

Twenty to-day! The only daughter and the pet of the family, Claribel's parents had willingly consented to her giving a birthday party. Tom was invited, of course; but thought he had better not go. All the other fellows would be wearing boots with pointed toes, and—well, he'd "just as soon not go anyhow."

"Go, my lad; go, by all means," said his mother. "You don't have much pleasure; a little recreation will do you good. You've been mopish of late, just for the want of a bit of fun, I'll warrant me."

"But my boots, Mother. Most all the fellows that'll be there is doods."

"Poof! yer boots, indeed! They're neat and made of the best of leather, and not a crack in 'em. Yer boots!—three-dollar boots at that! Why, when was you, Tom Roden, ever so squeamish about yer boots or anything else, so's you was dressed decent? And doods? Fiddlesticks! What d'you care for doods? Don't let *them* keep you away."

"That's all right. But there'll be Fred. Somers, with his diamond ring; and George Fletcher, he's just got a new suit o' clothes which he paid twenty dollars for—cutaway coat, long tail, latest style. I'm not shabby myself, and I aint ashamed of my clothes; but—I don't care to go, that's all."

"But you're a young man now, you know, and maybe you'll meet some nice girl there and fall in love with her. Who knows? That'll brighten you up so you won't know yourself. And do you know," she added in a confidential tone, "I've been thinkin' this long while back that I ought to tell you, Tom, my boy, that as soon as you feel like gettin' married, I can shift for myself. I'm not sixty yet, bless you; and I'm mighty smart with the needle—you know that. So you don't go away, like Jim and Harry, where I can't see you often, I shall be perfectly satisfied. I shall indeed, Tom. 'Tisn't right that I should stand in yer way. Wives don't like their husbands' mothers to be around the house. It's only natural. Now, go you to the party, Tom; and if so be you come back and say to me, says you, 'Mother, I've asked Claribel Seaton to marry me, and she says yes,' why I shall be delighted; because I want to see you settled down happy and comfortable before anything happens me."

"Claribel!" he could only gasp. "What put Claribel into your head, Mother?"

"Nothin'—nothin'; only I'd sooner it be her than anybody else I know, that's all. But please yourself, lad, please yourself; youth an' spirit don't like bein' dictated to in these matters. Jest a little bit flighty an' dressy, but a good girl—a good girl; one of the right sort. But suit yourself, Tom, and you'll suit me. But, bless me! she's young yet, and will get more staid as she grows older, and——Why, Tom!—Tom! Well, I declare if he isn't as red as a beet! If I didn't akinda suspicion you—the way you spoke not a minute ago!"

But Tom volunteered no explanation.

"Tom!—Tommy! Surely you aint got no secrets from yer poor old mother? Now, come right up to me and look me in the eye, and say is it Claribel Seaton. Now!—now! Is it or isn't it Claribel? It *is*. You don't need to say a word; I can read it on your face."

"Very well, then there is no need for confession. But see here, Mother, Claribel's a fine girl, and I don't say that I wouldn't like to marry her if I was thinking about that kind o' thing; still" (putting his arm around her neck) "a man that would neglect his mother, even for a wife, aint doing his dooty by the best friend he has in the world. Don't you worry about me; I'm all right as I am. I've been thinking all of this over to myself, and I'm not going to make no bargain that puts you out in the cold. So I don't think I'll go to the party to-night."

"And why not, my son? You needn't be thinking of going at all. Your mother had cause to thank God for, and to appreciate your not leaving her position. It does you credit, Tom. But take care to keep me to improve on it."