

The Story of Waitstill Baxter

[Continued from page 6, Col. 4] ed in a public place, according to law. Perhaps I shall save a day out of the fourteen I've got to wait for my wife.

"Walk up to the door with me," begged Ivory. "The horse is all harnessed, and Rod will slip him into the sleigh in a jiffy."

"Oh, Ivory, do you realize what this means"—and Waitstill clung to his arm as they went up the lane together—"that whatever sorrow, whatever hardship comes to us neither of us will ever have to bear it alone again?"

"I believe I do realize it as few men could, for never in my five and twenty years have I had a human creature to whom I could pour myself out, in whom I could really confide, with whom I could take counsel. You can guess what it will be to have a comprehending woman at my side. Shall we tell my mother? Do say 'yes'; I believe she will understand. Rod, Rod, come and see who's stepping in the door this very minute!"

Rodman was up in his bedroom, attending himself elaborately for sentry duty. His delight at seeing Waitstill was perhaps slightly tempered by the thought that flashed at once through his mind—that if she was safe he would not be required to stand guard in the snow for hours as he had hoped. But this grief passed when he fully realized Waitstill's presence at the farm at this unaccustomed hour really meant. After he had been told he hung about her like the child that he was—though he had a bit of the hero in him, at bottom, too—embracing her waist fondly and bristling with wondering questions.

"Is she really going to stay with us for always, Ivory?" he asked. "Every day and all the days, every night and all the nights. 'Praise God from whom all blessings flow!'" said Ivory, taking off his fur cap and opening the door of the living room. "But we've got to wait for her a whole fortnight. Rod, isn't that a ridiculous snail of a law?"

"Patty didn't wait a fortnight." Ivory responded, with a smile. "But she had a good reason, and, alas, we haven't, or they'll say that we haven't. And I am very grateful to the same dear little Patty, for when she got herself a husband she found me a wife!"

Rodman did not wholly understand this, but felt that there were many mysteries attending the love affairs of grownup people that were too complicated for him to grasp, and it did not seem to be just the right moment for questions.

Waitstill and Ivory went into Mrs. Boynton's room quietly, hand in hand, and when she saw Waitstill she raised herself from her pillow and held out her arms with a soft cry of delight. "I haven't had you for so long, so long!" she said, touching the girl's cheek with her frail hand.

"You are going to have me every day now, dear," whispered Waitstill, with a sob in her voice, for she saw a change in the face, a new transparency, a still more ethereal look than had been there before.

"Every day?" she repeated longingly. Waitstill took off her hood and knelt on the floor beside the bed, hiding her face in the counterpane to conceal the tears.

"She is coming to live with us, dear. Come in, Rod, and hear me tell her. Waitstill is coming to live with us. Isn't that a beautiful thing to happen to this dreary house?" asked Ivory, bending to take his mother's hand.

"Don't you remember what you thought the first time I ever came here, mother?" and Waitstill lifted her head and looked at Mrs. Boynton with swimming eyes and lips that trembled. "Ivory is making me all come true, and I shall be your daughter!"

Mrs. Boynton sank farther back into her pillows and, closing her eyes, gave a long sigh of infinite content. Her voice was so faint that they had to stoop to catch the words, and Ivory, feeling the strange benediction that seemed to be passing from his mother's spirit to theirs, took Rod's hand and knelt beside Waitstill.

CHAPTER XXVIII. Aaron's Red.

"IVORY! Ivory!" Ivory stirred in a sleep that had been troubled by too great happiness. To travel a dreary path alone, a path leading seemingly nowhere, and then suddenly to have a companion by one's side, the very sight of whom enchanted the eye, the very touch of whom delighted the senses—what joy unspeakable! Who could sleep soundly when wakefulness brought a train of such blissful thoughts?

"Ivory! Ivory!" He was fully awake now, for he knew his mother's voice. In all the years, ever thoughtful of his comfort and of the constant strain upon his strength, Lois had never wakened her son at night.

"Coming, mother, coming!" he said, when he realized she was calling him. And, hastily drawing on some clothing, for the night was bitterly cold, he came out of his room and saw his mother standing at the foot of the stairway with a lighted candle in her hand.

"Can you come down, Ivory? It is a strange hour to call you, but I have something to tell you—something I have been piecing together for weeks, something I have just clearly remembered."

"If it's something that won't keep till morning, mother, you creep back into bed and we'll hear it comfortably," he said, coming downstairs and leading her to her room. "I'll smooth the covers, so; beat up the pillows—there!—and throw another log on the sitting room fire. Now, what's the matter? Couldn't you sleep?"

"All summer long I have been trying to remember something—something untrue that you have been believing, some falsehood for which I was responsible. I have pursued and pursued it, but it has always escaped me. Once it was clear as daylight, for Rodman read me from the Bible a plain answer to all the questions that tortured me."

"That must have been the night that she fainted," thought Ivory. "When I awoke next morning from my long sleep the old puzzle had come back a thousand times worse than before, for then I knew that I had held the clew in my own hand and had lost it. Now, praise God, I know the truth, and you, the only one to whom I can tell it, are close at hand!"

Ivory looked at his mother and saw that the veil that had separated them mentally seemed to have vanished in the night that had passed. Often and often it had blown away, as it were, for the fraction of a moment and then blown back again. Now her eyes met his with an altogether new clearness that startled him, while her breath came with ease and she seemed stronger than for many days.

"You remember the winter I was here at the farm alone when you were at the academy?" "Yes. It was then that I came home and found you so terribly ill. Do you think we need go back to that old time now, mother dear?"

"Yes, I must, I must! One morning I received a strange letter, bearing no signature, in which the writer said that if I wished to see my husband I had only to go to a certain address in Brentville, N. H. The letter went on to say that Mr. Aaron Boynton was ill and longed for nothing so much as to speak with me, but there were reasons why he did not wish to return to Edgewood. Would I come to him without delay?"

Ivory now sat straight in his chair and listened keenly, feeling that this was to be no vague, uncertain and misleading memory, but something true and tangible.

"The letter excited me greatly after your father's long absence and silence. I knew it could mean nothing but sorrow; but, although I was half ill at the time, my plain duty was to go, so I thought to go without making any explanation in the village."

All this was new to Ivory, and he hung upon his mother's words, dreading yet hoping for the light that they might shed upon the past.

"I arrived at Brentville quite exhausted with the journey and weighed down by anxiety and dread. I found the house mentioned in the letter at 7 o'clock in the evening and knocked at the door. A common, hard featured woman answered the knock and, seeming to expect me, ushered me in. I do not remember the room; I remember only a child leaning patiently against the window sill looking out into the dark and that the place was bare and cheerless."

"I came to call upon Mr. Aaron Boynton," I said, with my heart sinking lower and lower as I spoke. The woman opened a door into the next room, and when I walked in, instead of seeing your father, I confronted a haggard, death stricken young woman sitting up in bed, her great eyes bright with pain, her lips as white as her hollow cheeks and her long black hair streaming over the pillow. The very sight of her struck a knell to the little hope I had of soothing your father's sick bed and forgiving him if he had done me any wrong."

"Well, you came, as I thought you would," said the girl, looking me over from head to foot in a way that somehow made me burn with shame. "Now, sit down in that chair and hear what I've got to say while I've got the strength to say it. I haven't the time nor the desire to put a gloss on it. Aaron Boynton isn't here, as you plainly see, but that's not my fault, for he belongs here as much as anywhere, though he wouldn't have much interest in a dying woman. If you have suffered on account of him so have I, and you have had this pain boring into you and eating your life away for months, as I have."

"I pitied her, she seemed so distraught, but I was in terror of her all the same and urged her to tell her story calmly and I would do my best to hear it in the same way."

"Calm," she exclaimed, "with this agony tearing me to pieces! Well, to make beginning and end in one, Aaron Boynton was my husband for three years."

"I caught hold of the chair to keep myself from falling and cried, 'I do not believe it!' 'Believe it or not,' she answered scornfully, 'it makes no difference to me, but I can give you twenty proofs in as many seconds. We met at a Cochrane meeting, and he chose me from all the others as his true wife. For two years we traveled together, but long before they came to an end there was no happiness for either of us. He had a conscience—not much of

one, but just enough to keep him miserable. At last I felt he was not believing the doctrines he preached, and I caught him trying to get news of you and your boy just because you were out of reach, and neglecting my boy and me, who had given up everything to wander with him and live on whatever the brethren and sisters chose to give us."

"So there was a child, a boy," I gasped. "Did—did he live?" "He's in the next room," she answered, "and it's him I brought you here for. Aaron Boynton has served us both the same. He left you for me and me for heaven knows who. If I could live I wouldn't ask any favors, of you least of all, but I haven't a penny in the world, though I shan't need one very long. My friend that's nursing me hasn't a roof to her head, and she wouldn't share it with the boy if she had—she's a bigoted orthodox."

"But what do you expect me to do?" I asked angrily, for she was stabbing me with every word.

"The boy is your husband's child, and he always represented you as a saint upon earth. I expect you to take him home and provide for him. He doesn't mean very much to me—just enough so that I don't relish his going to the poorhouse, that's all."

"He'll go to something very like that if he comes to mine," I said. "Don't worry me with talk, for I can't stand it," she wailed, clutching at her nightgown and flinging back her hair. "Either you take the child or I send somebody to Edgewood with him, somebody to tell the whole story. Some of the Cochrans can support him if you won't, or, at the worst, Aaron Boynton's town can take care of his son. The doctor has given me two days to live. If it's a minute longer I've warned him and I warn you that I'll end it myself, and if you don't take the boy I'll do the same for him. He's a good sight better off dead than knocking about the world alone. He's innocent, and there's no sense in his being punished for the sins of other folks."

"I see it all. Why did I never think of it before, my poor, poor Rod!" said Ivory, clenching his hands and burying his head in them.

"Don't grieve, Ivory. It has all turned out so much better than we could have hoped. Just listen to the end. She was frightful to hear and to look at, the girl was, though all the time I could feel that she must have had a gypsy beauty and vigor that answered to something in your father."

"Go along out now!" she cried suddenly. "I can't stand anybody near. The doctor never gives me half enough medicine, and for the hour before he comes I fairly die for lack of it, though little he cares. Go upstairs and have your sleep, and tomorrow you can make up your mind."

[Continued next week.] The Highest Title. I hope I shall always possess firmness and virtue enough to maintain what I consider the most enviable of all titles, the character of an "honest man."—George Washington.

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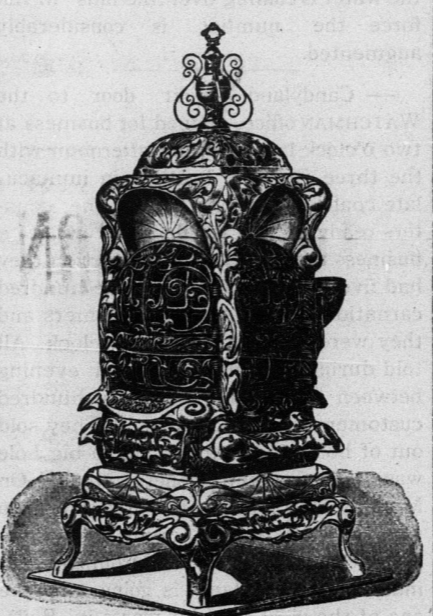
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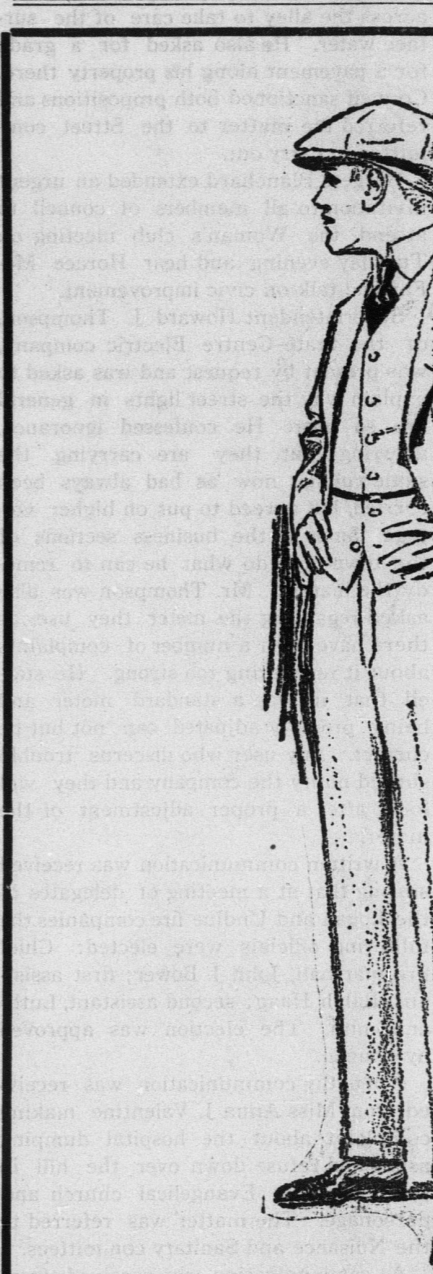
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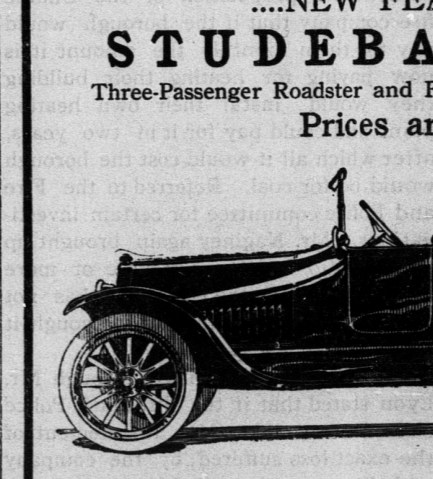
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