

CHAPTER XIX. - THE COURT'N OF SKIM CLARK.

By this time the summer was well advanced, and the rich people at the Wegg farm had ceased to be objects of wonder to the Millville folk. The girls were still regarded with curious looks when they wandered into the village on an errand, and Mr. Merrick and Major Doyle inspired a certain amount of awe; but time had dulled the edge of marvelous invasion and the city people were now accepted as a matter of course.

Peggy McNutt was still bothering his head over schemes to fleece the strangers, in blissful ignorance of the fact that one of his neighbors was planning to get ahead of him.

The Widow Clark was a shrewd woman. She had proven this by becoming one of the merchants of Millville after her husband's death. The poor man had left an insurance of five hundred dollars and the little frame building wherein he had conducted a harness shop. Mrs. Clark couldn't make and repair harness; so she cleared the straps and scraps and wax-ends out of the place, painted the interior of the shop bright yellow, with a blue ceiling, erected some shelves and a counter and turned part of the insurance money into candy, cigars, stationery, and a meager stock of paper-covered novels.

Skim, her small son, helped her as far as he was able, and between them they managed things so frugally that at the end of eight years the widow still had her five hundred dollars capital, and the little store had paid her living expenses.

Skim was named after his uncle, Peter Skimbley, who owned a farm near Watertown. The widow's hopeful was now a lank, pale-faced youth of eighteen, whose most imposing features were his big hands and a long nose that ended in a sharp point. The shop had ruined him for manual labor, for he sat hunched up by the stove in winter, and in summer hung around Cotting's store and listened to the gossip of the loungers. He was a boy of small conversational powers, but his mother declared that Skim "done a heap o' thinkin' that nobody suspected."

The widow was a good gossip herself, and knew all the happenings in the little town. She had a habit of reading all her stock of paper-covered novels before she sold them, and her mind was stocked with the mass of romance and adventure she had thus absorbed. "What I loves more'n

eat'n' or sleep'n'," she often said, "is a rattlin' good love story. There don't seem to be much love in real life, so a poor lone crittur like me has to calm her hankerin's by a-readin' novels."

No one had been more interested in the advent of the millionaire at the Wegg farm than the widow Clark. She had helped "fix up" the house for the new owner and her appreciative soul had been duly impressed by the display of wealth demonstrated by the fine furniture sent down from the city. She had watched the arrival of the party and noticed with eager eyes the group of three pretty and stylishly dressed nieces who accompanied their rich uncle. Once or twice since the young ladies had entered her establishment to purchase pens or stationery, and on such occasions the widow was quite overcome by their condescension.

All this set her thinking to some purpose. One day she walked over to the farm and made her way quietly to the back door. By good fortune she found blind Nora hemming napkins and in a mood to converse. Nora was an especially neat seamstress, but required some one to thread her needles. Mary the cook had been doing this, but now Mrs. Clark sat down beside Nora to "hev a little talk" and keep the needles supplied with thread.

She learned a good deal about the nieces, for old Nora could not praise them enough. They were always sweet and kind to her and she loved to talk about them. They were all rich, too, or would be; for their uncle had no children of his own and could leave several millions to each one when he died.

"An' they're so simple, too," said the old woman; "nothin' cityfied ner stuck-up about any on 'em, I kin tell ye. They dresses as fine as the Queen o' Sheba, Tom says; but they romp 'round just like they was borned in the country. Miss Patsy she's learnin' to milk the cow, an' Miss Beth takes care o' the chickens all by herself. They're reg'lar girls, Marthy Clark, an' money hain't spiled 'em a bit."

This report tended to waken a great ambition in the widow's heart. Or perhaps the ambition had already taken form and this gossip confirmed and established it. Before she left the farm she had a chance to secretly observe the girls, and they met with her full approval.

At supper that evening she said to her hopeful:

"Skim, I want ye to go courtin'."

Skim looked up in amazement.

"Me, ma?" he asked.

"Yes, you. It's time you was thinkin' of gittin' married."

Skim held his knife in his mouth a moment while he thought over this startling proposition. Then he removed the cutlery, heaved a deep sigh, and enquired:

"Who at, ma?"

"What's that?"

"Who'll I go courtin' at?"

"Skim, you 'member in thet las' book we read, 'The Angel Maniac's Revenge,' there was a sayin' that fate knocks wunst on ev'ry man's door. Well, fate's knockin' on your door."

Skim listened, with a nervous glance toward the doorway. Then he shook his head.

"All fool fancy, ma," he remarked. "Don't ye go an' git no rumantic notions out'n books inter yer head."

"Skim, am I a fool, er ain't I?"

"'Tain't fer me ter say, ma."

"Fate's knockin', an' if you don't open to it, Skim, I'll wash my hands o' ye, an' ye kin jest starve to death."

The boy looked disturbed.

"What's aggrivatin' of ye, then?" he enquired, anxiously.

"A millionaire is come right under yer nose. He's here in Millville, with three gals fer nieces thet's all got money to squander an's bound to hev more."

Skim gave a low whistle.

"Ye don't mean fer me to be courtin' at them gals, do ye?" he demanded.

"Why not? Yer fambly's jest as respectable as any, 'cept thet yer Uncle Mell backslided after the last revival, an' went to a hoss race. Yer young, an' yer han'some; an' there's three gals waitin' ready to be won by a bold wooer. Be bold, Skim; take fate by the fetlock, an' yer fortun's made easy!"

Skim did not reply at once. He gulped down his tea and stared at the opposite wall in deep thought. It wasn't such a "tarnal bad notion," after all, and so thoroughly impressed was he with his own importance and merit that it never occurred to him he would meet with any difficulties if he chose to undertake the conquest.

"Peggy says marri'ge is the mark of a fool; an' Peggy married money, too," he remarked slowly.

"Pah! money! Mary Ann Cotting didn't hev but a hundred an' forty dollars, all told, an' she were an old maid an' soured an' squint-eyed when Peggy hitched up with her."

"I hain't seen nuthin' o' the world, yit," continued Skim, evasively.

"Ner ye won't nuther, onless ye marry money. Any one o' them gals could take ye to Europe an' back a dozen times."

Skim reflected still farther.

"Courtin' ought to hev some decent clothes," he said. "I kain't set in the nabob's parlor, with all thet slick furnitur', in Nick Thorne's cast-off Sunday suit."

"The cloth's as good as ever was made, an' I cut 'em down myself, an' stitched 'em all over."

"They don't look like store clothes, though," objected Skim.

The widow sighed.

"Tain't the coat that makes the man, Skim."

"It's the coat thet makes decent courtin', though," he maintained, stubbornly. "Gals like to see a feller dressed up. It shows he means business an' 'mounts to somethin'."

"I give Nick Thorne two dollars an' a packidge o' terbacker fer them clotlies, which the on'y thing wrong about was they'd got too snug fer

comfort. Nick said so himself. But I'll make a bargain with ye, Skim. Ef you'll agree to give me fifty dollars after yer married, I'll buy ye some store clothes o' Sam Cotting, to do courtin' in."

"Fifty dollars!"

"Well, I've brung ye up, hain't I?" "I've worked like a nigger, mindin' shop." "Say forty dollars. I ain't small, an' ef ye git one o' them city gals, Skim, forty dollars won't mean no more'n a wink of an eye to ye."

Skim frowned. Then he smiled, and the smile disclosed a front tooth missing.

"I'll dream on't," he said. "Let ye know in the mornin', ma. But I won't court a minite, mind ye, 'nless I git store clothes."