

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. Haying time 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 best.

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.

Despairing of winning Patty, Cephas turns his affections elsewhere. Patty and Mark are now sweethearts.

Patty and Mark know Deacon Baxter will not consent to their marriage, so they plan an elopement to New Hampshire.

Deacon Baxter is more than usually "difficult." Patty runs off with Mark, is married and returns and tells Waitstill.

The deacon turns Patty out into the cold. She finds shelter with Aunt Abby and Uncle Bart.

(Continued from last week.)

"It's all there underneath," said Patty, putting her hand on his arm and turning her wistful face to his. "It will come again. The girl in me isn't dead. She isn't even asleep, but she's all sobered down. She can't laugh just now, she can only smile, and the tears are waiting underneath, ready to spring out if any one says the wrong word. This Patty is frightened and anxious, and her heart beats too fast from morning till night. She hasn't any mother, and she cannot say a word to her dear sister, and she's going away to be married to you, that's almost a stranger, and she isn't eighteen and doesn't know what's coming to her nor what it means to be married. She dreads her father's anger, and she cannot rest till she knows whether your family will love her and take her in, and, oh, she's a miserable, worried girl, not a bit like the old Patty!"

Mark held her close and smoothed the curls under the loose brown hood. "Don't you fret, Patty darling. I'm not the boy I was last week. Every word you say makes me more of a man. I wish the road to New Hampshire was full of lions and I could fight my way through them just to show you how strong I feel!"

"There'll be lions enough," smiled Patty through her tears, "though they won't have manes and tails. But I can imagine how father will roar and how my courage will ooze out of the heels of my boots."

"Just let me catch the deacon roaring at my wife!" exclaimed Mark, with a swelling chest. "Now, run along home, Patty, dear, for I don't want you scolded on my account. I'll sound Ellen and see if she's brave enough to be one of the eloping party. Good night! Good night!"

CHAPTER XXII.

A Wedding Ring.

THE snow had come. It had begun to fall softly and steadily at the beginning of the week, and now for days it had covered the ground deeper and deeper, drifting about the little red brick house on the hilltop, banking up against the barn and shrouding the sheds and the smaller buildings.

There had been two cold, still nights; the windows were covered with silvery landscapes whose delicate foliage made every pane of glass a leafy bower,

while a dazzling crust bediamonded the hillsides, so that no eye could rest on them long without becoming snow-blinded.

Town House hill was not as well traveled as many others, and Deacon Baxter had often to break his own road down to the store without waiting for the help of the village snow-plow to make things easier for him.

Many a path had Waitstill broken in her time, and it was by no means one of her most distasteful tasks—that of shoveling into the drifts of heaped-up whiteness, tossing them to one side or the other and cutting a narrow, clean edged track that would pack down into the hardness of marble.

There were many "chores" to be done these cold mornings before any household could draw a breath of comfort. The Baxters kept but one cow in winter, killed the pig—not to eat, but to sell—and reduced the flock of hens and turkeys, but Waitstill was always as busy in the barn as in her own proper domain.

Her heart yearned for all the dumb creatures about the place, intervening between them and her father's scanty care, and when the thermometer descended far below zero she would be found stuffing hay into the holes and cracks of the barn and henhouse, giving the horse and cow fresh beddings of straw and a mouthful of extra food between the slender meals provided by the deacon.

It was 3 o'clock in the afternoon, and a fire in the Baxters' kitchen since 6 in the morning had produced a fairly temperate climate in that one room, though the entries and chambers might have been used for refrigerators, as the deacon was as parsimonious in the use of fuel as in all other things, and if his daughters had not been hardy young creatures, trained from their very birth to discomforts and exposures of every sort, they would have died long ago.

The Baxter kitchen shone and glittered in all its accustomed cleanliness and order. Scrubbing and polishing were cheap amusements and nobody grudged them to Waitstill. No tables in Riverboro were whiter, no tin more lustrous, no pewter brighter, no brick hearths ruddier than hers. The beans and brown bread and Indian pudding were basking in the warmth of the old brick oven, and what with the crackle and sparkle of the fire, the gleam of the blue willow ware on the cupboard shelves, and the scarlet geraniums blooming on the sunny shelf above the sink, there were few pleasanter places to be found in the village than that same Baxter kitchen.

Yet Waitstill was ill at ease this afternoon; she hardly knew why. Her father had just put the horse into the pung and driven up to Milliken's mills for some grain, and Patty was down at the store instructing Bill Morrill (Cephas Cole's successor) in his novel task of waiting on customers and learning the whereabouts of things; no easy task in the bewildering variety of stock in a country store, where pins, treacle, gingham, epsom salts, Indian meal, shoestrings, shovels, brooms, sulphur, tobacco, suspenders, rum and indigo may be demanded in rapid succession.

Patty was quiet and docile these days, though her color was more brilliant than usual, and her eyes had all their accustomed sparkle. She went about her work steadily, neither ranting nor railing at fate, nor bewailing her lot, but even in this Waitstill felt a sense of change and difference too subtle to be put in words. She had noted Patty's summer flirtations, but regarded them indulgently, very much as if they had been the irresponsible friskings of a lamb in a meadow. Waitstill had more than the usual reserve in these matters, for in New England at that time, though the soul was a subject of daily conversation, the heart was felt to be rather an indelicate topic to be alluded to as seldom as possible. Waitstill certainly would never have examined Patty closely as to the state of her affections, intimate as she was with her sister's thoughts and opinions about life. She simply bided her time until Patty should confide in her.

She had wished now and then that Patty's capricious fancy might settle on Philip Perry, although, indeed, when she considered it seriously, it seemed like an alliance between a butterfly and an owl. Cephas Cole she regarded as quite beneath Patty's rightful ambitions, and, as for Mark Wilson, she had grown up in the belief, held in the village generally, that he would marry money and position and drift out of Riverboro into a gayer, larger world. Her devotion to her sister was so ardent and her admiration so sincere that she could not think it possible that Patty would love anywhere in vain. Nevertheless she had an instinct that her affections were crystallizing somewhere or other, and when that happened the uncertain and eccentric temper of her father would raise a thousand obstacles.

While these thoughts coursed more or less vaguely through Waitstill's mind she suddenly determined to get her cloak and hood and run over to see Mrs. Boynton. Ivory had been away a good deal in the woods since early November chopping trees and helping to make new roads. He could not go long distances like the other men, as he felt constrained to come home every day or two to look after his mother and Rodman, but the work was too lucrative to be altogether refused.

With Waitstill's help he had at last overcome his mother's aversion to old Mrs. Mason, their nearest neighbor, and she, being now a widow with very slender resources, went to the Boyntons' several times each week to put the forlorn household a little on its feet.

It was all uphill and down to Ivory's

farm, Waitstill reflected, and she could take her sled and slide half the way, going and coming, or she could cut across the frozen fields on the crust.

She caught up her shawl from a hook on the kitchen door, and, throwing it over her head and shoulders to shield herself from the chill blasts on the stairway, ran up to her bedroom to make herself ready for the walk.

She slipped on a quilted petticoat and a warmer dress, braided her hair freshly, while her breath went out in a white cloud to meet the freezing air; snatched her wraps from her closet, and was just going down the stairs, when she remembered that an hour

before, having to bind up a cut finger for her father, she had searched Patty's bureau drawer for an old handkerchief, and had left things in disorder while she ran to answer the deacon's impatient call and stamp upon the kitchen floor.

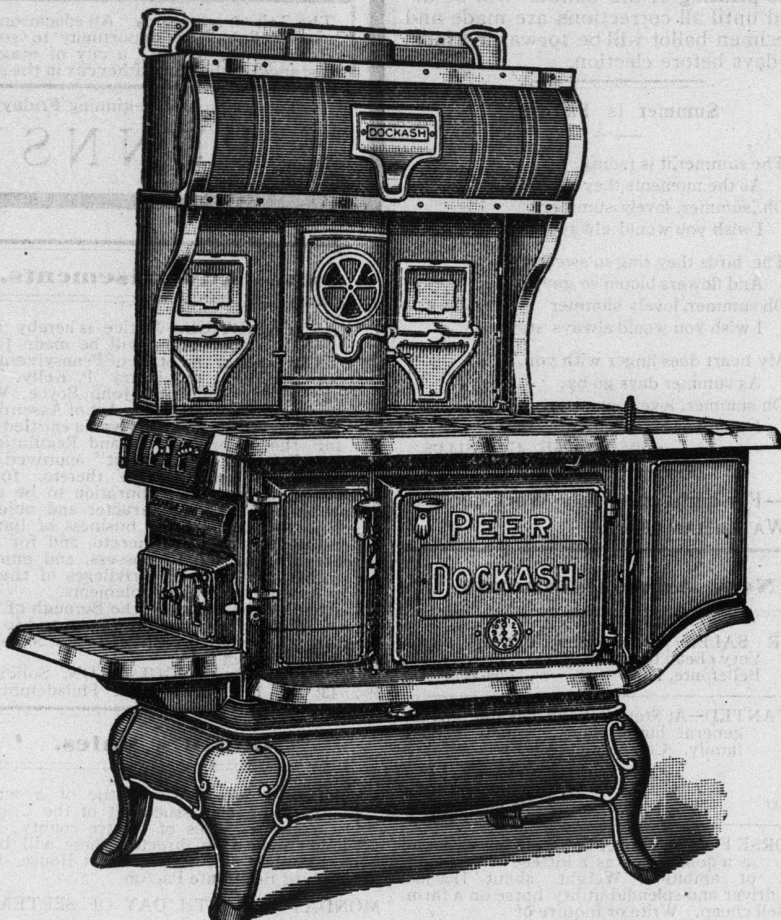
"Hurry up and don't make me stan' here all winter," he had shouted. "If you ever kept things in proper order you wouldn't have to hunt all over the house for a piece of rag when you need it!"

Patty was very dainty about her few patched and darned belongings; also very exact in the adjustment of her

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