

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 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 party, 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 discourages 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 feckle.

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.

Waitstill rises against her father and tells him she will marry Ivory as soon as he is ready to have her.

[Continued from last week.]

The old man was decidedly nervous and intended to keep his temper until there was a safer chance to let it fly.

Waitstill set down. "There's nothing to talk over," she said. "I have done all that I promised my stepmother the night she died, and now I am going. If there's a duty owed between daughter and father it ought to work both ways. I consider that I have done my share, and now I intend to seek happiness for myself. I have never had any, and I am starving for it."

"An' you'd leave me to git on the best I can after what I've done for you?" burst out the deacon, still trying to hold down his growing passion.

"You gave me my life, and I'm thankful to you for that, but you've given me little since, father."

"Hain't I fed an' clothed you?"

"No more than I have fed and clothed you. You've provided the raw food, and I've cooked and served it. You've bought cloth, and I have made shirts and overalls and coats for you and knitted your socks and comforters and mittens. Not only have I toiled and saved and scrimped away my girlhood as you bade me, but I've earned for you. Who made the butter and took care of the hens and dried the apples and 'drew in' the rugs? Who raised and ground the peppers for sale and tended the geese that you might sell the feathers? No, father, I don't consider that I'm in your debt!"

Deacon Foxwell Baxter was completely nonplused for the first time in his life. He had never allowed "argyfin'" in his household, and there had never been a clash of wills before this when he had not come off swiftly and brutally triumphant. This situation was complicated by the fact that he did not dare to apply the brakes as usual since there were more issues involved than ever before. He felt too stunned to deal properly with this daughter, having emptied all the vials of his wrath upon the other one and being, in consequence, somewhat enfeebled. It was always easy enough to cope with Patty, for her impertinence evoked such rage that the argument took care of itself, but this grave young woman was a different matter. There she sat composedly on the edge of her wooden chair, her head lifted

high, her color coming and going, her eyes shining steadily like fixed stars; there she sat, calmly announcing her intention of leaving her father to shift for himself. Yet the skies seemed to have no thought of falling! He felt that he must make another effort to assert his authority.

"Now, you take off your coat," he said, the pipe in his hand trembling as he stirred nervously in his chair. "You take your coat right off an' set down to the supper table same as usual, do you hear? Eat your victuals an' then go to your bed an' git over this crazy fit that Patience has started workin' in you. No more nonsense now! Do as I tell you!"

"I have made up my mind, father, and it's no use arguing. All who try to live with you fall sooner or later. You have had four children, father.

One boy ran away; the other did not mind being drowned, I fear, since life was so hard at home. You have just turned the third child out for a sin of deceit and disobedience she would never have committed—for her nature is as clear as crystal—if you had ever loved her or considered her happiness. So I have done with you, unless in your old age God should bring you to such a pass that no one else will come to your assistance; then I'd see somehow that you were cared for and nursed and made comfortable. You are not an old man; you are strong and healthy, and you have plenty of money to get a good housekeeper. I should decide differently perhaps if all this were not true."

"You lie! I haven't got plenty of money!" And the deacon struck the table a sudden blow that made the china in the cupboard rattle. "You've no notion what this house costs me, an' the food for the stock, an' you two girls, an' labor at the store, an' the hayfield, an' the taxes an' insurance! I've slaved from sunrise to sunset, but I ain't hardly been able to lay up a cent. I s'pose the neighbors have been fillin' you full o' tales about my mis-able little savin's an' makin' 'em into a fortune. Well, you won't git any of 'em, I promise you that!"

"You have plenty laid away. Everybody knows, so what's the use of denying it? Anyway, I don't want a penny of your money, father, so good-by. There's enough cooked to keep you for a couple of days," and Waitstill rose from her chair and drew on her mittens.

Father and daughter confronted each other, the secret fury of the man met by the steady determination of the girl. The deacon was baffled, almost awed, by Waitstill's quiet self control, but at the very moment that he was half unconsciously glaring at her, it dawned upon him that he was beaten, and that she was mistress of the situation.

Where would she go? What were her plans? For definite plans she had, or she could not meet his eye with so resolute a gaze. If she did leave him how could he contrive to get her back again and so escape the scorn of the village, the averted look, the lessened trade?

"Where are you goin' now?" he asked, and though he tried his best, he could not for the life of him keep back one final taunt. "I s'pose, like your sister, you've got a man in your eye?" He chafed this, to him, impossible suggestion as being the most insulting one that he could invent at the moment.

"I have," replied Waitstill, "a man in my eye and in my heart. We should have been husband and wife before this had we not been kept apart by obstacles too stubborn for us to overcome. My way has chanced to open first, though it was none of my contriving."

Had the roof fallen in upon him the deacon could not have been more dumfounded. His tongue literally clove to the roof of his mouth. His face fell, and his mean, piercing eyes blinked under his shaggy brows as if seeking light.

Waitstill stirred the fire, closed the brick oven and put the teapot on the back of the stove, hung up the long handled dipper on its accustomed nail over the sink and went to the door.

Her father collected his scattered wits and pulled himself to his feet by the arms of the high backed rocker. "You shan't step outside this room till you tell me where you're goin'," he said when he found his voice.

"I have no wish to keep it secret. I am going to see if Mrs. Mason will keep me tonight. Tomorrow I shall walk down the river and get work at



"You might as well go to live on the poor farm!"

the mills, but on my way I shall stop at the Boyntons' to tell Ivory I am ready

to marry him as soon as he's ready to take me."

"This was enough to stir the blood of the deacon into one last fury.

"I might have guessed it if I hadn't been blind as a bat an' deaf as an adder!" And he gave the table another ringing blow before he leaned on it to gather strength. "Of course it would be one o' that crazy Boynton crew you'd take up with!" he roared. "Nothin' would suit either o' you girls but choosin' the biggest enemies I've got in the whole village!"

"You've never taken pains to make anything but enemies, so what could we do?"

"You might as well go to live on the poor farm! Aaron Boynton was a respectable hound, Lois Boynton is as crazy as a loon, the boy is a nobody's child, an' Ivory's no better than a common pauper!"

"Ivory's a brave, strong, honorable man and a scholar too. I can work for him and help him earn and save, as I have you."

"How long's this been goin' on?" The deacon was choking, but he meant to get to the bottom of things while he had the chance.

"It hasn't gone on at all. He has never said a word to me, and I have always obeyed your will in these matters, but you can't hide love any more than you can hide hate. I know Ivory loves me, so I'm going to tell him that my duty is done here and I am ready to help him."

"Goin' to throw yourself at his head, be you?" sneered the deacon. "By the Lord, I don't know where you two girls got these loose ways o' thinkin' an' actin'. Mebbe he won't take you, an' then where'll you be? You won't git under my roof again when you've once left it, you can make up your mind to that!"

"If you have any doubts about Ivory's being willing to take me you'd better drive along behind me and listen while I ask him."

Waitstill's tone had an exultant thrill of certainty in it. She threw up her head, glorying in what she was about to do. If she laid aside her usual reserve and voiced her thoughts openly it was not in the hope of convincing her father, but for the bliss of putting them into words and intoxicating herself by the sound of them.

"Come after me if you will, father, and watch the welcome I shall get. Oh, I have no fear of being turned out by Ivory Boynton. I can hardly wait to give him the joy I shall be bringing! It's selfish, but I'll do it!" And before Deacon Baxter could cross the room Waitstill was out of the kitchen door into the shed and flying down Town House hill like an arrow shot free from the bow.

The deacon followed close behind, hardly knowing why, but he was no match for the girl, and at last he stood helpless on the steps of the shed, shak-

ing his fist and hurling terrible words after her, words that it was fortunate for her peace of mind she could not hear.

"A curse upon you both!" he cried savagely. "Not satisfied with disobeyin' an' defyin' me, you've put me to shame, an' now you'll be settin' the neighbors ag'in me an' ruinin' my trade. If you was freezin' in the snow I wouldn't heave a blanket to you! If you was starvin' I wouldn't fling either of you a crust! Never shall you darken my doors again, an' never shall you git a penny o' my money, not if I have to throw it into the river to spite you!"

Here his breath failed, and he stumbled out into the barn whimpering between his broken sentences like a whipped child.

"Here I am with nobody to milk, nor feed the hens; nobody to churn tomorrow, nor do the chores; a poor, miserable creature, deserted by my children, with nobody to do a hand's turn 'thout bein' paid for every step they take! I'll give 'em what they deserve. I don't know what, but I'll be even with 'em yet." And the deacon set his Baxter jaw in a way that meant his determination to stop at nothing.

CHAPTER XXVI.

Sentry Duty.

IVORY BOYNTON drove home from the woods that same afternoon by way of the bridge, in order to buy some provisions at the brick store. When he was still a long distance from the bars that divided the lane from the highroad he espied a dark clad little speck he knew to be Rodman leaning over the fence, waiting and longing as usual for his homecoming, and his heart warmed at the thought of the boyish welcome that never failed.

The sleigh slipped quickly over the hard packed, shining road, and the bells rang merrily in the clear, cold air, giving out a joyous sound that had no echo in Ivory's breast that day. He had just had a vision of happiness through another man's eyes. Was he always to stand outside the banquetting table, he wondered, and see others feasting while he hungered?

Now the little speck bounded from the fence, flew down the road to meet the sleigh and jumped in by the driver's side.

"I knew you'd come tonight," Rodman cried eagerly. "I told Aunt Boynton you'd come."

"How is she, well as common?"

"No, not a bit well since yesterday morning, but Mrs. Mason says it's nothing worse than a cold. Mrs. Mason has just gone home, and we've had a grand housecleaning today. She's washed and ironed and baked, and we've put Aunt Boynton in clean sheets and pillowcases, and her room's nice and warm, and I carried the cat

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