

CHAPTER XVI

LOCAL CONTRIBUTION

We hear considerable of the "conventional people" of this world, but seldom meet with them; for, as soon as we begin to know a person, we discover peculiarities that quite remove him from the ranks of the conventional--if such ranks exist at all. The remark of the old Scotch divine to his good wife: "Everybody's queer but thee and me, Nancy, and sometimes I think thee a little queer," sums up human nature admirably. We seldom recognize our own queerness, but are prone to mark the erratic temperaments of others, and this is rather more comfortable than to be annoyed by a consciousness of our personal deficits.

The inhabitants of a country town are so limited in their experiences that we generally find their personal characteristics very amusing. No amount of scholastic learning could have rendered the Millville people sophisticated, for contact with the world and humanity is the only true educator; but, as a matter of fact, there was little scholastic learning among them, with one or two exceptions, and the villagers as a rule were of limited intelligence. Every one was really a "character," and Uncle John's nieces, who all possessed a keen sense of humor, enjoyed the oddities of the Millvillites immensely.

A humorous situation occurred through a seemingly innocent editorial of

Beth on authorship. In the course of her remarks she said: "A prominent author is stated to have accumulated a large fortune by writing short stories for the newspapers and magazines. He is said to receive ten cents a word, and this unusual price is warranted by the eager demand for his stories, of which the reading public is very fond. However, the unknown author does not fare so badly. The sum of from thirty to fifty dollars usually remitted for a short story pays the beginner a better recompense, for the actual time he is engaged upon the work, than any other occupation he might undertake."

This was seriously considered the morning it appeared in the Tribune by Peggy McNutt and Skim Clark, as they sat in the sunshine on the former's little front porch. Peggy had read it aloud in his laborious, halting way, and Skim listened with growing amazement.

"Thirty dollars!" he cried; "thirty to fifty fer a short story! Great Snakes, Peggy, I'm goin' into it."

"Heh? Goin' into what?" asked Peggy, raising his eyes from the paper.

"I kin write a story," declared Skim confidently.

"Ye kin, Skim?"

"It's a cinch, Peggy. Mother keeps all the magazines an' paper novils, an' we allus reads 'em afore we sells 'em. I've read the gol-durndest

lot o' truck ye ever heard of, so I'm posted on stories in gen'ral. I'll write one an' sell it to the Millville Tribune. Do ye s'pose they'll give me the thirty, er the fifty, Peggy?"

"Anywheres between, they says. But one feller gits ten cents a word. Whew!"

"I know; but he's a big one, which I ain't--just now. I'll take even the thirty, if I hev to."

"I would, Skim," advised Peggy, nodding approval. "But make 'em put yer photygraf in the paper, besides. Say, it'll be a big thing fer Millville to turn out a author. I didn't think it were in you, Skim."

"Why, it hadn't struck me afore," replied the youth, modestly. "I've ben hankerin' to make money, without knowin' how to do it. I tell ye, Peggy, it pays to read the newspapers. This one's give me a hint how to carve out a future career, an' I'll write a story as'll make them girl edyturs set up an' take notice."

"Make it someth'n' 'bout Injuns," suggested Peggy. "I ain't read a Injun story fer years."

"No; they're out o' fashion," observed Skim loftily. "What folks want now is a detective story. Feller sees a hole in a fence an' says, 'Ha! there's ben a murder!' Somebody asks what makes him think so, an' the

detective feller says, takin' out a magnifie-in' glass, 'Thet hole's a bullet-hole, an' the traces o' blood aroun' the edges shows the bullet went through a human body afore it went through the fence.' 'Then,' says some one, 'where's the body?' 'That,' says the detective, 'is what we mus' diskiver.' So the story goes on to show how the body were diskivered an' who did the murderin'."

"By Jupe, thet's great!" cried Peggy admiringly. "Skim, ye're a wonder!"

"Ma allus said I were good fer somethin', but she couldn't tell what."

"It's story-writin'," declared Peggy "Say, Skim, I put ye onter this deal; don't I git a rake-off on thet fifty dollars?"

"Not a cent!" said Skim indignantly. "Ye didn't tell me to write a story; I said myself as I could do it. An' I know where to use the money, Peggy, ev'ry dollar of it, whether it's thirty er fifty."

Peggy sighed.

"I writ a pome once," he said. "Wonder ef they'd pay fer a pome?"

"What were it like?" asked Skim curiously.

"It went someth'n' this way," said Peggy:

"I sigh
Ter fly
Up high
In the sky.
But my
Wings is shy,
So I mus' cry
Good-bye
Ter fly-
in'."

"Shoo!" said Skim disdainfully. "Thet ain't no real pome, Peggy."

"It makes rhymes, don't it? All but the las' line."

"Mebbe it does," replied Skim, with assumption of superior wisdom; "but it don't mean nuth'n'."

"It would ef I got paid fer it," observed Peggy.

Skim went home to his mother's tiny "Emporium," took some note paper out of stock, opened a new bottle of ink and sat down at the sitting room table to write his story. The Widow Clark looked in and asked what he meant by "squanderin' profits that way."

"Shet up, mar. Gi' me elbow room," said her dutiful son. "I'm writin' a

fifty dollar story fer the Tribune."

"Fifty dollars!"

"Thirty, anyhow; mebbe fifty," replied Skim. "What's a good name fer a detective, mar?"

The widow sat down and wiped her damp hands on her apron, looking upon her hopeful with an expression of mingled awe and pride.

"Kin ye do it, Skim?" she asked softly.

"I s'pose I kin turn out one a day, by hard work," he said confidently.

"At thirty a day, the lowes' price, that's a hunderd 'n' eighty a week, seven hunderd 'n' twenty a month, or over eight thousan' dollars a year.

I got it all figgered out. It's lucky fer me the nabobs is rich, or they couldn't stan' the strain. Now, mar, ef ye want to see yer son a nabob hisself, some day, jes' think up a good name fer a detective."

"Sherholmes Locke," she said after some reflection.

"No; this 'ere story's got ter be original. I thought o' callin' him Suspectin' Algernon. Detectives is allus suspectin' something."

"Algernon's high-toned," mused the widow. "Let it go at that, Skim."

All that day and far into the evening he sat at his task, pausing now and then for inspiration, but most of the time diligently pushing his pen over the strongly lined note paper and hopelessly straying from the lines. Meantime, Mrs. Clark walked around on tiptoe, so as not to disturb him, and was reluctant even to call him to his meals in the kitchen. When Skim went to bed his story had got into an aggravating muddle, but during the next forenoon he managed to bring it to a triumphant ending.

"When I git used to the thing, mar," he said, "I kin do one a day, easy. I had to be pertickler over this one, it bein' the first."

The widow read the story carefully, guessing at the words that were hopelessly indistinct.

"My! but it's a thriller, Skim," she said with maternal enthusiasm; "but ye don't say why he killed the girl."

"That don't matter, so long's he did it."

"The spellin' don't allus seem quite right," she added doubtfully.

"I guess the spellin's as good as the readin'll be," he retorted, with evident irritation. "I bet I spell as well as any o' the folks thet takes the paper."

"And some words I can't make out."

"Oh, the edytur'll fix that. Say, air ye tryin' to queer my story, mar?"

Do ye set up to know more'n I do about story writin'?"

"No," she said; "I ain't talented, Skim, an' you be."

"What I orter hev," he continued, reflectively, "is a typewriter. When I git two er three hunderd ahead perhaps I'll buy one--secondhand."

"Kin ye buy one thet'll spell, Skim?" she asked, as she made a neat roll of the manuscript and tied a pink hair ribbon around it.

Skim put on a collar and necktie and took his story across to the newspaper office.

"I got a conter-bution fer the paper," he said to Patsy, who asked him his business.

"What, something original, Skim?" she asked in surprise.

"Ye've hit it right, Miss Doyle; it's a story."

"Oh!"

"A detective story."

"Dear me! Then you'll have to see Mrs. Weldon, who is our literary editor."

Louise, who was sitting close by, looked up and held out her hand for the beribboned roll.

"I don't jes' know," remarked Skim, as he handed it across the table, "whether it's a thirty dollar deal, er a fifty."

Having forgotten Beth's editorial, Louise did not understand this remark, but she calmly unrolled Skim's manuscript and glanced at the scrawled heading with an amused smile.

"Suspecting Algernon," she read aloud.

"'It were a dark and teedjus night in the erly springtime while the snow were falling soft over the moon litt lanscape.' Why, Skim, how came you to write this?"

"'It were the money," he said boldly. "I kin do one a day like this, at thirty dollers apiece, an' never feel the wear an' tear."

Patsy giggled, but Louise stared with a wondering, puzzled expression at the crabbed writing, the misspelled words and dreadful grammar. Indeed, she was a little embarrassed how to handle so delicate a situation.

"I'm afraid we cannot use your story, Mr. Clark," she said gently, and remembering the formula that usually accompanied her own rejected manuscripts she added: "This does not necessarily imply a lack of merit in your contribution, but is due to the fact that it is at present unavailable for our use."

Skim stared at her in utter dismay.

"Ye mean ye won't take it?" he asked with trembling lips.

"We have so much material on hand, just now, that we cannot possibly purchase more," she said firmly, but feeling intensely sorry for the boy. "It may be a good story--"

"It's the bes' story I ever heard of!" declared Skim.

"But we have no place for it in the Millville Tribune," she added, handing him back the roll.

Skim was terribly disappointed. Never, for a single moment, had he expected "sech a throwdown as this."

"Seems to me like a bunco game," he muttered savagely. "First ye say in yer blamed ol' paper a story's wuth thirty to fifty dollars, an' then when I bring ye a story ye won't pay a red cent fer it!"

"Stories," suggested Louise, "are of various qualities, depending on the experience and talent of the author. An excellent story is often refused because the periodical to which it is offered is overstocked with similar material. Such conditions are often trying, Skim; I've had a good many manuscripts rejected myself."

But the boy would not be conciliated.

"I'll send it to Munsey's, that's what I'll do; an' then you'll be durn sorry," he said, almost ready to cry.

"Do," urged Louise sweetly. "And if they print it, Mr. Clark, I'll agree to purchase your next story for fifty dollars."

"All right; the fifty's mine. I got witnesses, mind ye!" and he flounced out of the room like an angry schoolboy.

"Oh, Louise," exclaimed Patsy, reproachfully, "why didn't you let me see the thing? It would have been better than a circus."

"Poor boy!" said the literary editor, with a sigh. "I didn't want to humiliate him more than I could help. I wonder if he really will have the audacity to send it to Munsey's?"

And now the door opened to admit Peggy McNutt, who had been watching his chance to stump across to the printing office as soon as Skim left there. For Peggy had reasoned, not unjustly, that if Skim Clark could make a fortune as an author he, Marshall McMahan McNutt, had a show to corral a few dollars in literature himself. After lying awake half the night thinking it over, he arose this morning with the firm intention of competing with Skim for the village laurels. He well knew he could not write a shuddery detective story, such as Skim had outlined, but that early poem of his, which the boy had seemed to regard so disdainfully, was considered by Peggy a rather clever production. He repeated it over and over to himself, dwelling joyously on its perfect rhyme, until he was convinced it was a good poem and that Skim had enviously slandered it. So he wrote it out in big letters on a sheet of foolscap and determined to offer it to "them newspaper gals."

"I got a pome, Miss Patsy," he said, with unusual diffidence, for he was by no means sure the "gals" would not agree with Skim's criticism.

"What! Another contributor?" she exclaimed playfully. "Has the whole town suddenly turned literary, Peggy?"

"No; jest me 'n' Skim. Skim says my pome's no good; but I sort o' like it, myself."

"Let me see it," said Patsy, ignoring this time the literary editor, who

was glad to be relieved of the responsibility of disappointing another budding author.

Peggy handed over the foolscap, and Patsy eagerly read the "pome."

"Listen, Louise! Listen, Beth!" she called, delightedly. "Here is certainly a real 'pome,' and on aviation--the latest fad:

"SKY HIGH

BY MARSHALL MCMAHON MCNUTT

of Millville

dealer in Real Estate Spring Chickens &c.

1.

I sigh

Too fly

Up high

In the sky.

2.

But my

Wings air shy

And so I cry

A sad goodbye

Too fly-

Ing."

A chorus of hilarious laughter followed the reading, and then Patsy wiped her eyes and exclaimed:

"Peggy, you are not only a poet but a humorist. This is one of the best short poems I ever read."

"It's short 'cause I run out o' rhymes," admitted Peggy.

"But it's a gem, what there is of it."

"Don't, dear," remonstrated Louise; "don't poke fun at the poor man."

"Poke fun? Why, I'm going to print that poem in the Tribune, as sure as my name's Patricia Doyle! It's too good for oblivion."

"I dunno," remarked Peggy, uncertainly, "whether it's wuth fifty dollars, er about--"

"About forty-nine less," said Patsy. "A poem of that length brings about fifty cents in open market, but I'll be liberal. You shall have a whole dollar--and there it is, solid cash."

"Thank ye," returned Peggy, pocketing the silver. "It ain't what I expected, but--"

"But what, sir?"

"But it's like findin' it, for I didn't expect nuth'n'. I wish I could do more of 'em at the same price; but I did thet pome when I were young an' hed more ambition. I couldn't think of another like it to save my neck."

"I am glad of that, Peggy. One of this kind is all a paper dare print. We mustn't get too popular, you know."

"I s'pose you'll print my name as the one what did it?" he inquired anxiously.

"I shall print it just as it's written, advertisement and all."

She did, and Peggy bought two extra copies, at a cent apiece. He framed all three and hung one in his office, one in the sitting room and a third in his bedroom, where he could see it the first thing when he wakened each morning. His fellow villagers were very proud of him, in spite of the "knocking" of the Clarks. Skim was deeply mortified that Peggy's "bum pome" had been accepted and his own masterly composition "turned down cold." The widow backed her son and told all the neighbors that "Peggy never hed the brains to write thet pome, an' the chances air he stole it from the 'Malvern Weekly Journal.' Them gal edyturs wouldn't know," she added scornfully; "they's as ignerunt as Peggy is, mostly."

A few days later McNutt entered the printing office with an air of great importance.

"Goodness me! I hope you haven't done it again, Peggy," cried Patsy, in alarm.

"No; I got fame enough. What I want is to hev the wordin' on my business cards changed," said he. "What'll it cost?"

"What change do you wish made?" asked Patsy, examining the sample card.

"Instead of 'Marshall McMahan McNutt, dealer in Real Estate an' Spring Chickens,' I want to make it read: 'dealer in Real Estate, Spring Chickens an' Poetry.' What'll it cost. Miss Patsy?"

"Nothing," she said, her eyes dancing; "We'll do that job free of charge, Peggy!"