

The Story of Waitstill Baxter

By KATE DOUGLAS WIGGIN

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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 daft 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.

Patty and Waitstill go to church, although their father is too mean to give them fitting garments. Waitstill sings in the choir.

A strange young woman in the Wilson pew, a visitor from Boston, makes Patty jealous. Haytime arrives.

Waitstill decides to disobey her father by paying a visit to Mrs. Boynton. Uncle Bart discourses to Cephas on woman's ways.

Mrs. Boynton confides in Waitstill, telling the girl she believes Rodman is not her sister's child, but she cannot be sure.

To punish Waitstill for disobedience Deacon Baxter locks her out all night. She spends the night in the barn. Patience sympathizes.

Patience Baxter is embarrassed amid a multitude of suitors. She thinks Mark is sick.

Trying to trace his father, Ivory writes to Waitstill a long account of Boynton's following of Cochrane, with which Mrs. Boynton was not in full sympathy.

The village gossips are busy with the names of Waitstill and Ivory, but in a friendly and sympathetic manner.

In Ivory's absence young Rodman ministers to Mrs. Boynton. She is ill and sends Rodman for Ivory.

Ivory receives proof of his father's death and succeeds in convincing his mother of it. Waitstill volunteers her help in the Boynton housekeeping.

(Continued from last week.)

"She will only worry herself sick," thought Patty. "She won't let me marry without asking father's permission, and she'd think she ought not to aid me in deceiving him, and the tempest would be twice as dreadful if it fell upon us both! Now, if anything happens, I can tell father that I did it all myself and that Waitstill knew nothing about it whatever. Then—oh, joy!—if father is too terrible I shall be a married woman and I can always say: 'I will not permit such cruelty! Waitstill is dependent upon you no longer; she shall come at once to my husband and me!'"

This latter phrase almost intoxicated Patty, so that there were moments when she could have run up to Milliken's mills and purchased herself a husband at any cost, had her slender savings permitted the best in the market, and the more impersonal the husband the more delightedly Patty rolled the phrase under her tongue.

"I can never be 'published' in church," she thought, "and perhaps nobody will ever care enough about me to brave father's displeasure and insist on running away with me. I do wish somebody would care 'frightfully' about me enough for that, enough to help me make up my mind, so that I could just drive up to father's store some day and say, 'Good afternoon, father! I knew you'd never let me marry'—there was always a dash here in Patty's imaginary discourses, a dash that could be filled in with any Christian name according to her mood of the moment—"so I just married him anyway and you needn't be angry with my sister, for she knew nothing about it. My husband and I are sorry if you are displeased, but there's no help for it, and my husband's home will always be open to Waitstill whatever happens."

Patty, with all her latent love of finery and ease, did not weigh the worldly circumstances of the two men, though the reflection that she would have more amusement with Mark than with Philip may have crossed her mind. She trusted Philip and respected his steady going, serious view of life. It pleased her vanity, too, to feel how her nonsense and fun lightened his temperamental gravity, playing in and out and over it like a butterfly in a smoke bush. She would be safe with Philip always, but safety had no special charm for one of her age, who had never been in peril. Mark's superior knowledge of the world, moreover, his careless, buoyant manner of carrying himself, his gay, boyish audacity, all had a very distinct charm for her—and yet—

But there would be no "and yet" a little later. Patty's heart would blaze quickly enough when sufficient heat was applied to it and Mark was falling more and more deeply in love

every day. As Patty vacillated his purpose strengthened, the more she weighed the more he ceased to weigh the difficulties of the situation, the more she unfolded herself to him the more he loved and the more he rejected her. She began by delighting his senses, she ended by winning all that there was in him and creating continually the qualities he lacked, after the manner of true women even when they are very young and foolish.

CHAPTER XVII.

A State of Maine Prophet.

SUMMER was dying hard, for although it had passed, by the calendar, Mother Nature was still keeping up her customary attitude.

There had been a soft rain in the night, and every spear of grass was brilliantly green and tipped with crystal. The smoke bushes in the garden plot and the asparagus bed beyond them looked misty as the sun rose higher, drying the soaked earth and dripping branches. Spiders' webs, marvels of lace, dotted the short grass under the apple tree. Every flower that had a fragrance was pouring it gratefully into the air; every bird with a joyous note in its voice gave it more joyously from a bursting throat, and the river laughed and rippled in the distance at the foot of Town House hill. The dawn grew into full morning, and streams of blue smoke rose here and there from the Edgewood chimneys. The world was alive and so beautiful that Waitstill felt like going down on her knees in gratitude for having been born into it and given a chance of serving it in any humble way whatsoever.

Wherever there was a barn, in Riverboro or Edgewood, one could have heard the three-legged stools being lifted from the pegs, and then would begin the music of the milk pails; first the resonant sound of the stream in the bottom of the tin pail, then the soft, delicious purring of the cascade into the full bucket, while the cows serenely chewed their cud and whisked away the flies with swiftness. Deacon Baxter was taking his cows to a pasture far over the hill, the feed having grown too short in his own fields. Patty was washing dishes in the kitchen and Waitstill was in the dairy house at the butter making, one of her chief delights. She worked with speed and with beautiful sureness, patting, squeezing, rolling the golden mass like the true artist she was, then turning the sweet scented waxen balls out of the mould onto the big stone china platter that stood waiting. She had been up early, and for the last hour she had toiled with devouring eagerness that she might have a little time to herself. It was hers now, for Patty would be busy with the beds after she finished the dishes, so she drew a fold-



She Sat Down to Read the First Communication She Had Ever Received in Ivory's Handwriting.

ed paper from her pocket, the first communication she had ever received in Ivory's handwriting, and sat down to read it:

My Dear Waitstill—Rodman will take this packet and leave it with you when he finds opportunity. It is no in any real sense a letter, so I am in no danger of incurring your father's displeasure. You will probably have heard new rumors concerning my father during the past few days, for Peter Morrill has been to Edgewood, N. H., where he says letters have been received stating that my father died in Cortland, O., more than five years ago. I shall do what I can to substantiate this fresh report, as I have always done with all the previous ones, but I have little hope of securing reliable information at this distance and after this length of time. I do not know when I can ever start on a personal quest myself, for even had I the money I could not leave home until Rodman is much older and fitted for greater responsibility. Oh, Waitstill, how you have helped my poor, dear mother! Would that I were free to tell you how I value your friendship! It is something more than mere friendship. What you are doing is like throwing a life line to a sinking human being. Two or three times of late mother has forgotten to set out the supper things for my father. Her ten years' incessant waiting for him seems to have subsided a little, and in its place she watches for you. Ivory had written "watches for her daughter," but carefully erased the last two words. You come but seldom, but her heart feeds on the sight of you. What she needed, it seems, was the magical touch of youth and health and strength and sympathy, the qualities you possess in such great measure.

If I had proof of my father's death I think now perhaps that I might try to break it gently to my mother, as if it were fresh news, and see if possibly I might thus remove her principal hallucination. You see now, do you not, how sane she is in many—indeed in most ways—how sweet and lovable, even how sensible? To help you better to understand the in-

fluence that has robbed me of both father and mother and made me and mine the subject of town and tavern gossip for years past I have written for you just a sketch of the "Cochrane craze," the romantic story of a man who swayed the wills of his fellow creatures in a truly marvelous manner. Some local historian of his time will doubtless give him more space. My wish is to have you know something more of the circumstances that have made me a prisoner in life instead of a free man. But, prisoner as I am at the moment, I am sustained just now by a new courage. I read in my copy of Ovid last night, "The best of weapons is the undaunted heart." This will help you, too, in your hard life, for yours is the most undaunted heart in all the world.

IVORY BOYNTON.

The chronicle of Jacob Cochrane's career in the little villages near the Saco river has no such interest for the general reader as it had for Waitstill Baxter. She hung upon every word that Ivory had written and realized more fully than ever before the shadow that had followed him since early boyhood—the same shadow that had fallen across his mother's mind and left continual twilight there.

No one really knew, it seemed, why or from whence Jacob Cochrane had come to Edgewood. He simply appeared at the old tavern a stranger, with satchel in hand, to seek entertainment. Uncle Bart had often described this scene to Waitstill, for he was one of those sitting about the great open fire at the time. The man easily slipped into the group and soon took the lead in conversation, delighting all with his agreeable personality, his nimble tongue and graceful speech. At supper time the hostess and the rest of the family took their places at the long table, as was the custom, and he astonished them by his knowledge not only of town history, but of village matters they had supposed unknown to any one.

When the stranger had finished his supper and returned to the barroom he had to pass through a long entry, and the landlady, whispering to her daughter, said:

"Betsy, you go up to the chamber closet and get the silver and bring it down. This man is going to sleep there, and I am afraid of him. He must be a fortune teller, and the Lord only knows what else!"

In going to the chamber the daughter had to pass through the barroom. As she was moving quietly through, hoping to escape the notice of the newcomer, he turned in his chair and, looking her full in the face, suddenly said:

"Madam, you needn't touch your silver. I don't want it. I am a gentleman."

Whereupon the bewildered Betsy scuttled back to her mother and told her the strange guest was indeed a fortune teller.

Of Cochrane's initial appearance as a preacher Ivory had told Waitstill in their talk in the churchyard early in the summer. It was at a child's funeral (Continued on page 7, Col. 1)

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In the Darkest Hour.

When weary life, breathing reluctant breath, hath no hope sweeter than the hope of death; when the best counsel and the best relief to cheer the spirit or to cheat the grief, the only calm, the only comfort heard, comes in the music of a woman's word.—Edwin Arnold.

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