

# The Story of Waitstill Baxter

By KATE DOUGLAS WIGGIN

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[Continued from last week.]

"You don't leave me much freedom to do that," I tried to answer, but she interrupted me, rocking her body to and fro. "Neither of us will ever see Aaron Boynton again—you no more than I. He's in the west, and a man with two families and no means of providing for them doesn't come back where he's known. Come and take her away, Eliza! Take her away, quick!" she called.

"I stumbled out of the room, and the woman waved me upstairs. 'You must not mind, Hetty,' she apologized. 'She never had a good disposition at the best, but she's frantic with the pain now, and good reason, too. It's about over, and I'll be thankful when it is. You'd better swallow the shame and take the child. I can't and won't have him, and it'll be easy enough for you to say he belongs to some of your own folks.'

"By this time I was mentally bewildered. When the iron first entered my soul, when I first heard the truth about your father, at that moment my mind gave way—I know it now."

"Poor, poor mother! My poor, gentle little mother!" murmured Ivory brokenly as he stroked her hand.

"Don't cry, my son; it is all past—the sorrow and the bitterness and the struggle. I will just finish the story, and then we'll close the book forever. The woman gave me some bread and tea, and I flung myself on the bed without undressing. I don't know how long afterward it was, but the door opened and a little boy stole in, a sad, strange, dark eyed little boy who said: 'Can I sleep up here? Mother's screaming and I'm afraid.' He climbed up to the couch. I covered him with a blanket, and I soon heard his deep breathing. But later in the night, when I must have fallen asleep myself, I suddenly awoke and felt him lying beside me. He had dragged the blanket along and crept up on the bed to get close to my side for the warmth I could give or the comfort of my nearness. The touch of him almost broke my heart. I could not push the little creature away when he was lying there so near and warm and confiding—he, all unconscious of the agony his mere existence was to me. I must have slept again, and when the day broke I was alone. I thought the presence of the child in the night was a dream, and I could not remember where I was or why I was there."

"Mother, dear mother, don't tell me any more tonight. I fear for your strength," urged Ivory, his eyes full of tears at the remembrance of her sufferings.

"There is only a little more and the weight will be off my heart and on yours, my poor son. Would that I need not tell you! The house was still, and I thought at first that no one was awake, but when I opened the sitting room door the child ran toward me and took my hand as the woman came in from the sickroom. 'Go into the kitchen, Rodman,' she said, 'and lace up your boots. You're going right out with this lady. Hetty died in the night,' she continued impassively. 'The doctor was here about 10 o'clock, and I've never seen her so bad. He gave her a big dose of sleeping powder and put another in the table drawer for me to mix for her toward morning. She was helpless to move, we thought, but all the same she must have got out of bed when my back was turned and taken the powder dry on her tongue, for it was gone when I looked for it. It didn't hasten things much, and I don't blame her. If ever there was a wild, reckless creature it was Hetty Rodman. But I, who am just the opposite, would have done the same if I'd been her."

"He hurriedly gave me a cup of coffee and, putting a coat and a cap on the boy, literally pushed me out of the house. 'I've got to report things to the doctor,' she said, 'and you're better out of the way. Go down that side street to the station, and mind you say the boy belonged to your sister, who died and left him to you. You're a Doornant, ain't you? So was Hetty, and they're all sisters, so you'll be telling no lies. Goodby, Rodman. Be a good boy and don't be any trouble to the lady.'

"How I found the station I do not know, nor how I made the journey, nor where I took the stagecoach. The snow began to fall, and by noon there was a drifting storm. I could not remember where I was going nor who the boy was, for just as the snow was whirling outside so it was whirling in my brain."

"Mother, I can hardly bear to hear any more. It is too terrible!" cried Ivory, rising from his chair and pacing the floor.

"I can recall nothing of any account until I awoke in my own bed weeks afterward. The strange little boy was there, but Mrs. Day and Dr. Perry told me what I must have told them—that he was the child of my dead sister. Those were the last words uttered by

the woman in Brentville. I carried them straight through my illness and brought them out on the other side more firmly entrenched than ever."

"If only the truth had come back to you sooner!" sighed Ivory, coming back to her bedside. "I could have helped you to bear it all these years. Sorrow is so much lighter when you can share it with some one else. And the girl who died was called Hetty Rodman, then, and she simply gave the child her last name?"

"Yes, poor, suffering creature. I feel no anger against her now—it has burned itself all away—nor do I feel any bitterness against your father. I forgot all this miserable story for so long, loving and watching for him all the time, that it is as if it did not belong to my own life, but had to do with some unhappy stranger. Can you forgive, too, Ivory?"

"I can try," he answered. "God knows I ought to be able to if you can!"

"And will it turn you away from Rod?"

"No. It draws me nearer to him than ever. He shall never know the truth. Why should he? Just as he crept close to you that night, all unconscious of the reason you had for shrinking from him, so he has crept close to me in these years of trial when your mind has been wandering."

"Life is so strange. To think that this child, of all others, should have been a comfort to you! The Lord's hand is in it!" whispered Mrs. Boynton feebly.

"His boyish belief in me, his companionship, have kept the breath of hope alive in me. That's all I can say."

"The Bible story is happening over again in our lives, then. Don't you remember that Aaron's rod budded and blossomed and bore fruit and that the miracle kept the rebels from murmuring?"

"This rebel never will murmur again, mother," and Ivory rose to leave the room. "Now that you have shed your burden you will grow stronger and life will be all joy, for Waitstill will come to us soon, and we can shake off these miseries and be a happy family once more."

"It is she who has helped me most to find the thread, pouring sympathy and strength into me, nursing me, loving me, because she loved my wonderful son. Oh, how blest among women I am to have lived long enough to see you happy!"

And as Ivory kissed his mother and blew out the candle she whispered to herself, "Even so, Lord Jesus, come quickly!"

## CHAPTER XXIX.

**M**RS. MASON'S welcome to Waitstill was unexpectedly hearty, much heartier than it would have been six months before, when she regarded Mrs. Boynton as little less than a harmless lunatic, of no use as a neighbor, and when she knew nothing more of Ivory than she could gather by his occasional drive or walk past her door with a civil greeting.

Ivory made himself quickly at home and helped the old lady to get a room ready for Waitstill before he drove back for a look at his mother and then on to carry out his impetuous and romantic scheme of routing out the town clerk and announcing his intended marriage.

Waitstill slept like the shepherd boy in "The Pilgrim's Progress," with the "herb called heart's ease" in her bosom. She opened her eyes next morning from the depths of Mrs. Mason's best feather bed and looked wonderingly about the room, with all its unaccustomed surroundings. She heard the rattle of fire irons and the clatter of dishes below, the first time in all her woman's life that preparations for breakfast had ever greeted her ears when she had not been an active participant in them.

She lay quite still for a quarter of an hour, tired in body and mind, but incredibly happy in spirit, marveling at the changes wrought in her during the day preceding, the most eventful one in her history.

The image of Ivory had been all through the night in the foreground of her dreams and in her moments of wakefulness, both made blissful by the heaven of anticipation that dawned upon her. Was ever man so wise, so tender and gentle, so strong, so comprehending? What mattered the absence of worldly goods, the presence of care and anxiety, when a woman had a steady hand to hold, a steadfast heart to trust, a man who would love her and stand by her, whatever befell?

Then the face of Ivory's mother would swim into the mental picture; the pale face, as white as the pillow it lay upon; the face with its aureole of ashen hair, and the wistful blue eyes that begged of God and her children some peace before they closed on life.

The vision of her sister was a joyful one, and her heart was at peace about her, the plucky little princess who had blazed the way out of the ogre's castle.

She saw Patty clearly as a future fine lady, in velvets and satins and furs, bewitching everybody by her gay spirits, her piquant vivacity, and the loving heart that lay underneath all the nonsense and gave it warmth and color.

The remembrance of her father alone on the hilltop did indeed trouble Waitstill. Self reproach, in the true sense of the word, she did not, could not, feel.

When she was thankfully eating her breakfast with Mrs. Mason a little later and waiting for Ivory to call for them both and take them to the Boynton farm, she little knew what was going on at her old home in these very

hours, when, to tell the truth, she would have liked to slip in, had it been possible, wash the morning dishes, skim the cream, do the week's churning, make her father's bed and slip out again into the dear shelter of love that awaited her.

The deacon had passed a good part of the night in scheming and contriving, and when he drank his self made cup of muddy coffee at 7 o'clock next morning he had formed several plans that were to be immediately frustrated, had he known it, by the exasperating and suspicious nature of the ladies involved in them.

At 8 he had left the house, started Bill Morrill at the store and was on the road in search of vengeance and a housekeeper. Old Mrs. Atkins of Deerwader sniffed at the wages offered. Miss Peters of Union Falls, an aged spinster with weak lungs, had the impertinence to tell him that she feared she couldn't stand the cold in his house; she had heard he was very particular about the amount of wood that was burned. There was not another free woman within eight miles, and the deacon was chafing under the mortification of being continually obliged to state the reasons of his needing a housekeeper. The only hope, it seemed, lay in going to Saco and hiring a stranger, a plan not at all to his liking, as it was sure to involve him in extra expense.

Muttering threats against the universe in general, he drove home by way of Milliken's mills, thinking of the unfed hens, the unmilked cow, the



"Do you want to come and housekeep for me?"

unwashed dishes, the unchurned cream and, above all, of his unchastened daughters, his rage increasing with every step until it was nearly at the white heat of the night before.

A long stretch of hill brought the tired old mare to a slow walk and enabled the deacon to see the Widow Tillman clipping the geraniums that stood in tin cans on the shelf of her kitchen window.

Now, Foxwell Baxter had never been a village Lothario at any age nor frequented the society of such. Of late years, indeed, he had frequented no society of any kind, so that he had missed, for instance, Abel Day's description of the Widow Tillman as a "regular syreen," though he vaguely remembered that some of the Baptist sisters had questioned the authenticity of her conversion by their young and attractive minister. She made a pleasant picture at the window. She was a free woman. She was a comparative newcomer to the village, and her mind had not been poisoned with feminine gossip—in a word, she was a distinctly hopeful subject, and acting on a blind and sudden impulse, he turned into the yard, flung the reins over the mare's neck and knocked at the back door.

"Her character's no worse than mine by now if Aunt Abby Cole's on the road," he thought grimly, "and if the Wilsons see my sleigh inside of a widder's fence so much the better. It'll give 'em a jog. Good mornin', Mrs. Tillman," he said to the smiling lady. "I'll come to the p'int at once. My youngest daughter has married Mark Wilson against my will an' gone away from town, an' the older one's chosen a husband still less to my likin'. Do you want to come and housekeep for me?"

"I surmised something was going on," returned Mrs. Tillman. "I saw Patty and Mark drive away early this morning, with Mr. and Mrs. Wilson wrapping the girl up and putting a hot soapstone in the sleigh and consid'able kissing and hugging thrown in."

This knowledge added fuel to the flame that was burning fiercely in the deacon's breast.

"Well, how about the housekeepin'?" he asked, trying not to show his eagerness and not recognizing himself at all in the enterprise in which he found himself indulging.

"I'm very comfortable here," the lady responded artfully, "and I don't know's I care to make any change, thank you. I didn't like the village much at first, after living in larger places, but now I'm acquainted it kind of gains on me."

Her reply was carefully framed, for her mind worked with great rapidity, and she was mistress of the situation almost as soon as she saw the deacon alighting from his sleigh. He was not the sort of a man to be a casual caller, and his manner bespoke an urgent errand. She had a pension of \$6 a month, but over and above that sum her living was precarious. She made coats, and she had never known want, for she was a master hand at dealing with the opposite sex. Deacon Baxter, according to common report, had

ten or fifteen thousand dollars stowed away in the banks, so the situation would be as simple as possible under ordinary circumstances. It was as easy to turn out one man's pockets as another's when he was a normal human being, but Deacon Baxter was a different proposition.

"I wonder how you be's likely to live," she thought, glancing at him covertly out of the fall of her eye. "His evil temper must have driven more than one nail in his coffin. I wonder if I refuse to housekeep whether I'll get—a better offer. I wonder if I could manage him if I got him. I'd rather like to set in the Baxter pew at the orthodox meeting house after the way some of the Baptist sisters have snubbed me since I come here."

Not a vestige of these incendiary thoughts showed in her comely countenance.

"I'd make the wages fair," urged the deacon, looking round the clean kitchen, with the breakfast table sitting near the sunny window and the odor of corned beef and cabbage issuing temptingly from a boiling pot on the fire. "I hope she ain't a great meat eater," he thought, "but it's too soon to cross that bridge yet awhile."

"I've no doubt of it," said the widow, wondering if her voice rang true, "but I've got a pension, and why should I leave this cozy little home? Would I better myself any—that's the question? I'm kind of lonesome here. That's the only reason I'd consider a move."

"No need o' bein' lonesome down to the Falls," said the deacon. "And I'm in an' out all day, between the barn an' the store."

This, indeed, was not a pleasant prospect, but Jane Tillman had faced worse ones in her time.

"I'm no hand at any work outside the house," she observed, as if reflecting. "I can truthfully say I'm a good cook and have a great faculty for making a little go a long ways." (She considered this a master stroke, and, in fact, it was, for the deacon's mouth absolutely watered at this apparently unconscious comprehension of his disposition.) "But I'm no hand at any chores in the barn or shed," she continued. "My husband would never allow me to do that kind of work."

"Perhaps I could git a boy to help out. I've been kind o' thinkin' o' that lately. What wages would you expect if I paid a boy for the rough work?" asked the deacon tremulously.

"Well, to tell the truth, I don't quite fancy the idea of taking wages. Judge Dickinson wants me to go to Alfred and housekeep for him and named \$12 a month. It's good pay, and I haven't said 'No.' But my rent is small here, I'm my own mistress, and I don't feel like giving up my privileges."

"Twelve dollars a month!" He had never thought of approaching that sum, and he saw the heap of unwashed dishes growing day by day and the cream souring on the milk pans. Suddenly an idea sprang full born into the deacon's mind. (Jed Morrill's "Old Driver" must have been close at hand!) Would Jane Tillman marry him? No woman in the three villages would be more obnoxious to his daughters; that in itself was a distinct gain. She was a fine, robust figure of a woman in her early forties, and he thought, after all, that the hollow chested, spindle shank-ed kind were more expensive to feed on the whole than their better padded sisters. He had never had any difficulty in managing wives and thought himself quite equal to one more bout, even at sixty-five, though he had just the faintest suspicion that the high color on Mrs. Tillman's prominent cheek bones, the vigor shown in the coarse black hair and handsome eyebrows, might make this task a little more difficult than his previous ones.

"If you'd like to have a home o' your own 'thout payin' rent, you've only got to say the word an' I'll make you Mrs. Baxter," said the deacon. "There'll be nobody to interfere with you, an' a handsome legacy if I die first, for none o' my few savin's is goin' to my daughters, I can promise you that!"

The deacon threw out this tempting bait advisedly, for at this moment he would have poured his hoard into the lap of any woman who would help him to avenge his fancied wrongs.

This was information indeed! The "few savin's" alluded to amounted to some thousands, Jane Tillman knew. Had she not better burn her ships behind her, take the risks and have faith in her own powers? She was getting along in years, and her charms of person were lessening with every day that passed over her head. If the deacon's queer ways grew too queer, she thought, an appeal to the doctor and the minister might provide a way of escape and a neat little income to boot. So, on the whole, the marriage, though much against her natural inclinations, seemed to be providentially arranged.

If Jane Tillman became Mrs. Baxter she intended to get the whip hand and keep it, but nothing was further from her intention than to make the deacon miserable if she could help it. That was not her disposition, and so, when the deluded man left her house, he had made more concessions in a single hour than in all the former years of his life.

His future spouse was to write out a little paper for his signature; just a friendly little paper to be kept quite private and confidential between themselves, stating that she was to do no work outside of the house; that her pension was to be her own; that she was to have \$5 in cash on the first of every month in lieu of wages, and that in case of his death occurring first she was to have a third of his estate, and the whole of it if at the time of his decease he was still pleased with his

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Shoes.

Shoes.

## Yeager's Shoe Store

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