

The Story of Waitstill Baxter

(Continued from page 6, Col. 4)

received about going through the state and into New Hampshire in order to convert others and extend the movement. She had no sympathy with his self imposed mission, you may be sure, though now she goes back in her memory to the earlier days of her married life, when she tried hard, poor soul, to tread the same path that father was treading, so as to be by his side at every turn of the road.

"I am sure" here Ivory's tone was somewhat dry and satirical, "that father's road had many turns. Waitstill! He was a schoolmaster in Saco, you know, when I was born, but he soon turned from teaching to preaching, and here my mother followed with entire sympathy, for she was intensely, devoutly religious. I said there was little change in her, but there is one new symptom. She has ceased to refer to her conversion to Cochraneism as a blessed experience. Her memory of those first days seems to have faded. As to her sister's death and all the circumstances of her bringing Rodman home, her mind is a blank. Her expectation of father's return, on the other hand, is much more intense than ever."

"She must have loved your father dearly, Ivory, and to lose him in this terrible way is much worse than death. Uncle Bart says he had a great gift of language!"

"Yes, and it was that, in my mind, that led him astray. I fear that the spirit of God was never so strong in father as the desire to influence people by his oratory. That was what drew him to preaching in the first place, and when he found in Jacob Cochrane a man who could move an audience to frenzy, lift them out of the body and do with their spirits as he willed he acknowledged him as master. Whether his gospel was a pure and undefiled religion I doubt, but he certainly was a master of mesmeric control. My mother was beguiled, entranced, even bewitched at first. I doubt not, for she translated all that Cochrane said into her own speech and regarded him as the prophet of a new era. But Cochrane's last 'revelations' differed from the first and were of the earth, earthly. My mother's pure soul must have revolted, but she was not strong enough to drag father from his allegiance. Mother was of better family than father, but they were both well educated and had the best schooling to be had in their day. So far as I can judge, mother always had more 'balance' than father and much better judgment—yet look at her now!"

"Then you think it was your father's disappearance that really caused her mind to waver?" asked Waitstill.

"I do, indeed. I don't know what happened between them in the way of religious differences nor how much unhappiness these may have caused. I remember she had an illness when we first came here to live and I was a little chap of three or four, but that was caused by the loss of a child, a girl, who lived only a few weeks. She recovered perfectly, and her head was as clear as mine for a year or two after father went away. As his letters grew less frequent, as news of him gradually ceased to come, she became more and more silent and retired more completely into herself. She never went anywhere nor entertained visitors because she did not wish to hear the gossip and speculation that were going on in the village. Some of it was very hard for a wife to bear, and she resented it indignantly, yet never received a word from father with which to refute it. At this time, as nearly as I can judge, she was a recluse and subject to periods of profound melancholy, but nothing worse. Then she took that winter journey to her sister's deathbed, brought home the boy, and, hastened by exposure and chill and grief, I suppose, her mind gave way—that's all." And Ivory sighed drearily as he stretched himself on the greensward and looked off toward the snowclad New Hampshire hills. "I've meant to write the story of the 'Cochrane craze' some time or such part of it as has to do with my family history, and you shall read it if you like."

"I should like very much to read your account. Aunt Abby's version, for instance, is so different from Uncle Bart's that one can scarcely find the truth between the two, and father's bears no relation to that of any of the others."

"Some of us see facts and others see visions," replied Ivory, "and these differences of opinion crop up in the village every day when anything noteworthy is discussed. I came upon a quotation in my reading last evening that described it. 'One said it thundered; another that an angel spoke.'"

"Do you feel as if your father was dead, Ivory?"

"I can only hope so. That thought brings sadness with it, as one remembers his disappointment and failure, but if he is alive he is a traitor."

There was a long pause, and they could see in the distance Humphrey Barker with his clarinet and Pliny Waterhouse with his bass viol driving up to the churchyard fence to hitch their horses. The sun was dipping low and red behind the Town House hill on the other side of the river.

"What makes my father dislike the very mention of yours?" asked Waitstill. "I know what they say—that it is because the two men had high words once in a Cochrane meeting, when father tried to interfere with some of the

exercises and was put out of doors. It doesn't seem as if that grievance, seventeen or eighteen years ago, would influence his opinion of your mother or of you."

"It isn't likely that a man of your father's sort would forget or forgive what he considered an injury, and in refusing to have anything to do with the son of a disgraced man and a deranged woman he is well within his rights."

Ivory's cheeks burned red under the tan, and his hand trembled a little as he plucked bits of clover from the grass and pulled them to pieces absentmindedly. "How are you getting on at home these days, Waitstill?" he asked, as if to turn his own mind and hers from a too painful subject.

"You have troubles enough of your own without hearing mine, Ivory, and anyway they are not big afflictions, heavy sorrows, like those you have to bear. Mine are just petty, nagging, sordid, cheap little miseries, like gnats bites—so petty and so sordid that I can hardly talk to God about them, much less to a human friend. Patty is my only outlet and I need others, yet I find it almost impossible to escape from the narrowness of my life and be of use to any one else." The girl's voice quivered and a single teardrop on her cheek showed that she was speaking from a full heart. "This afternoon's talk has determined me on one thing," she went on. "I am going to see your mother now and then. I shall have to do it secretly, for your sake, for hers and for my own, but if I am found out then I will go openly. There must be times when one can break the lower law and yet keep the higher. Father's law in this case is the lower and I propose to break it."

"I can't have you getting into trouble, Waitstill," Ivory objected. "You're the only woman I can think of who might help my mother. All the same, I would not make your life harder, not for worlds!"

It was almost impossible for Ivory to hold his peace then, so full of gratitude was his soul and so great his longing to pour out the feeling that flooded it. He pulled himself together and led the way out of the churchyard.

CHAPTER IX. A June Sunday.

It was Sunday in June, and almost the whole population of Riverboro and Edgewood was walking or driving in the direction of the meeting house on Tory hill.

Church toilets, you may well believe, were difficult of attainment by Deacon Baxter's daughters, as they had been by his respective helpmates in years gone by. When Waitstill's mother first asked her husband to buy her a new dress, and that was two years after marriage, he simply said: "You look well enough. What do you want to waste money on finery for, these hard times? If other folks are extravagant that ain't any reason you should be. You ain't obliged to take your neighbors for an example, take 'em for a warnin'!"

"But, Foxwell, my Sunday dress is worn completely to threads," urged the second Mrs. Baxter.

"That's what women always say. They're all alike, no more idea o' savin' anything than a skunk blackbird! I can't spare any money for gawgaws, and you might as well understand it first as last. Go up attic and open the hair trunk by the window, you'll find plenty there to last you for years to come."

The second Mrs. Baxter visited the attic as commanded, and in turning over the clothes in the old trunk knew by instinct that they had belonged to her predecessor in office. Some of the dresses were neat, though terribly worn and faded, but all were fortunately far too short and small for a person of her fine proportions. Besides, her very soul shrank from wearing them, and her spirit revolted both from the insult to herself and to the poor dead woman she had succeeded, so she came downstairs to darn and mend and patch again her shabby wardrobe.

Waitstill had gone through the same experience as her mother before her, but in despair when she was seventeen she began to cut over the old garments for herself and Patty. Mercifully there were very few of them, and they had long since been discarded. At eighteen she had learned to dye yarns with yellow oak or maple bark and to make purples from elder and sumac berries; she could spin and knit as well as any old "aunt" of the village and cut and shape a garment as deftly as the Edgewood tailor, but the task of making bricks without straw was a hard one indeed.

She wore a white cotton frock on this particular Sunday. It was starched and ironed with a beautiful gloss, while a touch of distinction was given to her costume by a little black sleeveless "roundabout" made out of the covering of an old silk umbrella. Her flat hat had a single wreath of coarse daisies around the crown, and her mitts were darned in many places. Nevertheless you could not entirely spoil her; God had used a liberal hand in making her, and her father's parsimony was a sort of boomerang that flew back chiefly upon himself.

As for Patty, her style of beauty, like Cephas Cole's all, had to be toned down rather than up to be effective, but circumstances had been cruelly unrelenting in this process of late. Deacon Baxter had given the girls three or four shopworn pieces of faded yellow calico that had been repudiated by the village housewives as not fast enough in color to bear the test of proper washing. This had made frocks, aprons, petticoats and even underclothes, for two full years, and Patty's weekly oburgations when she removed her everlasting yellow dress from the nail

where it hung were not such as should have fallen from the lips of a deacon's daughter. Waitstill had taken a piece of the same yellow material, starched and ironed it, cut a curving, circular brim from it, sewed in a plaited crown, and, lo, a hat for Patty! What inspired Patty to put on a waist ribbon of deepest wine color, with a little band of the same on the pale yellow hat, no one could say.

"Do you think you shall like that dull red right close to the yellow, Patty?" Waitstill asked anxiously.

"It looks all right on the cumberlins in the Indian cellar," replied Patty, turning and twisting the hat on her head. "If we can't get a peek at the Boston fashions we must just find our styles where we can."

The various roads to Tory hill were alive with vehicles on this bright Sunday morning. Uncle Bert and Abel Day, with their respective wives on the back seat of the Cole's double wagon, were passed by Deacon Baxter and his daughters. Waitstill being due at meeting earlier than others by reason of her singing in the choir. The deacon's one horse, two wheeled "shay" could hold three persons with comfort on its broad seat, and the twenty-year-old mare, although she was always as hollow as a gourd, could generally do the mile, uphill all the way, in half an hour if urged continually, and the deacon, he it said, if not good at feeding was unsurpassed at urging.

Aunt Abby Cole could get only a passing glimpse of Patty in the depths of the "shay," but a glimpse was always enough for her, as her opinion of the girl's charms was considerably affected by the forlorn condition of her son, Cephas, whom she suspected of being hopelessly in love with the young person aforesaid, to whom she commonly alluded as "that red headed baggage."

"Patience Baxter's got the kind of looks that might do well enough at a tavern dance or a husking, but they're entirely unsuited to the Sabbath day

or the meetin' house," so Aunt Abby remarked to Mrs. Day in the way of back seat confidence. "It's unfortunate that a deacon's daughter should be afflicted with that bold style of beauty. Her hair's all but red. In fact, you might as well call it red when the sun shines on it. But if she'd ever smack it down with bear's grease she might darken it some, or anyhow she'd make it lay slicker. But it's the kind of hair that just matches that kind of a girl—sort of up an' comin'." Then her skin's so white and her cheeks so pink and her eyes so snappy that she'd attract attention without half tryin', though I guess she ain't above makin' an effort."

"She's innocent as a kitten," observed Mrs. Day impartially.

"Oh, yes, she's innocent enough an I hope she'll keep so. Waitstill's a sight han'somer, if the truth was told, but she's the sort of girl that's made for one man and the rest of 'em never look at her. The other one's cut out for the crowd, the more the merrier. She's a kind of mantrap, that girl is! Do urge the horse a little mite, Bartholomew! It makes me kind o' hot to be passed by Deacon Baxter. It's missionary Sunday, too, when he generally has rheumatism too bad to come out."

"I wonder if he ever puts anything into the plate?" said Mrs. Day. "No one ever saw him that I know of."

[Continued next week.]

Theatrical.

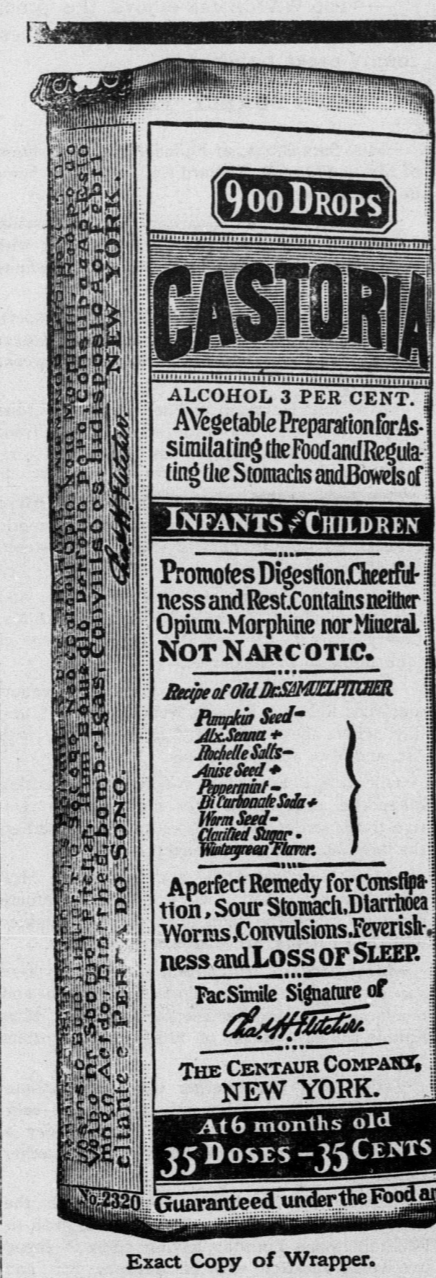
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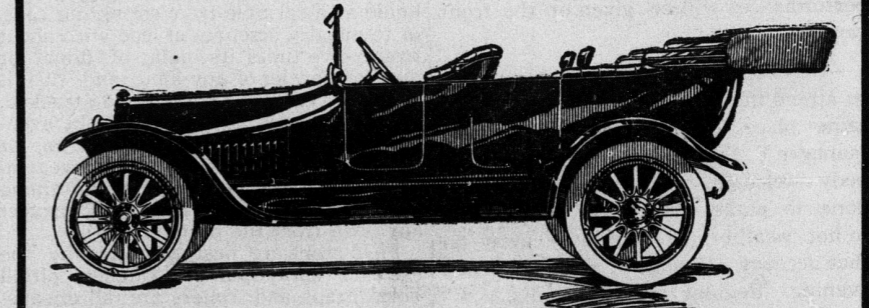
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