

# The Story of Waitstill Baxter

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## SYNOPSIS

Waitstill Baxter and her sister, Patience (Patty), keep house for their widowed, mean father, Ivory Boynton, whose father disappeared, is interested in Waitstill. He takes care of his daughter's mother.

Mrs. Boynton expects her husband to return. Rodman, a young boy, is a member of the Boynton household.

Ivory's father abandoned his family to follow Jacob Cochrane, a mystic. Patience chafes under her father's stern rule.

Patty has two admirers—Mark Wilson, an educated young man, and Cephas Cole, who is unlearned. Mark kisses her.

Waitstill is spending her life in loving care of Patience. Aunt Abby and Uncle Bart Cole are friends of the whole community.

Cephas Cole, tending store for Baxter, proposes to Patty and is rejected. In his agitation he lets the molasses run all over the store floor.

Although they love each other, Waitstill and Ivory suppress their affection because of their household cares.

[Continued next week.]

"Whoever 'tis wouldn't do any better by you'n I would. I'd take a lickin' for you any day," Cephas exclaimed abruptly, after a long pause.

"That wouldn't make any difference, Cephas," said Patty firmly, moving toward the front door as if to end the interview. "If I don't love you unlicked I couldn't love you any better licked, now, could I? Goodness gracious, what am I stepping in? Cephas, quick! Something has been running all over the floor. My feet are sticking to it."

"Good gosh! It's Mis' Morrill's molasses!" cried Cephas, brought to his senses suddenly.

It was too true! The gallon measure, forgotten by Cephas, had been filled to the brim ten minutes before, and ever since the treacly liquid had been overflowing the top and spreading in a brown flood, unnoticed, over the floor. Patty's feet were glued to it, her buff calico skirts lifted high to escape harm.

"I can't move," she cried. "Oh, you stupid, stupid Cephas! How could you leave the molasses spigot turned on? See what you've done! You've wasted quarts and quarts! What will father say and how will you ever clean up such a mess? You never can get the floor to look so that he won't notice it, and he is sure to miss the molasses. You've ruined my shoes, and I simply can't bear the sight of you!"

At this Cephas all but blubbered in the agony of his soul. It was bad enough to be told by Patty that she



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was "considering several," but his first romance had ended in such complete disaster that he saw in a vision his life blasted—changed in one brief moment from that of a prosperous young painter to that of a blighted and despoiled bungler, whose week's wages were likely to be expended in molasses to make good the deacon's loss.

"Find those cleaning cloths I left in the back room," ordered Patty, with a flashing eye. "Get some blocks or bits of board or stones for me to walk on so that I can get out of your nasty mess. Fill Bill Morrill's jug, quick, and set it out on the steps for him to pick up. I don't know what you'd do with 'ut me to plan for you! Lock the front door and hang father's sign that he's gone to dinner on the doorknob. Scoop up all the molasses you can with one of those new towels on the counter. Scoop and scrape and scoop and scrape; then put a cloth on your oldest broom, pour lots of water on, pall after pall, and swab. When you've swabbed till it won't do any more good, then scrub. After that I shouldn't wonder if you had to fan the floor with a newspaper or if I'll never get dry before fa-

ther comes home. I'll sit on the flour barrel a little while and advise, but I can't stay long because I'm going to a picnic. Hurry up and don't look as if you were going to die any minute! It's no use crying over spilt molasses. You don't suppose I'm going to tell any tales after you've made me an offer of marriage, do you? I'm not so mean as all that, though I may have my faults."

It was nearly 2 o'clock before the card announcing Deacon Baxter's absence at dinner was removed from the front doorknob, and when the store was finally reopened for business it was a most dejected clerk who dealt out groceries to the public. The worst feature of the affair was that every one in the two villages suddenly and contemporaneously wanted molasses, so that Cephas spent the afternoon reviewing his misery by continually turning the tap and drawing off the fatal liquid. Then, too, every inquisitive boy in the neighborhood came to the back of the store to view the operation, exclaiming: "What makes the floor so wet? Hain't been spillin' molasses, have yer? Bet yer have! Good joke on Old Foxy!"

## CHAPTER VIII. On Tory Hill.

IT had been a heavenly picnic, the little trio all agreed as to that, and when Ivory saw the Baxter girls coming up the shady path that led along the river from the Indian cellar to the bridge it was a merry group and a transfigured Rodman that caught his eye. The boy, trailing on behind with the baskets and laden with tin dippers and wild flowers, seemed another creature from the big eyed, quiet little lad he saw every day. He had chattered like a magpie, eaten like a bear, torn his jacket getting wild columbines for Patty, been nicely darned by Waitstill and was in a state of hilarity that rendered him quite unrecognizable.

"We've had a lovely picnic!" called Patty; "I wish you had been with us!" "You didn't ask me," smiled Ivory, picking up Waitstill's mending basket from the nook in the trees where she had hidden it for safe keeping. "We've played games, Ivory," cried the boy. "Patty made them up herself. First we had the 'Landing of the Pilgrims' and Waitstill made believe she was the figurehead of the Mayflower. She stood on a great bowl-der and sang:

"The breaking waves dashed high On a stern and rockbound coast and, oh, she was splendid! Then Patty was Pocahontas, and I was Cap'n John Smith, and look, we are all dressed up for the Indian wedding!"

"I shall have to run into father's store to put myself tidy," Waitstill said, "so goodby, Rodman, we'll have another picnic some day. Patty, you must do the chores this afternoon, you know, so that I can go to choir rehearsal."

Rodman and Patty started up the hill gayly with their burdens, and Ivory walked by Waitstill's side as she pulled off her birch bark crown and twisted her braid around her head with a heightened color at being watched.

"I'll say goodby now, Ivory, but I'll see you at the meeting house," she said as she neared the store. "I'll go in here and brush the pine needles off, wash my hands and rest a little before rehearsal. That's a puzzling anthem we have for tomorrow."

"I have my horse here. Let me drive you up to the church."

"I can't, Ivory; thank you. Father's orders are against my driving out with any one, you know."

"Very well. The road is free, at any rate. I'll hitch my horse down here in the woods somewhere, and when you start to walk I shall follow and catch up with you. There's luckily only one way to reach the church from here, and your father can't blame us if we both take it."

And so it fell out that Ivory and Waitstill walked together in the cool of the afternoon to the meeting house on Tory hill. Waitstill kept the beaten path on one side and Ivory that on the other, so that the width of the country road, deep in dust, was between them, yet their nearness seemed so tangible a thing that each could feel the heart beating in the other's side.

Their talk was only that of tried friends, a talk interrupted by long, beautiful silences—silences that come only to a man and woman whose understanding of each other is beyond question and answer. Not a sound broke the stillness, yet the very air, it seemed to them, was shedding meanings, the flowers were exhaling a love secret with their fragrances, the birds were singing it boldly from the tree-tops, yet no word passed the man's lips or the girl's. Patty would have hung out all sorts of signals and lures to draw the truth from Ivory and break through the walls of his self control, but Waitstill, never, and Ivory Boynton was made of stuff so strong that he would not speak a syllable of love to a woman unless he could say all. He was only five and twenty, but he had been reared in a rigorous school and had learned in its poverty, loneliness and anxiety lessons of self denial and self control that bore daily fruit now. He knew that Deacon Baxter would never allow any engagement to exist between Waitstill and himself. He also knew that Waitstill would never defy and disobey her father if it meant leaving her younger sister to fight alone a dreary battle for which she was not fitted. If there was little hope on her side there seemed even less on his.

His mother's mental illness made her peculiarly dependent upon him and at the same time held him in such strict bondage that it was almost impossible for him to get on in the world or even to give her the comforts she needed.

In villages like Riverboro in those early days there was no putting away even of men or women so demented as to be something of a menace to the peace of the household. But Lois Boynton was so gentle, so fragile, so exquisite a spirit, that she seemed in her sad aloofness simply a thing to be sheltered and shielded somehow in her difficult life journey. Ivory often thought how sorely she needed a daughter in her affliction. If the baby sister had only lived the home might have been different; but, alas, there was only a son—a son who tried to be tender and sympathetic, but after all was nothing but a big, clumsy, uncomprehending man creature, who ought to be felling trees, plowing, sowing, reaping or at least studying law, making his own fortune and that of some future wife. Old Mrs. Mason, a garrulous, good hearted grandame, was their only near neighbor, and her visits always left his mother worse rather than better. How such a girl as Waitstill would pour comfort and beauty and joy into a lonely house like his if only he were weak



"Tell me more," she said.

enough to call upon her strength and put it to so cruel a test! God help him! He would never do that, especially as he could not earn enough to keep a large family, bound down as he was by inexorable responsibilities. Waitstill thus far in life had suffered many sorrows and enjoyed few pleasures. Marriage ought to bring her freedom and plenty, not carking care and poverty. He stole long looks at the girl across the separating space that was so helpless to separate, feed-

ing his starved heart upon her womanly graces. Her quick, springing step was in harmony with the fire and courage of her mien. There was a line or two in her face—small wonder. But an "unconquerable soul" shone in her eyes, shone, too, in no uncertain way, but brightly and steadily, expressing an unshaken joy in living. Valiant, splendid, indomitable Waitstill! He could never tell her, alas! But how he gloried in her!

It is needless to say that no woman could be the possessor of such a love as Ivory Boynton's and not know of its existence. Waitstill never heard a breath of it from Ivory's lips; even his eyes were under control and confessed nothing, nor did his hand ever clasp hers to show by a tactile touch the truth he dared not utter; nevertheless she felt that she was beloved. She hid the knowledge deep in her heart and covered it softly from every eye but her own, taking it out in the safe darkness sometimes to wonder over and adore in secret. Did her love for Ivory rest partly on a sense of vocation—a profound, inarticulate divining of his vast need of her? He was so strong, yet so weak because of the yoke he bore, so bitterly alone in his desperate struggle with life, that her heart melted like wax whenever she thought of him. When she contemplated the hidden mutiny in her own heart she was awestruck sometimes at the almost divine patience of Ivory's conduct as a son.

"How is your mother this summer, Ivory?" she asked as they sat down on the meeting house steps waiting for Jed Morrill to open the door.

"There is little change in her from year to year, Waitstill—by the way, why don't we get out of this afternoon sun and sit in the old graveyard under the trees? We are early and the choir won't get here for half an hour. Dr. Perry says that he does not understand mother's case in the least and that no one but some great Boston physician could give a proper opinion on it; of course that is impossible at present."

They sat down on the grass underneath one of the elms, and Waitstill took off her hat and leaned back against the tree trunk.

"Tell me more," she said; "it is so long since we talked together quietly, and we have never really spoken of your mother."

"Of course," Ivory continued, "the people of the village all think and speak of mother's illness as religious insanity, but to me it seems nothing of the sort. I was only a child when father first fell in with Jacob Cochrane, but I was twelve when father went away from home on his 'mission' and if there was any one suffering from delusions in our family it was he, not mother. She had altogether given up going to the Cochrane meetings, and I well remember the scene when my father told her of the revelation he had

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