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A Victorian Christmas Collection published 2002.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Stoks, Peggy.

A Victorian Christmas collection / Peggy Stoks.

p. cm. — (Victorian Christmas anthologies)

ISBN 0-8423-6013-1 (sc)

1. Historical fiction, American. 2. Christmas stories, American.
3. Christian fiction, American. 4. Love stories, American. I. Title.
II. Series.

PS3569.T62237 V43 2002

813'.54—dc21

2002005255

Printed in the United States of America

08 07 06 05 04 03 02
9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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ONE



Grandma Biggs sniffed with disdain, stretched herself to her full four feet, ten inches, and thumped the wide oak planks of the porch with her cane. “Marie Katherine Biggs! Were you out driving with that Farrell boy?”

“Goodness, Grandma,” Marie replied. She watched the stylish black carriage retreat down the country lane, drawn by a perfectly matched set of bays. A cloud of dust rose in its wake in the golden October sunshine. Still tingling with excitement, the nineteen-year-old danced up the three steps to the porch and removed her bonnet. “A person would think you didn’t care for Chadwick Farrell.”

“I don’t. The boy galls me.” Grandma’s snapping brown stare met her own as the cane struck the porch again for good measure. “He’s good-lookin’, I’ll grant you, but he’s got nothin’ more inside him than hot air and horsefeathers.”

“He’s got so many wonderful ideas, Grandma.”

“Oh, I imagine the boy can talk pretty enough. He always did. I’m also certain his term at the university only made that worse. I’m just wondering what he’s all about. All these years, he comes, he goes. We see him, we don’t. It’s no proper courtship, Marie.” She lifted slender, snow-white brows. “I’m wonder-

ing, too, what he tells you about his family—and why you’re never invited over there.”

Marie sighed and set her hand on her grandmother’s shoulder, her pleasure at the afternoon drive through the countryside beginning to fade. “I think the least I can do is give him a chance. He’s very nice.”

A wrinkled yet still strong hand came up to cover her own. “He comes from money, Marie; don’t let that be goin’ to your head. ’Tain’t no secret his mama threatened to jump right into the Minnesota River when she found out her boy had taken a fancy to you. ‘Imagine,’” she said in a high tone dripping with mock disdain, her pinched expression mimicking the one Imogene Farrell wore as a matter of fact, “‘my son taking an interest in a farmer’s daughter. It is simply not acceptable.’”

“I’d best help Mother with supper,” Marie said. The remainder of her enjoyment of the afternoon’s outing had dissipated. Several uncomfortable questions about Chadwick Farrell once again arose in her mind, questions she’d worked so hard at putting aside during the drive.

“Now take Harald Hamsun there, across the way,” Grandma continued, hooking her cane over her wrist and tugging Marie’s arm until she was forced to turn around. The fair Norwegian farmer was barely visible, leading a team of oxen and a heavily loaded wagon from his fields. “A nice, honest man, he is. Hard-working. Just like his uncle Einar, afore he took sick.” She nodded with approval, a mischievous twinkle appearing in her eyes for just a moment. “A set of fine, broad shoulders the young man has, too.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Marie agreed, hoping her grandmother had finally finished rendering her opinions. “I’d best go help Mother now,” she offered once again, wanting nothing more at that moment than to occupy herself with some task and quell the busy debate her reason was waging regarding Chadwick Farrell.

“Go on and help your mama, then.” Grandma’s voice softened, and she gave Marie’s arm a gentle squeeze before shifting her cane back into her hand. “I think I’ll just enjoy a little of this weather before it turns nasty for good. Prob’ly only a handful of decent days left.” With that, the elder Mrs. Biggs adjusted her shawl and made her way down the porch steps. Somewhat relieved, Marie stepped into the kitchen, not entirely trusting she’d heard the last of her grandmother’s opinions concerning her choice of suitors.



By the time the Biggs family sat down for supper, much of Marie’s pensiveness had yielded to her normally optimistic disposition. The good-natured banter of her younger brothers and sisters, combined with the delicious aromas wafting from the kitchen, did much to settle her disordered thoughts. The issue of Chadwick Farrell seemed much further away, and a feeling of peace stole over her while Father asked the blessing.

“How was your ride with young Mr. Farrell today, Marie?” Father inquired in a genial tone, as he sliced the roast pork and passed the platter. Strands of gray battled evenly with the rich chestnut color of his hair and beard. His deep brown gaze sought hers. “He seemed to leave in a hurry.”

“He always leaves in a hurry,” twelve-year-old Hugh commented, bumping Marie’s elbow to indicate that she should take the bowl of mashed potatoes.

“The way he flies out of here.” Anthony, two years older than Hugh, spoke in a voice already much lower in timbre than it had been a year ago. “I think maybe he doesn’t like us.”

“Well, he likes Marie,” Sarah, nine, chimed in. “And he sure has a fancy carriage. If you marry him, Marie, will you have fancy things, too?”

“Hush, Sarah,” Mother admonished gently. “No one said

anything about Marie marrying Mr. Farrell. Now take some corn and pass it on.” She glanced around the table at her brood, giving them a wordless warning not to tease their oldest sister.

“How was your ride, dear?” she asked. “We didn’t get much of a chance to talk when you came in.”

“Oh, it was . . . fine,” Marie replied, scooping a small spoonful of potatoes onto her plate. She felt the eyes of all upon her. “The sun was actually very warm.”

“Maybe that’s why she suddenly got a sunburn on her cheeks.” The musical voice of Rosemary, nearly seventeen years old, was laden with laughter.

Good-natured giggles, chuckles, and chortles broke out around the table. Seated between Hugh and Rosemary’s twin, Raymond, Grandma Biggs loudly cleared her throat. “Well, you people can hee-haw all you like.” She glared at her son. “I do not understand, William, why you let Marie say no when Mr. Hamsun called, askin’ to court her. I’m tellin’ you, that Farrell boy is nothin’ but a skunk.”

“Does he stink, Grandma?” Three-year-old Julia’s innocent question produced another round of laughter from everyone but Marie.

“To high heaven, child,” Ruth Biggs replied, nodding approvingly while Hugh pinched his nostrils and pulled a face.

“That will be enough,” Father said. His voice was stern enough, though a trace of a smile lingered at his lips.

“I think we should change the talk from skunks to squirrels,” Mother offered diplomatically, with a slight nod toward her mother-in-law before turning to her husband. “I’m quite certain I’ve been hearing more activity on our roof than I ought to, William. I’d like you to go up there and take a look. . . .”

“May I please be excused, Mother?” The peace that had settled over Marie during Father’s prayer had long since fled. A lump had lodged itself in her throat, and unshed tears burned in her eyes.

“Yes, you may,” her mother answered. “Would you go out and put the hens in for me? I’ll keep a plate for you, dear.”

There was a hush at the table as Marie pushed back her chair and rose. When she reached the back door, she heard a sudden buzz of conversation start up at the table. Julia’s piping voice asked, “Is Marie going to cry?”

No, she wasn’t going to cry, she vowed, closing the door quietly and stepping out into the evening. The temperature had cooled dramatically in the past few hours, making her regret she hadn’t taken a wrap. Walking toward the hen yard, she wished her family would be more receptive toward Chadwick. Mother and Father had allowed him to pay call again since he’d returned from the university, but she could sense their reservation, no doubt having to do with the on-again, off-again manner in which he’d called upon her over the past several years.

They were from two different worlds, she and Chadwick, but if only her family could know the Chadwick she knew. A restless but bright-minded thinker, he flew through his high school courses and embarked upon his higher education with relish. He was an exciting person to be around, bold and so certain of himself.

The Chadwick her family didn’t know worked hard at his father’s bank and spoke eloquently about all the plans he had for social improvement and reform. He wanted to improve the Mankato area in south-central Minnesota and progress someday throughout the state and country. Even in high school he had talked of such things, but since he had returned from the university, he seemed so much more determined to carry out his altruistic ideals.

With twilight approaching, the hens were only too happy to run into their coop and roost. As Marie closed the door and latched it, her mind’s eye recalled the afternoon’s events. Her heart did a little flip-flop as she remembered the way Chad-

wick's lean, neatly manicured fingers had lingered over her hands when he'd passed the reins to her. Briefly, she allowed herself to wonder if he was ever going to kiss her. He'd exhibited nothing but gentlemanly behavior toward her, but she sensed his interest. He liked her first of all, he'd told her many times, because she had such a pretty smile, but he liked her most of all because she was a good listener and asked intelligent questions.

Shivering, she crossed her arms and rubbed her palms over her upper arms as the chilly breeze intensified into a gust. Glancing up at the sky, she was surprised to see the setting sun almost entirely obscured by a layer of gray clouds. Rain tonight, maybe snow if the mercury dipped below freezing. The month had already been visited by one good frost, which had nipped many tender vines.

The glow of yellow light was visible from the Hamsun farmhouse, warm and beckoning against the deepening shadows. Einar Hamsun had built his sturdy home many years before on an L-shaped plot of two hundred acres in the heart of Blue Earth County. Graced by a mix of woods and fields, the land lay just south of the twisting Le Sueur River.

Long-ago widowed with no surviving children, the elder Mr. Hamsun had suffered a severe stroke just two years before, succumbing to death a short time later. Within a few weeks his nephew Harald had come from Illinois to take over the farm. As Marie understood things, he had bought out all interests from Einar's two surviving brothers.

Harald Hamsun was a nice enough man, she supposed, though she really didn't know him very well. He was typically Scandinavian in appearance with blond hair and blue eyes, and she guessed him to be somewhere in his mid-twenties. He wasn't as tall as Chadwick, and whereas the younger man's lines were long and lean, everything about Harald seemed broad—his face,

his shoulders, his hands. He was a quiet man, unassuming, yet Father held a great opinion of him.

The only places she saw him were about his farm, in church, and occasionally at the table when Mother invited him for Sunday dinner. How he could make up his mind that he wished to court Marie based on the small amount of interaction they'd had made no sense to her at all. He was just lonely, she decided, living over there all by himself.

"Ooh, it's gotten cold! Looks like it might rain, too." Lost in thought, Marie hadn't heard Rosemary's approach. "I'm awfully sorry for teasing you, Marie," Rosemary continued, linking her arm through Marie's. "We were only having fun, but things just seemed to go too far at your expense. Everyone's sorry . . . well, except for Grandma. Mama's still talking on about squirrels, but now Grandma's decided Mr. Farrell is closer to a ferret than a skunk."

"It's all right," Marie said, feeling a crooked smile steal across her lips. Exasperating as her family was, she loved them dearly.

"Are you in love with Chadwick?"

"I'm not sure," Marie answered slowly. "I know I feel excitement when I'm with him, but it doesn't feel like the kind of love I have for you or Mother or Father."

"It's not supposed to, silly." Laughter bubbled up from deep inside the slender, dark-eyed young woman, and she gave Marie a playful shove, knocking her off balance.

"And just what do you know about that?" Straightening, Marie planted her hands on her hips and gave Rosemary a searching look.

"Maybe more than you do," Rosemary answered coyly, tossing her dark braids. "Race you to the house." With that, she was off.

Shaking her head yet unable to resist the challenge, Marie picked up her skirt and outraced her younger sister by three whole steps.



Lying in bed listening to Rosemary's deep, even breathing beside her, Marie sighed and turned from her side to her back. She'd said her prayers and asked the Lord for his peace, but her mind simply wouldn't rest. The unpleasant questions about Chadwick had come back, as they always did.

What *were* her feelings for Chadwick? And if he liked her so much, then why didn't he invite her to spend time with his family? Mama was always inviting him to stay for a meal, though he scarcely did. Was it really true that Imogene Farrell disdained her as much as Grandma said?

Eventually, fatigue overtook her, and she dozed.

Coughing and choking, Marie awakened, disoriented. Beside her, Rosemary was coughing too. Someone was shouting frantically, a surreal, bizarre sound, accompanied by muffled crackling noises. Shrieks of terror came from elsewhere in the house as her lungs struggled for pure, clean air.

"Everybody out! The house is on fire!" Father burst through the door, a lamp in one hand. Thick black smoke whirled about his hurried movements like a horde of writhing demons. "Get outside, now! Don't stop for anything. She's going fast."

The house is on fire? The terrible commotion registered in Marie's mind as she and Rosemary stumbled from their bed. Panic beat in her breast as she watched Father pull a limp Sarah out of her bed and toss her over his shoulder. The fumes were thick and acrid, and the crackling sound grew louder. Clinging to her sister's arm, choked by fear and smoke, Marie made her way to the door, wondering if they would all get out alive.