

The Story of Waitstill Baxter

[Continued from page 6, Col. 4]
a son-in-law any true father would be proud to own."

"Why are you set against this match, father?" argued Waitstill, striving to make him hear reason. "Patty has married into one of the best families in the village. Mark is gay and thoughtless, but never has he been seen the worse for liquor, and never has he done a thing for which a wife need hang her head. It is something for a young fellow of four and twenty to be able to provide for a wife and keep her in comfort, and when all is said and done it is a true love match."

Patty seized this inopportune moment to forget her father's presence and the tragic nature of the occasion and, in her usual impetuous fashion, flung her arms around Waitstill's neck and gave her the hug of a young bear. "My own dear sister," she said, "I don't mind anything so long as you stand up for us."

"Don't make her go tonight, father," pleaded Waitstill. "Don't send your own child out into the cold. Remember her husband is away from home."

"She can find another up at the Mills as good as he is or better. Off with you, I say, you trumpety little baggage, you!"

"Go, then, dear; it is better so. Uncle Bart will keep you overnight. Run up and get your things," and Waitstill sank into a chair, realizing the hopelessness of the situation.

"She'll not take anything from my house. It's her husband's business to find her in clothes."

"They'll be better ones than ever you found me," was Patty's response. No heroics for her; no fainting fits at being disowned; no hysterics at being turned out of house and home; no prayers for mercy, but a quick retort for every gibe from her father, and her defiant attitude enraged the deacon the more.

"I won't speak again," he said, in a tone that could not be mistaken. "Into the street you go with the clothes you stand up in or I'll do what I said I'd do."

"Go, Patty! It's the only thing to be done. Don't tremble, for nobody shall touch a hair of your head. I can trust you to find shelter tonight, and Mark will take care of you tomorrow."

Patty buttoned her shabby coat and led on her hood as she walked from the kitchen through the sitting room toward the side door, her heart heaving with shame and anger, and above all, with a child's sense of helplessness at being parted from her sister.

"Don't tell the neighbors any more than you can help," called her father after her retreating form. "An' if my of 'em dare to come up here an' give me any of their impudence they'll be treated same as you. Come back ere, Waitstill, and don't go to slaverin' any goodbyes over her. She isn't likely to get out of the village for some time if she's expectin' Mark Wilton to take her away."

"I shall certainly go to the door with my sister," said Waitstill coldly, suiting the action to the word, and following Patty out on the steps. "Shall you'll Uncle Bart everything, dear, and sk him to let you sleep at his house?" Both girls were trembling with excitement. Waitstill, pale as a ghost, sat on the steps all night if you say the word.

"No, no, run along. Father has vented his rage upon you, and I shall not give any more trouble. God bless and sep you, darling. Run along!" "And you're not angry with me now, are you? You still love me? And you'll give Mark and come to stay with soon, soon, soon?"

"We'll see, dear, when all this unhappy business is settled, and you are safe and happy in your own home. I all have much to tell you when we set tomorrow."

Patty had the most ardent love for her elder sister, and something that resembled reverence for her selfishness, her loyalty and her strength of character, but if the truth were told, she had no great opinion of Waitstill's ability to feel righteous wrath, nor of her power to avenge herself in the case of rank injustice. It was the conviction of her own superior fitness and faculty that had sustained Patty all through her late escapade. She felt herself a lucky girl, indeed, to achieve her safety and happiness for herself, but not so lucky if she had chanced to be in a way of escape for her more feeble and dutiful sister.

he would have been a trifle astounded had she surmised the existence of certain mysterious waves that had been sweeping along the coasts of Waitstill's mind that afternoon, breaking down all sorts of defenses and carrying her will along with them by force, but it is a truism that two human beings can live beside each other for half a century and yet continue strangers.

Waitstill's elopement with the youth of choice, taking into account all its attendant risks, was indeed an exhibition of courage and initiative not common to girls of seventeen. But Waitstill was meditating a mutiny more

daring yet—a mutiny, too, involving a course of conduct most unusual in maidens of Puritan descent.

She walked back into the kitchen to find her father sitting placidly in the rocking chair by the window. He had lighted his cornucop pipe, in which he always smoked a mixture of dried sweet fern as being cheaper than tobacco, and his face wore something resembling a smile—a foxy smile—as he watched his youngest born plowing down the hill through the deep snow, while the more obedient Waitstill moved about the room setting supper on the table.

Conversation was not the deacon's forte, but it seemed proper for some one to break the ice that seemed suddenly to be very thick in the immediate vicinity.

"That little Jill-go-over-the-ground will give the neighbors a pleasant evening tellin' 'em 'bout me," he chuckled. "Aunt Abby Cole will run the streets of the three villages by sunup tomorrow. But nobody pays any 'tention to a woman whose tongue is hung in the middle and wags at both ends. I wa'n't intendin' to use the whip on your sister, Waitstill," continued the deacon, with a crafty look at his silent daughter, "though a tronecht' would 'a' done her a sight o' good. But I was only tryin' to frighten her a little mite an' pay her up for bringin' disgrace on us the way she's done, makin' us the talk o' the town. Well, she's gone, an' good riddance to bad rubbish say I! One less mouth to feed an' one less body to clothe. You'll miss her jest at first on account o' there bein' no other women folks on the hill, but 'twon't last long. I'll have Bill Morrill do some o' your outside chores so 't you can take on your sister's work, if she ever done any."

This was a most astoundingly generous proposition on the deacon's part, and, to tell the truth, he did not himself fully understand his mental processes when he made it, but it seemed to be drawn from him by a kind of instinct that he was not standing well in his elder daughter's books.

CHAPTER XXV. Waitstill Speaks Her Mind.

THOUGH the two girls had never made any demonstration of their affection in his presence, Deacon Baxter had a fair idea of their mutual dependence upon each other; not that he placed the slightest value on Waitstill's opinion of him or cared in the smallest degree what she or any one else in the universe thought of his conduct, but she certainly did appear to advantage when contrasted with the pert little hussy who had just left the premises; also Waitstill loomed large in his household comforts and economies, having a clear head, a sure hand and being one of the steady going, reliable sort that can be counted on in emergencies, not like Patty, going off at half cock at the smallest provocation. Yes, Waitstill, as a product of his masterly training for the last seven years, had settled down, not without some trouble and friction, into a tolerably dependable pack horse, and he intended in the future to use some care in making permanent so valuable an aid and ally. She did not pursue nor attract the opposite sex, as his younger daughter apparently did; so by continuing his policy of keeping all young men rigidly at a distance he could count confidently on having Waitstill serve his purposes for the next fifteen or twenty years or as long as he himself should continue to ornament and enrich the earth.

He would go to Saco the very next day and cut Patty out of his will, arranging his property so that Waitstill should be the chief legatee as long as she continued to live obediently under his roof. He intended to make the last point clear if he had to consult every lawyer in York county, for he wouldn't take risks on any woman alive. If he must leave his money anywhere—and it was with a bitter pang that he faced the inexorable conviction that he could neither live forever nor take his savings with him to the realms of bliss prepared for members of the orthodox church in good and regular standing—he must leave his money behind him, he would dig a hole in the ground and bury it rather than let it go to any one who had angered him in his lifetime.

These were the thoughts that caused him to relax his iron grip and smile as he sat by the window smoking his cornucop pipe and taking one of his very rare periods of rest.

Presently he glanced at the clock. "It's only quarter past 4," he said. "I thought 't was later, but the snow makes it so light you can't judge the time. The moon fuls tonight, don't it? Yes; come to think of it, I know it does. Ain't you settin' out supper a little mite early, Waitstill?"

This was a longer and more amiable speech than he had made in years, but Waitstill never glanced at him as she said: "It is a little early, but I want to get it ready before I leave."

"Be you goin' out? Mind, I won't have you follerin' Patience round. You'll only upset what I've done, an' anyhow I want you to keep away from the neighbors for a few days, till all this blows over."

He spoke firmly, though for him mildly, for he still had the uneasy feeling that he stood on the brink of a volcano, and, as a matter of fact, he tumbled into it the very next moment.

The meager supper was spread—a plate of cold soda biscuits, a dried apple pie and the usual brown teapot were in evidence, and as her father ceased speaking Waitstill opened the door of the brick oven where the bean pot reposed, set a chair by the table, and turning, took up her coat (her mother's old riding cloak, it was), and calmly put it on, reaching then for her

hood and her squirrel tippet. "You are goin' out, then, spite o' what I said?" the deacon inquired sternly.

"Did you really think, father, that I would sleep under your roof after you had turned my sister out into the snow to lodge with whoever might take her in—my seventeen-year-old sister that your wife left to my care; my little sister, the very light of my life?"

Waitstill's voice trembled a trifle, but otherwise she was quite calm and free from heroics of any sort.

The deacon looked up in surprise. "I guess you're kind o' hystericky," he said. "Set down—set down an' talk things over. I ain't got nothin' ag'in you, an' I mean to treat you right. Set down."

[Continued next week.]

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