

The Story of Waitstill Baxter

By KATE DOUGLAS WIGGIN

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CHAPTER XXIX.

The Deacon's Waterloo.

MRS. 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 un milked cow, the 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, "an' if the Wilsons see my sleigh inside of a wilder's fence so much the better. It'll



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give 'em a jog. Good mornin', Mis' 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 considerable 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 long he's likely to live," she thought, glancing at him covertly out of the tail 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. "An' 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'd 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. (To be Continued)



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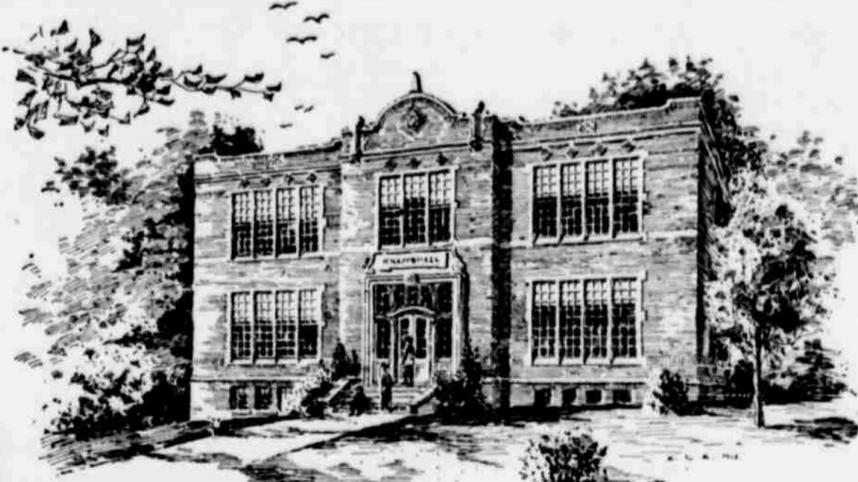
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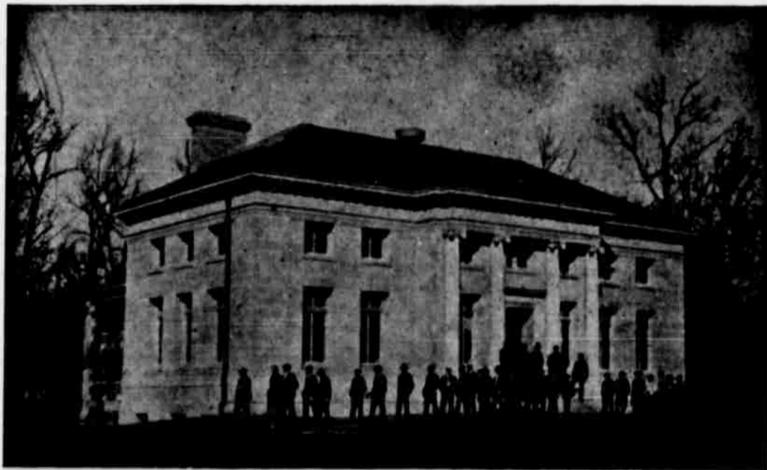
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