

Josiah Paxley's Wooing

A Complete Story
by OLAF BAKER

(Published by special arrangement)



AND the manner of it was in this wise. When you have a great passion upon you, and the object thereof is so rare and saintly a soul that almost it would seem sacrilege to declare it, then indeed you are in that state when a man feels his own abjectness in an overwhelming sort.

Now for years, as all the village can tell you, Josiah Paxley cared for naught else save the welfare of his garden and his soul; and it was gravely hinted in that Quarterly Meeting to which he belonged that his spiritual good came last. He was a tall, presentable-looking man, a Quaker by birth, and a bachelor by conviction. His manner of speech was slow, and all the words of it seemed to have fallen from the leaves of some ancient book. With his fellow-men he exchanged few words, because of a mighty reserve that sat upon him with a load of lead. And in the long winter evenings, when the lanes were choked with snow, and the old house full of a dream-like quietness, it seemed a fitting thing that he should sit wordless in the flicker of the fire. But when the apple trees burgeoned in the spring, and the wind came scented over sweet pasturage, and the throat of the blackbird was like to choke with song, you could have gone to the man and shaken him for his lack of seeming alive.

So he dwelt, winter and summer, autumn and spring, with no living things about him save his tabby cat Thomas and his housekeeper Maria. There was no love lost between any of them, and each held to his or her way, regardless of the rest. When Maria took fresh offence at her master's ways, she fed him on scraps of cold meat and rice puddings with the milk omitted, and when Thomas felt particularly malignant he went and killed a bird. Yet all the time these evil things flourished under his very nose Josiah dwelt in a great peace, and the peaches blossomed amorously upon the warm south wall.

When change clamors at the doorstep of a man's life it generally does so with a woman's tongue. So it was with Josiah Paxley in spite of all his years of bachelorhood, and it was almost a tragedy how deeply the thing went.

He saw her first at Meeting, whither he had gone upon First Day, or—as the Heathen call it—Sunday, as was his wont. She sat beside Martha Bickers on the second form at the side, and about her was a waste of empty seats, which showed up the tender droop of her shoulders to the greater advantage. For, with his natural perversity, it was her attitude rather than her face which Josiah noticed first. But when he got so far as to behold her countenance, his mind came suddenly out of that matter of sowing late sweetpeas where it had lamentably gone wandering in secular speculations, and lo! a seed of quite another sort was sown within his heart. After a while he caught what he was doing, and shaded his face quickly with his hand, as is the manner of Friends when the meeting is deep about them. But his hand was powerless to exclude the vision of the sweet countenance and the tender droop of the shoulders. They made the deeper impression because of their proximity to the stubborn attitude of Martha Bickers. Her face was as the Decalogue. A droop was a frailty of the flesh she would never permit even to her shoulders. Friends who were irregular attenders of Meeting, or lax in manners of speech, had reason to lament the undrooping vigor of Martha Bickers' mind.

All the week that followed, Josiah was tormented by the vision he had seen. He grew irritable, impossible to please. He chided Maria about her poor feeding of him, and even went to the length of smiting Thomas, who had clawed his leg for meat. In the quiet rooms of the old, dim house the figure of change wandered, a pale and ghostly woman whose garments whispered against the walls.

Upon the next First Day he found himself upon his way to Meeting a good ten minutes earlier than was his wont. After lingering in the graveyard outside while he read the names of dead Friends to while away the time, he at last joined himself unto the living, though they also looked dead enough if one judged by outward guise. Yes, there she was! the drooping shoulders, the sweet face, as if she had sat there all the week. In vain he struggled to repeat passages of Scripture to himself as he sat in the long silences that followed speaking or prayer. He even went to the length of recalling the argument against baptism in Barclay's

"Apology"—a strain upon the mental man not lightly to be undergone. It was a hollow mockery. He could not prevail. After Meeting was over, he was departing homeward alone, as his unsocial manner was, but Martha Bickers called him back.

"Won't thee dine with us?" she asked sternly. "We see nothing of thee now." Almost against his will, Josiah consented. He hated, beyond all other things, to take his meals abroad. But Martha Bickers was a relative of the blood upon his mother's side, and she was not a woman to be offended if you valued your peace of mind.

"My niece, Anne Newley, is with me," Martha continued grimly, as if she had said: "I have the plague."

"Indeed?" Josiah remarked. He did not regard the statement as of an emotional order.

"She is staying behind to talk with Jane Constable," Martha went on. "The young do love to loiter and gossip."

"They do," Josiah assented. He was regretting that he had accepted the invitation to dinner. He had a native hostility to strange nieces.

But when, five minutes afterwards, he found himself face to face across the dinner-table with the distracting vision which had haunted him for a week past, he was dumb with consternation and surprise. Nervousness impelled him to speech of a disjointed and vivid sort. Anne Newley, for her part, talked freely in a sweet and even manner; yet what she said was never upon the level of mere chatter. It was a speech fragrant and restful as an old garden. Her ideas fell softly from her lips like the falling of rose-leaves.

Josiah went home with his head in a whirl.

Three days afterwards he was idly watching the peach blossom upon the wall, when he was startled by a low voice at his elbow, and he turned to find Anne Newley close beside him on the grass.

"Please," she was saying, "my aunt would be so glad if thee'd let her have some eggs. She is expecting visitors for Quarterly Meeting, and the hens are so stubborn about laying."

Eggs! The Vision was asking him for eggs! Josiah found it necessary to mop his brow.

Then, while he sent the unwilling Maria upon a search for the eggs—a thing she hated and abhorred—it was incumbent upon him to entertain his visitor. He did it by taking her round his wonderful garden, racking his brain for matters of converse.

When Anne Newley left with her basket of eggs in one hand, she carried also a bunch of white violets in the other. The pity of it was that she did not know they were a wordless man's manner of expressing his soul.

Three days later she was again in his garden. But this time it was not for eggs. Josiah had met her by chance in the lane, and to their mutual astonishment had invited her to look at his beehives. Yet when they stood before the hives, it was she who talked of them rather than he. And so they drifted slowly round the garden, and all the time Josiah was struggling with himself to ask her the terrific question which would alter his whole life.

He plucked up all his courage at the radish bed, but quailed utterly before that of the early peas. There was an agony in his mind such as only a timid man may comprehend.

At the end of a long walk loomed a bed of asparagus. Josiah clenched his hands and came as nigh as a Quaker may to swearing that before he reached that bed the question should be asked. Yet the bed was reached and passed, and still the unspoken words tore at his brain with fiery hands.

"I must be getting home," Anne said gently. "But thy garden is very beautiful."

"Ah, but thee hasn't seen it all," Josiah said with ungrammatical fervor. "There is the orchard and the pig-sty."

"I should like to see the pig-sty," Anne said politely.

"But is it empty?" she asked, a minute later, as she stood looking over the door.

"Yes," Josiah said solemnly, it is empty."

There was an embarrassed pause. Then with desperation, he suddenly asked:

"And shall we keep a pig?"

Something in the manner, rather than in the words, startled Anne.

"A pig?" she murmured. "A pig?"

Then she looked into Josiah's eyes, and understood his meaning.

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They kept the pig.

[THE END.]

BOVRIL

CONTAINS ALL THE ELEMENTS
OF STRENGTH

BOVRIL goes directly to the creation of energy. It increases and maintains vigor and does not add unnecessary weight.

The Lady's Lists

(Continued from page 22)

up to the bar of the lists, and sat there, with lance in rest and visor raised, while the herald recited the long roll of her titles and dignities, calling upon all who desired, so in birth and honor they were worthy to tilt against her for the prize of the tourney. She looked a gallant figure in her silver armor, and meet to break a light lance against any courteous knight in the name of chivalry. Her shield was blazoned *argent* with her device of a lily crowned, and her motto, "*Foys à Loys*"; her horse was gallily caparisoned in blue and silver, and her blue eyes shone starlike under her silver helm with its lily crest.

At the cry of "*Laissez-aller!*" Sir Denis d'Espard, a stout knight and her faithful worshipper, rode lightly to meet her, but retired with speed, for she struck him fair upon his war-dinted shield, while he missed her completely. Another came, and another, but all understood that the white lily must not suffer defeat, and many hoped by their yielding of an advantage to win her favor.

The sun was sinking, and the Countess was weary, when a tall knight in black armor, mounted on a black horse, made his appearance. It needed not the herald to make known his identity—all had heard of the Wingless Eagle that was his crest, and showed in tarnished gold upon his black and battered shield, with the words "*Sans Ailes*" beneath it. He wore a green gauntlet as gaze in his helm, a huge crusading sword clanked at his side, and the lance he held was thick as a young fir tree, a fearsome weapon for all its blunted tip. The Countess's heart quaked; it was her intent to yield to him, but what if he cherished rancor against her and exulted in this opportunity for revenge?

At the signal they shot forward, like arrows from the bow, engaged, wheeled, and made ready for the second encounter. Her pride rose in arms, and all her strength was in the second blow that she aimed at his eagle crest, but she could scarcely believe her eyes when she saw him reel and fall from the shock of her light lance with the crash of a forest tree. Her heart bounded as a roar of applause went up from the spectators, but with the courtesy of her noble birth she dismounted and held out a hand to assist her fallen adversary.

"You lie where I should be," said she, flushed and breathless. "Not so did you meet the English at Orleans!"

"You learn again by my example to kneel, fair lady," was his rejoinder, as he struggled in his cumbersome armor to rise. "As for the crown of valour, it will sort better with your gold locks than my swart ones, and fairly have you won it by your doughty deeds this day!"

He raised his visor and she raged helplessly against the light of humor in his eyes. She was caught in the trap laid to humiliate him by crowning him at the hands of his baseborn love, and not knowing how to escape the ordeal, she passively allowed her squire to remount her, and in misery rode round the lists to the noise of loud acclamations, while her ladies rained flowers upon her. Bertha stood gravely awaiting her with the circlet of golden bay leaves in her hand, and in desperation she longed to set spurs to her horse and ride from the place. Sir Fulke and no other saved her. Riding up to the ladies' balcony, he took the glittering prize from the mock Queen of Beauty and Love, who in silence yielded it, and saying: "A Queen may not crown a Queen—that is a man's office," drew rein in the path of the Countess.

Again his eyes had dominion over her, so that her heart turned to water; but she glanced askance at Bertha, watching them from the throne close by, and the sight pricked her pride.

"Never! Never!" she cried wildly. "Stay me not, Sir Eagle; I will not suffer it!"

His mailed hand fell heavily on her shoulder, and as involuntarily she bowed her head, he crowned her above her lily crest. Knights, ladies, and the folk of Terraine cheered in chorus, not knowing what anguish filled the breast of their liege lady.

Thrusting him aside, she rode fast from the lists, and on reaching her chamber flung herself down by her bed in tears, where after a while the girl Bertha found her. The Countess turned fiercely at the sound of her voice, but saw the girl soberly garbed in grey, waiting quietly to disembarass her of her armor.

"Do you mock at me also? Why are you not gone to your lover?" she cried, shrinking from her gentle touch.

"You deceive yourself, lady," said Bertha. "Sir Fulke is no more to me than my good friend and foster-brother, and as such he loves me. He sent me hither to aid him in his suit with you, for whom he hath long sighed, knowing not how in his outlawed state he might ever approach you."

Aloys gazed at her for a space as if stunned; then her hot, undisciplined heart began to sing a strange song, and the blood rushed into her wan cheeks, drying up her tears. With a laugh of exultation she rose, and clasped the girl in her mailed arms, kissing her.

"You are my sister also!" she cried. "Help me now to make me fair and womanly. Since I am no match for Sir Fulke as a man, let me try if in lady's lists I may vanquish him."

A sumptuous feast was spread in the great banquet-hall, with its carved roof and stained-glass windows. Beside the Countess's vacant seat was another, prepared for her most honored guest, and standing there in white robes stiffly brodered with silver lilies, her head crowned with the crown of the tourney, she let her eyes rove round the hall for Sir Fulke. She found him at last in a far corner, still in suit of mail, though unhelmeted, his hands tightly clasped on his sword hilt, and his eyes burning upon her. She sent her page to summon him, and waited, with all her guests until he had clanked heavily to her side, then gave him her hand in welcome.

"My knights and my ladies," she cried in a ringing voice, "greet ye well the Lord of Château Duresse, known hitherto as outlawed, but now reinstated in his possessions. I desire that you entreat him as the best among you, freely forgetting all that has passed, for he honors us by his presence here. *Vive l'Aigle sans Ailes!*"

They toasted him to do her pleasure, but the men eyed him with little love, and be sure there were veiled smiles and whispers among the ladies. Aloys cared nothing for them as she sat throned by her conqueror, on fire with the consciousness of his close presence, humbly sweet in surrender. They spoke seldom, but all the while he feasted his eyes on her in wonder, not knowing what the change in her might portend, and making the most of his hour in Paradise.

Wine flowed freely along the board, tongues were loosened, and the ladies began to look anxiously for their Countess's signal to retire, but when she rose it was to address them in this wise, with a voice that trembled:

"I have been a sorry mistress to you—a wild girl, with no thought but her own pleasure. The time is come that I abdicate the seat I fill so unworthily; for although I have aped the man, no man am I at heart, and ye need a man to rule over you."

At that they made a loud outcry, but she held up a hand for them to cease, smiling a little proudly.

"Ye have heard a foolish vow that I made in your presence, that has remained hitherto unfulfilled. Here in your presence again I renew it unto future years. Sir Eagle, I kneel to you; if you deign to lift me to your side, I am yours; if not, I stay here at your feet."

So saying, she slipped down on her knees in her royal robes, holding out her hands to him, and gazing with her blue eyes fearlessly into his face.

With a great shout of triumph, Sir Fulke clasped his arms about her, lifted her to his embrace, and then throned her aloft to his shoulder.

"Drink ye to your lady and mine!" he cried. "Since vows are vows, she hath knelt to me, but it is I that am the dust under her feet. The black banner floats no more above Château Duresse; henceforth in its place shall shine the lily in an azure field. Swear ye all with me: '*Foys à Loys!*'"