sweet-pea. “Well, you can see what he does to my flowers. He speaks little English. One day [?] I asked one of the boys if they read and wrote Spanish. He said no, the only Spanish they spoke was a dialect. I don't intend to lose contact with that family. There's still a fourth brother who will soon be able to work for me. I'm looking forward to having him.

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"The French? Most of them are Canucks. Ignorant, and they don't care if they are. As for the Irish, well," - Miss Wheaton's lips curved into a smile - "well, we have 8 to accept them as a necessary evil."

"I remember little of the strike of '21," Miss Wheaton continued. "I often sit by the window, and I did those days, but I remember no parade and no militia. There was a feeling of oppression in the air, and I felt that plans were being laid in secret. Plans that we outside the granite industry knew nothing of. I saw clusters of men, groups of them hurrying along the street on their way to various halls where they held meetings. Their voices were loud and harsh, raised in anger. They waved their arms and shook their fists. It was all very disturbing. My mother was alive then. Just she, and the housekeeper and myself in the house. The strike made no disorder or confusion in our even tenor of living. Not during the day. At night we heard the tramp-tramp of feet on the pavement outside the house. There was much shouting. Cars kept roaring by, going I don't know where. In spite of locked doors and windows, I found it all very disconcerting. I had no inclination to sleep.

"Living quietly here as I do, I know little of labor troubles and less of the granite industry. I do know that the last granite strike caused a great deal of temporary poverty and need. One Barre charitable organization that I am acquainted with reported thirty new families added to their lists for temporary assistance. Most of the aid was in the form of food; a few families accepted clothing that had been contributed by various ladies of the organization. I was not active in this organization but I was told that there were very few Spanish and Italian families who accepted help. The few that did receive aid did so with profuse thanks, and an unmistakable feeling of shame.

"I remember vaguely of workers being injured during the strike, and of riots, but I have forgotten the details. It seems to me that if strikes in attaining their end must cause such need and injury, then certainly they are no solution to labor conditions. Perhaps the granite workers were justified in asking for more pay and less hours. It's hard work, and injurious to health. I know that many of these workers have good sized families. I'm

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not well acquainted with them. I don't have to be to know that death from stonecutters' tuberculosis has struck members of several of these families. For about fifty years I have read the same pitiful stories repeated in the obituaries in the Barre Daily Times.

Mr. A—, aged 50, died today after an illness of several months. Since coming to this country he has been employed as stonecutter in the local sheds. He was a member of the Granite Cutters' Union. Surviving him are his wife, three sons and a daughter."

Miss Wheaton patted the fold of her moire skirt thoughtfully. "Granite has put Barre in an enviable position in the State. Seventy-five percent of our people own their own homes. Being on Barre's Main Street my home would make a fine location for a business block. I have been offered 10 close to \$100,000 for it. But I won't sell. Never. It's my home.

Relief percentage is low. City laborers receive higher wages than in any other Vermont town. Barre's a progressive town. I suppose there must be heartache wherever there is industry on a large scale. Someone pays for its progress —"