

The Story of Waitstill Baxter

(Continued from page 6, Col. 4)

elect to that relationship by the common consent of the community, their fitness being established by great age, by decided individuality or eccentricity of character, by uncommon loveliness or by the possession of an abundant wit and humor. There was no formality about the thing. Certain women were always called "Aunt Sookie," or "Aunt Hitty," or what not, while certain men were distinguished as "Uncle Rish," or "Uncle Pel," without previous arrangement or the consent of the high contracting parties.

Such a couple were Cephas Cole's father and mother, Aunt Abby and Uncle Bart. Bartholomew Cole's trade was that of a joiner. As for Aunt Abby's, it can only be said that she made all trades her own by sovereign right of investigation, and what she did not know about her neighbor's occupations was unlikely to be discovered on this side of Jordan. One of the villagers declared that Aunt Abby and her neighbor, Mrs. Abel Day, had argued for an hour before they could make a bargain about the method of disseminating a certain important piece of news, theirs by exclusive right of discovery and prior possession. Mrs. Day offered to give Mrs. Cole the privilege of Saco hill and Aunt Betty Jack's, she herself to take Guide Board and Town House hills. Aunt Abby quickly proved the injustice of this decision, saying that there were twice as many families living in Mrs. Day's chosen territory as there were in that allotted to her, so the river road to Milliken's mills was grudgingly awarded to Aunt Abby by way of compromise, and the ladies started on what was a tour of mercy in those days—the furnishing of a subject of discussion for long, quiet evenings.

Uncle Bart's joiner's shop was at the foot of Guide Board hill on the Riverboro side of the bridge, and it was the pleasantest spot in the whole village. The shop itself had a cheery look, with its weather stained shingles, its small square windows and its hospitable door, half as big as the front side of the building. The step was an old millstone too worn for active service, and the piles of chips and shavings on each side of it had been there for so many years that sweet williams, clove pinks and purple phlox were growing in among them in the most irresponsible fashion, while a morning glory vine had crept up and curled around a long handled rake that had been standing against the front of the house since early spring. There was an air of cozy and amiable disorder about the place that would have invited friendly confabulation even had not Uncle Bart's white head, honest, ruddy face and smiling welcome coaxed you in before you were aware. A fine Nothead apple tree shaded the side windows, and underneath it reposed all summer a bright blue sleigh, for Uncle Bart always described himself as being "plagued for shed room" and kept things as he liked at the shop, having a "pison neat" wife who did exactly the opposite at his house.

The seat of the sleigh was all white now with scattered fruit blossoms, and one of Waitstill's earliest remembrances was of going downhill with



"A shop or a barn has saved many a man's life and reason."

Patty toddling at her side, of Uncle Bart's lifting them into the sleigh and permitting them to sit there and eat the ripe red apples that had fallen from the tree. Uncle Bart's son, Cephas (Patty's secret adorer), was a painter by trade and kept his pots and cans and brushes in a little outhouse at the back, while Uncle Bart himself stood every day behind his long joiner's bench almost knee deep in shavings. How the children loved to play with the white, satiny rings, making them into necklaces, hanging them to their ears and weaving them into wreaths. Wonderful houses could always be built in the corner of the shop out of the little odds and ends and "nubbins" of white pine, and Uncle Bart was ever ready to cut or saw a special piece needed for some great purpose.

The sound of the plane was sweet music in the old joiner's ears. "I don't

hardly know how I'd 'a' made out if 'I had to work in a mill," he said confidentially to Cephas. "The noise of a saw goin' all day, coupled with your mother's tongue mornin's an' evenin's, would 'a' been too much for my weak head. I'm a quiet man, Cephas, a man that needs a peaceful shop where he can get away from the comforts of home now and then without shirkin' his duty nor causin' gossip. If you should ever marry, Cephas—which don't look to me likely without you pick out a dif'rent girl—I'd advise you not to keep your stock o' paints in the barn or the shed, for it's altogether too handy to the house and the women folks. Take my advice and have a place to yourself, even if it's a small one. A shop or a barn has saved many a man's life and reason, Cephas, for it's ag'in a woman's nature to have you underfoot in the house without hectorin' you. Choose a girl same 's you would a horse that you want to hitch up into a span; 't ain't every two that'll stan' together without kickin'. When you get the right girl keep out of her way consid'able an' there'll be less wear an' tear."

CHAPTER VII. Cephas Speaks.

IT was June and the countryside was so beautiful it seemed as if no one could be unhappy, however great the cause. That was what Waitstill Baxter thought as she sat down on the millstone step for a word with the old joiner, her best and most understanding friend in all the village.

"I've come to do my mending here with you," she said brightly, as she took out her well filled basket and threaded her needle. "Isn't it a wonderful morning? Nobody could look the world in the face and do a wrong thing on such a day, could they, Uncle Bart?"

The meadows were a waving mass of golden buttercups; the shallow water at the river's edge just below the shop was blue with spikes of arrow weed; a bunch of fragrant water lilies, gathered from the mill pond's upper levels, lay beside Waitstill's mending basket, and every foot of roadside and field within sight was swaying with long stemmed white and gold daisies. The June grass, the friendly, humble, companionable grass, that no one ever praises as they do the flowers, was a rich emerald green, a velvet carpet fit for the feet of the angels themselves. And the elms and maples! Was there ever such a year for richness of foliage? And the sky, was it ever so blue or so clear, so far away, or so completely like heaven, as you looked at its reflection in the glassy surface of the river?

"Yes, it's a pretty good day," allowed Uncle Bart judiciously as he took a squint at his T-square. "I don't know's I should want to start out an' try to beat it! The Lord can make a good many kinds o' weather in the course of a year, but when he puts his mind on to it an' kind o' gives himself a free hand he can turn out a June mornin' that must make the devil sick to his stomach with envy! All the same, Waity, my cow ain't beavin' herself any better'n usual. She's been rampagin' since sun up, I've seen mother chasin' her out o' Mis' Day's garden patch twice a'ready! It seems real good an' honey to see you settin' there sewin' while I'm workin' at the bench, Cephas is down to the store, so I s'pose your father's off somewhere?"

Perhaps the June grass was a little greener, the buttercups yellower, the foliage more lacy, the sky bluer, because Deacon Baxter had taken his luncheon in a pail under the wagon seat and departed on an unwilling journey to Moderation, his object being to press the collection of some accounts too long overdue. There was something tragic in the fact, Waitstill thought, that whenever her father left the village for a whole day, life at once grew brighter, easier, more hopeful. One could breathe freely, speak one's heart out, believe in the future, when father was away.

The girls had harbored many delightful plans at early breakfast. As it was Saturday, Patty could catch little Rod Boynton if he came to the bridge on errands as usual, and if Ivory could spare him for an hour at noon they would take their luncheon and eat it together on the river bank as Patty had promised him. At the last moment, however, Deacon Baxter had turned around in the wagon and said: "Patience, you go down to the store and have a regular housecleanin' in the stockroom. Git Cephas to lift what you can't lift yourself, move everything in the place, sweep and dust it, scrub the floor, wash the window and make room for the new stuff that they'll bring up from Milltown 'bout noon. If you have any time left over put new papers on the shelves out front and clean up and fix the show window. Don't stand round gabbin' with Cephas, and see't he don't waste time that's paid for by me. Tell him he might clean up the terbaccer stans round the stove, black it and cover it up for the summer if he ain't too busy servin' cust'mers."

"The whole day spoiled!" wailed Patty, flinging herself down in the kitchen rocker. "Father's powers of invention beat anything I ever saw! That stockroom could have been cleaned any time this month, and it's too heavy work for me anyway; it spoils my hands grubbing around those nasty, sticky, splintery boxes and barrels. Instead of being out of doors I've got to be shut up in that smelly, rummy, tobacco, salt-fishy, pepperminty place with Cephas Cole! He won't have a pleasant morning, I can tell you! I shall snap his head off every time he speaks to me."

"So I would!" Waitstill answered composedly. "Everything is so clearly his fault that I certain' would work off my temper on Cephas! Still, I can think of a way to make matters come out right. I've got a great basket of mending that must be done, and you remember there's a choir rehearsal for the new anthem this afternoon, but anyway I can help a little on the cleaning. Then you can make Rodman do a few of the odd jobs; it will be a novelty to him. And Cephas will work his fingers to the bone for you, as you well know, if you treat him like a human being."

"All right!" cried Patty joyously, her mood changing in an instant. "There's Rod coming over the bridge now. Toss me my gingham apron and the scrubbing brush and the pail and the tin of soap and the cleaning cloths. Let's see. The broom's down there, so I've got everything. If I wave a towel from the store pack up luncheon for three. You come down, and bring your mending. Then when you see how I'm getting on we can consult. I'm going to take the 10 cents I've saved and spend it in raisins. I can get a good many if Cephas gives me wholesale price, with family discount subtracted from that. Cephas would treat me to candy in a minute, but if I let him we'd have to ask him to the picnic. Goodby!" And the volatile creature darted down the hill singing "There'll be something in heaven for children to do" at the top of her healthy young lungs.

The waving signal a little later on showed that Rodman could go to the picnic, the fact being that he was having a holiday from 11 o'clock until 2, and Ivory was going to drive the bridge at noon anyway, so his permission could then be asked.

Patty's mind might have been thought entirely on her ugly task as she swept and dusted and scrubbed that morning, but the reverse was true. Mark Wilson had gone away without saying goodby to her. This was not surprising perhaps, as she was about as much sequestered in her hill-top prison as a Turkish beauty in a harem. Neither was it astonishing that Mark did not write to her. He never had written to her, and as her father always brought home the very infrequent letters that came to the family Mark knew that any sentimental correspondence would be fraught with danger. No, everything was probably just as it should be, and yet—well, Patty had expected during the last three weeks that something would happen to break up the monotony of her former existence. She hardly knew what it would be, but the kiss dropped so lightly on her cheek by Mark Wilson still burned in remembrance and made her sure that it would have a sequel or an explanation.

Mark's sister Ellen and Phil Perry were in the midst of some form of lovers' quarrel, and during its progress Phil was paying considerable attention to Patty at Sabbath school and prayer meeting, occasions, it must be confessed, only provocative of very indirect and long distance advances. Cephas Cole, to the amazement of every one but his (constitutionally) exasperated mother, was "toning down" the ell of the family mansion, mitigating the lively yellow and putting another fresh coat of paint on it, for no conceivable reason save that of pleasing the eye of a certain capricious, ungrateful young hussy, who would probably say, when her verdict was asked, that she didn't see any particular difference in it one way or another.

Trade was not especially brisk at the deacon's emporium this sunny June Saturday morning. Cephas may have possibly lost a customer or two by leaving the store vacant while he toiled and sweated for Miss Patience Baxter in the stockroom at the back, overhanging the river, but no man alive could see his employer's lovely daughter tugging at a keg of shingle nails without trying to save her from a broken back, although Cephas could have watched his mother move the house and barn without feeling the slightest anxiety in her behalf. If he could ever get the "heft" of the "dog-

goned" cleaning out of the way so that Patty's mind could be free to entertain his proposition; could ever secure one precious moment of silence when she was not slatting and banging, pushing and pulling things about, her head and ears out of sight under a snelf and an irritating air of absorption about her whole demeanor; if that moment of silence could ever, under Providence, be simultaneous with the absence of customers in the front shop, Cephas intended to offer himself to Patience Baxter that very morning.

Once, during a temporary lull in the rear, he started to meet his fate when Rodman Boynton followed him into the back room, and the boy was at once set to work by Patty, who was the most consummate slave driver in the state of Maine. After half an hour there was another heaven sent chance, when Rodman went up to Uncle Bart's shop with a message for Waitstill, but just then, in came Bill Morrill, a boy of twelve, with a request for a gallon of molasses, and would Cephas lend him a stone jug over Sunday, for his mother had hers "soakin' out in soap suds 'cause 'twa'n't smellin' jest right."

Bill's message given, he hurried up the road on another errand, promising to call for the molasses later, and again there was perfect quiet in the stockroom. As the door opened, Cephas, taking his last chance, went forward to meet Patty, who was turning down the skirt of her dress, taking the cloth off her head, smoothing her hair and tying on a clean white ruffled apron, in which she looked as pretty as a pink.

"Patty," stammered Cephas, seizing his golden opportunity. "Patty, keep your mind on me for a minute. I've put a new coat o' paint on the ell just to please you. Won't you get married and settle down with me? I love you so I can't eat nor drink nor tend store nor nothin'!"

"Oh, I—couldn't, Cephas, thank you. I just couldn't—don't ask me!" cried Patty, as nervous as Cephas himself now that her first offer had really come. "I'm only seventeen, and I don't feel like settling down, Cephas, and father wouldn't think of letting me get married."

"Don't play tricks on me, Patty, and keep showin' me off so an' givin' wrong reasons," pleaded Cephas. "What's the trouble with me? I know mother's temper's ornartin', but we never need go into the main house daytimes, and father'd alert stand up ag'in her if she didn't treat you right. I've got a good trade, and father has \$100 o' my savin's that I can draw out tomorrer if you'll have me."

"I can't, Cephas. Don't move—stay where you are. No, don't come any nearer. I'm not fond of you that way, and, besides—and, besides!" Her blush and her evident embarrassment gave Cephas a new fear.

"You ain't promised a'ready, be you," he asked anxiously, "when there ain't a feller anywheres around that's ever stepped foot over your father's doornill but jest me?"

"I haven't promised anybody or anybody," Patty answered sately, gaining her self control by degrees, "but I won't deny that I'm considering—that's true!"

"Considerin' who?" asked Cephas, turning pale.

"Oh—several, if you must know the truth," and Patty's tone was cruel in its jauntiness.

"Several!" The word did not sound like ordinary work-a-day Riverboro English in Cephas' ears. He knew that "several" meant more than one, but he was too stunned to define the term properly in its present strange connection.

(Continued next week.)

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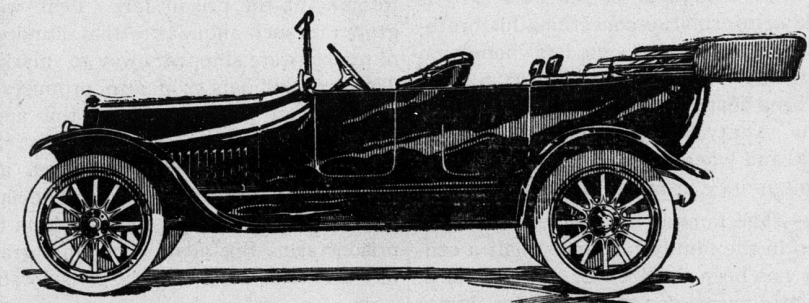
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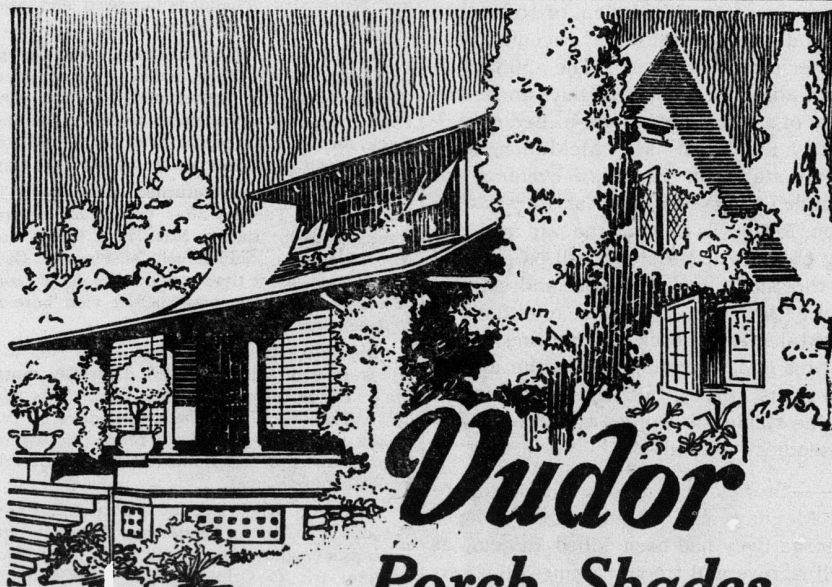
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