

## CHAPTER XX. - A LOST CAUSE.

The boy's musings confirmed him in the idea that his mother's scheme was entirely practical. He didn't hanker much to marry, being young and fairly satisfied with his present lot; but opportunities like this did not often occur, and it seemed his bounden duty to take advantage of it.

He got the "store clothes" next day, together with a scarlet necktie that was "all made up in the latest style," as Sam Cotting assured him, and a pair of yellow kid gloves "fit fer a howlin' swell." Skim wasn't sure, at first, about the gloves, but capitulated when Sam declared they were "real cityfied."

In the evening he "togged up," with his mother's help, and then walked over to the Wegg farm.

Beth answered the knock at the door. The living room was brightly lighted; Uncle John and the Major were playing checkers in a corner and Patsy was softly drumming on the piano. Louise had a book and Beth had been engaged upon some fancy-work.

When the door opened Skim bobbed his head and said:

"Evenin', mom. I've come a-visitin'."

Beth conquered an inclination to smile.

"Won't you come in?" she said, sweetly.

"Thankee; I will. I'm Skimbley Clark, ye know; down t' the village. Ma keeps a store there."

"I'm pleased to meet you, Mr. Clark. Allow me to introduce to you my uncle and cousins," said the girl, her eyes dancing with amusement.

Skim acknowledged the introductions with intense gravity, and then sat down upon a straight-backed chair near the piano, this being the end of the room where the three girls were grouped. Uncle John gave a chuckle and resumed his game with the Major, who whispered that he would give a dollar for an oil painting of Mr. Clark--if it couldn't be had for less.

Louise laid down her book and regarded the visitor wonderingly. Patsy scented fun and drew a chair nearer the group. Beth resumed her

embroidery with a demure smile that made Skim decide at once that "he picked the pretty one."

Indeed, the decision did justice to his discretion. Beth De Graf was a rarely beautiful girl and quite outshone her cousins in this respect. Louise might be attractive and Patsy fascinating; but Beth was the real beauty of the trio, and the most charming trait in her character was her unconsciousness that she excelled in good looks.

So Skim stared hard at Beth, and answered the preliminary remarks addressed to him by Patsy and Louise in a perfunctory manner.

"Won't you take off your gloves?" asked Louise, soberly. "It's so warm this evening, you know."

The boy looked at his hands.

"It's sech a tarnal job to git 'em on agin," he replied.

"Don't put them on, then," advised Patsy. "Here in the country we are allowed to dispense with much unnecessary social etiquette."

"Air ye? Then off they come. I ain't much stuck on gloves, myself; but ma she 'lowed that a feller goin' courtin' orter look like a sport."

A chorus of wild laughter, which greeted this speech, had the effect of making Skim stare at the girls indignantly. He couldn't find anything funny in his remark; but there they sat facing him and uttering hysterical peals of merriment, until the tears ran down their cheeks.

Silently and with caution he removed the yellow gloves from his hands, and so gave the foolish creatures a chance "to laugh out their blamed giggle."

But they were watching him, and saw that he was disconcerted. They had no mind to ruin the enjoyment in store for them by offending their guest, so they soon resumed a fitting gravity and began to assist the youth to forget their rudeness.

"May I ask," said Patsy, very graciously, "which one of us you intend to favor with your attentions?"

"I ain't much used to sech things," he replied, looking down at his big hands and growing a little red-faced. "P'raps I hadn't orter tell, before the rest o' ye."

"Oh, yes; do tell!" pleaded Louise. "We're so anxious to know."

"I don't s'pose it's right clever to pick an' choose when ye're all by," said Skim, regaining confidence. "But ma, she 'lowed thet with three gals handy I orter git one on 'em, to say the least."

"If you got more than one," remarked Beth, calmly, "it would be illegal."

"Oh, one's enough," said Skim, with a grin. "Peggy says it's too many, an' a feller oughtn't to take his gal out'n a grab-bag."

"I should think not, indeed," returned Patsy. "But here are three of us openly displayed, and unless you turn us all down as unworthy, it will be necessary for you to make a choice."

"What foolishness are you girls up to now?" demanded Uncle John, catching a stray word from the other corner while engaged in a desperate struggle with the Major.

"This is a time for you to keep quiet, Uncle," retorted Patsy, merrily. "We've got important things to consider that are none of your affairs, whatever."

Skim reflected that he didn't want this one, except as a last resort. She was "too bossy."

"When I started out," he said, "I jest come a-courtin', as any feller might do thet wasn't much acquainted. But ef I've got to settle down to one o' ye--"

He hesitated.

"Oh, you must really take one at a time, you know," asserted Louise. "It's the only proper way."

"Then I'll start on thet dark-eyed one thet's a sewin'," he said, slowly.

Beth looked up from her work and smiled.

"Go ahead, Mr. Clark," she said, encouragingly. "My name is Beth. Had you forgotten it?"

"Call me Skim," he said, gently.

"Very well, Skim,--Now look here, Patsy Doyle, if you're going to sit there and giggle you'll spoil everything. Mr. Clark wants to court, and it's getting late."

"P'raps I've went fur enough fer tonight," remarked Skim, uneasily. "Next time they'll leave us alone, an' then----"

"Oh, don't postpone it, please!" begged Beth, giving the boy a demure glance from her soft brown eyes. "And don't mind my cousins. I don't."

"These things kain't be hurried," he said. "Si Merkle courted three weeks afore he popped. He tol' me so."

"Then he was a very foolish man," declared Patsy, positively. "Just look at Beth! She's dying to have you speak out. What's the use of waiting, when she knows why you are here?"

By this time Skim had been flattered to the extent of destroying any stray sense he might ever have possessed. His utter ignorance of girls and their ways may have been partly responsible for his idiocy, or his mother's conviction that all that was necessary was for him to declare himself in order to be accepted had misled him and induced him to abandon any native diffidence he might have had. Anyway, the boy fell into the snare set by the mischievous young ladies without a suspicion of his impending fate.

"Miss Beth," said he, "ef yer willin', I'll marry ye; any time ye say. I agreed t' help Dick Pearson with the harvestin', but I'll try to' git Ned Long to take my place, an' it don't matter much, nohow."

"But I couldn't have you break an engagement," cried Beth, hastily.

"Why not?"

"Oh, it wouldn't be right, at all. Mr. Pearson would never forgive me," she asserted.

"Can't ye--"

"No; not before harvest, Skim. I couldn't think of it."

"But arterward--"

"No; I've resolved never to marry after harvest. So, as you're engaged, and I don't approve of breaking engagements, I must refuse your proposition entirely."

Skim looked surprised; then perplexed; then annoyed.

"P'raps I didn't pop jest right," he murmured, growing red again.

"You popped beautifully," declared Patsy. "But Beth is very peculiar, and set in her ways. I'm afraid she wouldn't make you a good wife, anyhow."

"Then p'raps the gal in blue----"

"No;" said Louise. "I have the same prejudices as my cousin. If you hadn't been engaged for the harvest I might have listened to you; but that settles the matter definitely, as far as I am concerned."

Skim sighed.

"Ma'll be mad as a hornet ef I don't get any of ye," he remarked, sadly. "She's paid Sam Cotting fer this courtin' suit, an' he won't take back the gloves on no 'count arter they've been wore; an' thet'll set ma crazy. Miss Patsy, ef yo' think ye could----"

"I'm sure I couldn't," said Patsy, promptly. "I'm awfully sorry to break your heart, Skim, dear, and ruin your future life, and make you misanthropic and cynical, and spoil your mother's investment and make her mad as a hornet. All this grieves me terribly; but I'll recover from it, if you'll only give me time. And I hope you'll find a wife that will be more congenial than I could ever be."

Skim didn't understand all these words, but the general tenor of the speech was convincing, and filled him with dismay.

"Rich gals is tarnal skeerce in these parts," he said, regretfully.

Then they gave way again, and so lusty was the merriment that Uncle John and the Major abandoned their game and came across the room to discover the source of all this amusement.

"What's up, young women?" asked their Uncle, glancing from their laughing faces to the lowering, sullen one of the boy, who had only now begun to suspect that he was being "poked fun at."

"Oh, Uncle!" cried Patsy; "you've no idea how near you have been to losing us. We have each had an offer of marriage within the last half hour!"

"Dear me!" ejaculated Uncle John.

"It shows the young man's intelligence and good taste," said the Major, much amused. "But is it a Mormon ye are, sir, to want all three?" directing a keen glance at Skim.

"Naw, 'tain't," he returned, wholly disgusted with the outcome of his suit. "All three got as't 'cause none of 'em's got sense enough t' know a good thing when they seen it."

"But I do," said the Major, stoutly; "and I maintain that you're a good thing, and always will be. I hope, sir, you'll call 'round and see me in Baltimore next year. I'll not be there, but ye can leave your card, just the same."

"Please call again, sir," added Uncle John; "about October--just before snow flies."

The boy got up.

"I don't keer none," he said, defiantly. "It's all ma's fault, gittin' me laughed at, an' she won't hear the last of it in a hurry, nuther."

"Be gentle with her, Skim," suggested Beth, softly. "Remember she has to face the world with you by her side."

Having no retort for this raillery, which he felt rather than understood, Skim seized his hat and fled. Then Patsy wiped the tears from her eyes and said:

"Wasn't it grand, girls? I haven't had so much fun since I was born."