

Aunt Jane's Nieces On Vacation

By

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(AKA Edith Van Dyne)

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CHAPTER I - THE HOBO AT CHAZY JUNCTION

Mr. Judkins, the station agent at Chazy Junction, came out of his little house at daybreak, shivered a bit in the chill morning air and gave an involuntary start as he saw a private car on the sidetrack. There were two private cars, to be exact--a sleeper and a baggage car--and Mr. Judkins knew the three o'clock train must have left them as it passed through.

"Ah," said he aloud; "the nabobs hev arrove."

"Who are the nabobs?" asked a quiet voice beside him.

Again Mr. Judkins started; he even stepped back a pace to get a better view of the stranger, who had approached so stealthily through the dim light that the agent was unaware of his existence until he spoke.

"Who be you?" he demanded, eyeing the man suspiciously.

"Never mind who I am," retorted the other in a grumpy tone; "the original question is 'who are the nabobs?'"

"See here, young feller; this ain't no place fer tramps," observed Mr. Judkins, frowning with evident displeasure; "Chazy Junction's got all it kin do to support its reg'lar inhabitants. You'll hev to move on."

The stranger sat down on a baggage truck and eyed the private car reflectively. He wore a rough gray suit, baggy and threadbare, a flannel shirt with an old black tie carelessly knotted at the collar, a brown felt hat with several holes in the crown, and coarse cowhide shoes that had arrived at the last stages of usefulness. You would judge him to be from twenty-five to thirty years of age; you would note that his face was browned from exposure, that it was rather set and expressionless but in no way repulsive. His eyes, dark and retrospective, were his most redeeming feature, yet betrayed little of their owner's character. Mr. Judkins could make nothing of the fellow, beyond the fact that he was doubtless a "tramp" and on that account most unwelcome in this retired neighborhood.

Even tramps were unusual at Chazy Junction. The foothills were sparsely settled and the inhabitants too humble to be attractive to gentlemen of the road, while the rocky highways, tortuous and uneven, offered no invitation to the professional pedestrian.

"You'll hev to move on!" repeated the agent, more sternly.

"I can't," replied the other with a smile. "The car I was--er--attached to has come to a halt. The engine has left us, and--here we are, I and the nabobs."

"Be'n ridin' the trucks, eh?"

"No; rear platform. Very comfortable it was, and no interruptions. The crazy old train stopped so many times during the night that I scarcely woke up when they sidetracked us here, and the first thing I knew I was abandoned in this wilderness. As it grew light I began to examine my surroundings, and discovered you. Glad to meet you, sir."

"You needn't be."

"Don't begrudge me the pleasure, I implore you. I can't blame you for being gruff and unsociable; were you otherwise you wouldn't reside at--at--" he turned his head to read the half legible sign on the station house, "at Chazy Junction. I'm familiar with most parts of the United States, but Chazy Junction gets my flutters. Why, oh, why in the world did it happen?"

Mr. Judkins scowled but made no answer. He was wise enough to understand he was no match in conversation for this irresponsible outcast who knew the great world as perfectly as the agent knew his junction. He turned away and stared hard at the silent sleeper, the appearance of which was not wholly unexpected.

"You haven't informed me who the nabobs are, nor why they choose to be sidetracked in this forsaken stone-quarry," remarked the stranger, eyeing the bleak hills around him in the growing light of dawn.

The agent hesitated. His first gruff resentment had been in a manner disarmed and he dearly loved to talk, especially on so interesting a subject as "the nabobs." He knew he could astonish the tramp, and the temptation to do so was too strong to resist.

"It's the great John Merrick, who's got millions to burn but don't light many bonfires," he began, not very graciously at first. "Two years ago he bought the Cap'n Wegg farm, over by Millville, an'--"

"Where's Millville?" inquired the man.

"Seven mile back in the hills. The farm ain't nuthin' but cobblestone an' pine woods, but--"

"How big is Millville?"

"Quite a town. Eleven stores an' houses, 'sides the mill an' a big settlement buildin' up at Royal, where the new paper mill is jest started. Royal's four mile up the Little Bill Hill."

"But about the nabob--Mr. Merrick, I think you called him?"

"Yes; John Merrick. He bought the Cap'n Wegg place an' spent summer 'fore last on it--him an' his three gals as is his nieces."

"Oh; three girls."

"Yes. Clever gals, too. Stirred things up some at Millville, I kin tell you, stranger. Lib'ral an' good-natured, but able to hold their own with the natives. We missed 'em, last year; but t'other day I seen ol' Hucks, that keeps their house for 'em--he 'n' his wife--an' Hucks said they was cumin' to spend this summer at the farm an' he was lookin' fer 'em any day. The way they togged up thet farmhouse is somethin' won'erful, I'm told. Hain't seen it, myself, but a whole carload o' furnitoor--an' then some more--was shipped here from New York, an' Peggy McNutt, over t' Millville, says it must 'a' cost a for-tun'."

The tramp nodded, somewhat listlessly.

"I feel quite respectable this morning, having passed the night as the guest of a millionaire," he observed. "Mr. Merrick didn't know it, of course, or he would have invited me inside."

"Like enough," answered the agent seriously. "The nabob's thet reckless an' unaccountable, he's likely to do worse ner that. That's what makes him an' his gals interestin'; nobody in quarries. How about breakfast, friend Judkins?"

"That's my business an' not yourn. My missus never feeds tramps."

"Rather ungracious to travelers, eh?"

"Ef you're a traveler, go to the hoe-tel yonder an' buy your breakfas' like a man."

"Thank you; I may follow your advice."

The agent walked up the track and put out the semaphore lights, for the sun was beginning to rise over the hills. By the time he came back a colored porter stood on the platform of the private car and nodded to him.

"Folks up yit?" asked Judkins.

"Dressing, seh."

"Goin' ter feed 'em in there?"

"Not dis mohnin'. Dey'll breakfas' at de hotel. Carriage here yit?"

"Not yit. I s'pose ol' Hucks'll drive over for 'em," said the agent.

"Dey's 'spectin' some one, seh. As fer me, I gotta live heah all day, an' it makes me sick teh think of it."

"Heh!" retorted the agent, scornfully; "you won't git sick. You're too well paid fer that."

The porter grinned, and just then a little old gentleman with a rosy, cheery face pushed him aside and trotted down the steps.

"Mornin', Judkins!" he cried, and shook the agent's hand. "What a glorious sunrise, and what crisp, delicious air! Ah, but it's good to be in old Chazy County again!"

The agent straightened up, his face wreathed with smiles, and cast an "I told you so!" glance toward the man on the truck. But the stranger had disappeared.

CHAPTER II - THE INVASION OF MILLVILLE

Over the brow of the little hill appeared a three-seated wagon, drawn by a pair of handsome sorrels, and in a moment the equipage halted beside the sleeper.

"Oh, Thomas Hucks--you dear, dear Thomas!" cried a clear, eager voice, and out from the car rushed Miss Patricia Doyle, to throw her arms about the neck of the old, stoop-shouldered and white-haired driver, whose face was illumined by a joyous smile.

"Glad to see ye, Miss Patsy; right glad 'n deed, child," returned the old man. But others were waiting to greet him; pretty Beth De Graf and dainty Louise Merrick--not Louise "Merrick" any longer, though, but bearing a new name she had recently acquired--and demure Mary, Patsy's little maid and an old friend of Thomas Hucks', and Uncle John with his merry laugh and cordial handshake and, finally, a tall and rather dandified young man who remained an interested spectator in the background until Mr. Merrick seized and dragged him forward.

"Here's another for you to know, Thomas," said the little millionaire. "This is the other half of our Louise--Mr. Arthur Weldon--and by and by you can judge whether he's the better half or not."

The aged servant, hat in hand, made a respectful bow to Mr. Weldon. His frank eyes swept the young man from head to foot but his smile was the same as before.

"Miss Louise is wiser ner I be," said the old fellow simply; "I'm safe to trust to her judgment, I guess."

There was a general laugh, at this, and they began to clamber aboard the wagon and to stow away beneath the seats the luggage the colored porter was bringing out.

"Stop at the Junction House, Thomas," said Mr. Merrick as they moved away.

"Nora has the breakfast all ready at home, sir," replied Thomas.

"Good for Nora! But we can't fast until we reach home--eight good miles of jolting--so we'll stop at the Junction House for a glass of Mrs. Todd's famous milk."

"Very good, sir."

"Is anyone coming for our trunks and freight? There's half a car of truck to be carted over."

"Ned's on the way, sir; and he'll get the liveryman to help if he can't carry it all."

The Junction House was hidden from the station by the tiny hill, as were the half dozen other buildings tributary to Chazy Junction. As the wagon drew up before the long piazza which extended along the front of the little frame inn they saw a man in shabby gray seated at a small table with some bread and a glass of milk before him. It was their unrecognized guest of the night--the uninvited lodger on the rear platform--but he did not raise his eyes or appear to notice the new arrivals.

"Mrs. Todd! Hey, Mrs. Todd!" called Uncle John. "Anybody milked the cow yet?"

A frowsy looking woman came out, all smiles, and nodded pleasantly at the expectant group in the wagon. Behind her loomed the tall, lean form of Lucky Todd, the "proprietor," who was serious as a goat, which animal he closely resembled in feature.

"Breakfas' all 'round, Mr. Merrick?" asked the woman.

"Not this time, Mrs. Todd. Nora has our breakfast waiting for us. But we want some of your delicious milk to last us to the farm."

"Las' night's milkin's half cream by this time," she rejoined, as she briskly reentered the house.

The man at the table held out his empty glass.

"Here; fill this up," he said to Lucky Todd.

The somber-faced proprietor turned his gaze from the Merrick group to the stranger, eyed him pensively a moment and then faced the wagon again. The man in gray got up, placed the empty glass in Todd's hand, whirled him around facing the door and said sternly:

"More milk!"

The landlord walked in like an automaton, and a suppressed giggle came from the girls in the wagon. Uncle John was likewise amused, and despite the unknown's frazzled apparel the little millionaire addressed him in the same tone he would have used toward an equal.

"Don't blame you, sir. Nobody ever tasted better milk than they have at the Junction House."

The man, who had resumed his seat, stood up, took off his hat and bowed. But he made no reply.

Out came Mrs. Todd, accompanied by another frowsy woman. Between them they bore a huge jug of milk, a number of thick glasses and a plate of crackers.

"The crackers come extry, Mr. Merrick," said the landlady, "but seein' as milk's cheap I thought you might like 'em."

The landlord now came out and placed the stranger's glass, about half filled with milk, on the table before him. The man looked at it, frowned, and tossed off the milk in one gulp.

"More!" he said, holding out the glass.

Todd shook his head.

"Ain't no more," he declared.

His wife overheard him and pausing in her task of refilling the glasses for the rich man's party she looked over her shoulder and said:

"Give him what he wants, Lucky."

The landlord pondered.

"Not fer ten cents, Nancy," he protested. "The feller said he wanted ten cents wuth o' breakfas', an' by Joe he's had it."

"Milk's cheap," remarked Mrs. Todd. "It's crackers as is expensive these days. Fill up his glass, Lucky."

"Why is your husband called 'Lucky,' Mrs. Todd?" inquired Patsy, who was enjoying the cool, creamy milk.

"'Cause he got me to manage him, I guess," was the laughing reply. "Todd ain't much 'count 'nless I'm on the spot to order him 'round."

The landlord came out with the glass of milk but paused before he set it down.

"Let's see your money," he said suspiciously.

It seemed to the girls, who were curiously watching the scene, that the tramp flushed under his bronzed skin; but without reply he searched in a

pocket and drew out four copper cents, which he laid upon the table. After further exploration he abstracted a nickel from another pocket and pushed the coins toward the landlord.

"Nother cent," said Todd.

Continued search seemed for a time hopeless, but at last, in quite an unexpected way, the man produced the final cent and on receiving it Todd set down the milk.

"Anything more, yer honor?" he asked sarcastically.

"Yes; you might bring me the morning paper," was the reply.

Everyone except Todd laughed frankly at this retort. Uncle John put two silver dollars in Mrs. Todd's chubby hand and told Thomas to drive on.

"I dunno," remarked old Hucks, when they were out of earshot, "whether that feller's jest a common tramp or a workman goin' over to the paper mill at Royal. Jedgin' from the fact as he had money I guess he's a workman."

"Wrong, Thomas, quite wrong," said Beth, seated just behind him. "Did you notice his hands?"

"No, Miss Beth."

"They were not rough and the fingers were slender and delicate."

"That's the mark of a cracksman," said Arthur Weldon, with a laugh. "If there are any safes out here that are worth cracking, I'd say look out for the gentleman."

"His face isn't bad at all," remarked Patsy, reflectively. "Isn't there any grade between a workman and a thief?"

"Of course," asserted Mr. Merrick, in his brisk way. "This fellow, shabby as he looked, might be anything--from a strolling artist to a gentleman down on his luck. But what's the news, Thomas? How are Ethel and Joe?"

"Mr. an' Mrs. Wegg is quite comft'ble, sir, thank you," replied old Hucks, with a show of eagerness. "Miss Ethel's gran'ther, ol' Will Thompson, he's dead, you know, an' the young folks hev fixed up the Thompson house like a palace. Guess ye'd better speak to 'em about spendin' so much money, Mr. Merrick; I'm 'fraid they may need it some day."

"Don't worry. They've a fine income for life, Thomas, and there will be plenty to leave to their children--if they have any. But tell me about the mill at Royal. Where is Royal, anyhow?"

"Four mile up the Little Bill Creek, sir, where the Royal Waterfall is. A feller come an' looked the place over las' year an' said the pine forest would grind up inter paper an' the waterfall would do the grindin'. So he bought a mile o' forest an' built a mill, an' they do say things is hummin' up to the new settlement. There's more'n two hundred hands a-workin' there, a'ready."

"Goodness me!" cried Patsy; "this thing must have livened up sleepy old Millville considerably."

"Not yet," said Hucks, shaking his head. "The comp'ny what owns the mill keeps a store there for the workmen, an' none of 'em come much to Millville. Our storekeepers is madder'n blazes about it; but fer my part I'm glad the two places is separated."

"Why?" asked Louise.

"They're a kinder tough lot, I guess. Turnin' pine trees inter paper mus' be a job thet takes more muscle than brains. I don't see how it's done, at all."

"It's simple enough," said Mr. Merrick. "First the wood is ground into pulp, and then the pulp is run through hot rollers, coming out paper. It's a mighty interesting process, so some day we will all go to Royal and see the paper made."

"But not just yet, Uncle," remarked Patsy. "Let's have time to settle down on the farm and enjoy it. Oh, how glad I am to be back in this restful, sleepy, jumping-off-place of the world again! Isn't it delightful, Arthur Weldon? Did you ever breathe such ozony, delicious mountain air? And do you get the fragrance of the pine forests, and the--the--"

"The bumps?" asked Arthur, as the wagon gave a jolt a bit more emphatic than usual; "yes, Patsy dear, I get them all; but I won't pass judgment on Millville and Uncle John's farm just yet. Are we 'most there?"

"We're to have four whole months of it," sighed Beth. "That ought to enable us to renew our youth, after the strenuous winter."

"Rubbish!" said Uncle John. "You haven't known a strenuous moment, my dears, and you're all too young to need renewals, anyhow. But if you can find happiness here, my girls, our old farm will become a paradise."

These three nieces of Mr. Merrick were well worth looking at. Louise, the eldest, was now twenty--entirely too young to be a bride; but having decided to marry Arthur Weldon, the girl would brook no interference and, having a will of her own, overcame all opposition. Her tall, slender form was exceedingly graceful and willowy, her personality dainty and refined, her temperament under ordinary conditions essentially sweet and agreeable. In

crises Louise developed considerable character, in strong contrast with her usual assumption of well-bred composure. That the girl was insincere in little things and cultivated a polished manner to conceal her real feelings, is undeniable; but in spite of this she might be relied upon to prove loyal and true in emergencies.

Patricia Doyle was more than two years the junior of her cousin Louise and very unlike her. Patsy's old father, Major Gregory Doyle, said "she wore her heart on her sleeve," and the girl was frank and outspoken to a fault. Patsy had no "figure" to speak of, being somewhat dumpy in build, nor were her piquant features at all beautiful. Her nose tipped at the end, her mouth was broad and full-lipped and her complexion badly freckled. But Patsy's hair was of that indescribable shade that hovers between burnished gold and sunset carmine. "Fiery red" she was wont to describe it, and most people considered it, very justly, one of her two claims to distinction. Her other admirable feature was a pair of magnificent deep blue eyes--merry, mischievous and scintillating as diamonds. Few could resist those eyes, and certain it is that Patsy Doyle was a universal favorite and won friends without a particle of effort.

The younger of the three nieces, Elizabeth De Graf, was as beautiful a girl as you will often discover, one of those rarely perfect creations that excite our wonder and compel admiration--as a beautiful picture or a bit of statuary will. Dreamy and reserved in disposition, she lacked the graciousness of Louise and Patsy's compelling good humor; yet you must not think her stupid or disagreeable. Her reserve was really diffidence; her dreamy, expressionless gaze the result of a serious nature and a thoughtful temperament. Beth was quite practical and matter-of-fact, the reverse of Patsy's imaginative instincts or Louise's affected indifference. Those who knew Beth De Graf best loved her dearly, but strangers found her hard to approach and were often repulsed by her unresponsive manner. Underneath all, the girl was a real girl, with many splendid qualities, and Uncle John relied upon Beth's stability more than on that of his other two nieces. Her early life had been a stormy and unhappy one, so she was but now developing her real nature beneath the warmth of her uncle's protecting love.

Topping the brow of a little hill the wagon came to a smooth downward grade where the road met the quaint old bridge that spanned Little Bill Creek, beside which stood the antiquated flour and feed mill that had given Millville its name. The horses were able to maintain their brisk trot across the bridge and through the main street of the town, which was merely a cluster of unimposing frame buildings, that lined either side of the highway

for the space of an ordinary city block. Then they were in the wilds again and rattling over another cobblestone trail.

"This 'ere country's nuth'n' but pine woods 'n' cobblestones," sighed old Hucks, as the horses subsided to a walk. "Lor' knows what would 'a' happened to us without the trees! They saves our grace, so's to speak."

"I think the scenery is beautiful," observed Patsy. "It's so different from other country places."

"Not much farming around here, I imagine," said Arthur Weldon.

"More than you'd think, sir," replied Thomas. "There's certain crops as thrives in stony land, an' a few miles north o' here, towards Huntingdon, the soil's mighty rich 'n' productive. Things ain't never as bad as they seem in this world, sir," he added, turning his persistently smiling face toward the young man.

Mr. Merrick sat beside the driver on the front seat. The middle seat was occupied by Patsy and Beth, between whom squeezed little Mary, the maid. Louise and Arthur had the back seat.

A quarter of a mile beyond the town they came to a sort of lane running at right angles with the turnpike, and down this lane old Hucks turned his team. It seemed like a forbidding prospect, for ahead of them loomed only a group of tall pines marking the edge of the forest, yet as they came nearer and made a little bend in the road the Wegg farm suddenly appeared in view. The house seemed so cozy and homelike, set upon its green lawn with the tall pines for a background, that the girls, who knew the place well, exclaimed with delight, and Arthur, who now saw it for the first time, nodded his head approvingly.

Uncle John was all excitement over the arrival at his country home. An old fashioned stile was set in a rail fence which separated the grounds from the lane, and Hucks drew up the wagon so his passengers could all alight upon the step of the stile. Patsy was out at a bound. Louise followed more deliberately, assisted by her boy husband, and Beth came more sedately yet. But Uncle John rode around to the barn with Thomas, being eager to see the cows and pigs and poultry with which the establishment was liberally stocked.

The house was of two stories, the lower being built of cobblestones and the upper of pine slabs; but it had been artistically done and the effect was delightful. It was a big, rambling dwelling, and Mr. Merrick had furnished the old place in a lavish manner, so that his nieces would lack no modern comfort when they came there to spend a summer.

On the porch stood an old woman clothed in a neat gingham dress and wearing a white apron and cap. Her pleasant face was wreathed in smiles as she turned it toward the laughing, chattering group that came up the path. Patsy spied her and rushed up to give old Nora a hug and kiss, and the other two girls saluted the blind woman with equal cordiality, for long ago she had won the love and devotion of all three. Arthur, who had heard of Nora, pressed her hand and told her she must accept him as another of her children, and then she asked for Mr. Merrick and ran in to get the breakfast served. For, although blind, old Nora was far from being helpless, and the breakfast she had prepared in anticipation of their arrival was as deliciously cooked as if she had been able to use her eyes as others did.

CHAPTER III - THE DAWN OF A GREAT ENTERPRISE

The great enterprise was sprung on Mr. Merrick the very morning following his arrival at the farm. Breakfast was over and a group had formed upon the shady front lawn, where chairs, benches and hammocks were scattered in profusion.

"Well, Uncle, how do you like it?" asked Louise. "Are you perfectly comfortable and happy, now we've escaped so far from the city that its humming life is a mere memory?"

"Happy as a clam," responded Uncle John, leaning back in his chair with his feet on a foot rest. "If I only had the morning paper there would be nothing else to wish for."

"The paper? That's what that queer tramp at the Junction House asked for," remarked Beth. "The first thought of even a hobo was for a morning paper. I wonder why men are such slaves to those gossiping things."

"Phoo!" cried Patsy; "we're all slaves to them. Show me a person who doesn't read the daily journals and keep abreast of the times and I'll show you a dummy."

"Patsy's right," remarked Arthur Weldon. "The general intelligence and cosmopolitan knowledge of the people are best cultivated by the newspapers. The superiority of our newspapers has been a factor in making us the greatest nation on earth, for we are the best informed."

"My, what big words!" exclaimed Louise.

"It is quite true," said Uncle John soberly, "that I shall miss our daily paper during our four months' retirement in these fascinating wilds. It's the one luxury we can't enjoy in our country retreat."

"Why not?" asked Patsy, with startling abruptness, while a queer expression--as of an inspiration--stole over her bright face.

"Chump!" said Beth, drily; "you know very well why not, Patsy Doyle. Mooley cows and the fourth estate don't intermingle, so to speak."

"They can be made to, though," declared Patsy. "Why hasn't some one thought of it before? Uncle John--girls!--I propose we start a daily paper."

Louise laughed softly, Beth's lip curled and Arthur Weldon cast an amused glance at the girl; but Uncle John stared seriously into Patsy's questioning blue eyes.

"How?" he asked in a puzzled tone. If anything could interest this eccentric little millionaire more than the usual trend of events it was an original proposition of this sort. He loved to do things that other people had not attempted, nor even thought of. He hated conversational platitudes and established conventions, and his nieces had endeared themselves to him more by their native originality and frank disregard of ordinary feminine limitations than in any other way. It was generally conceded that Patsy was his favorite because she could advance more odd suggestions than the other girls, and this niece had a practical aptitude for carrying out her whimsical ideas that had long since won her uncle's respect. Not that she could outdo Mr. Merrick in eccentricity: that was admitted to be his special province, in which he had no rival; but the girl was so clever a confederate that she gave her erratic uncle much happiness of the sort he most appreciated.

Therefore, this seemingly preposterous proposition to establish a daily paper on a retired country farm did not strike the old gentleman as utterly impossible, and anything within the bounds of possibility was sure to meet his earnest consideration, especially when it was proposed by one of his favorite nieces.

"How?" responded Patsy; "why, it's easy enough, Uncle. We'll buy a press, hire a printer, and Beth and Louise will help me edit the paper. I'm sure I can exhibit literary talents of a high order, once they are encouraged to sprout. Louise writes lovely poetry and 'stories of human interest,' and Beth-

"I can't write even a good letter," asserted that young lady; "but I'd dearly love to edit a newspaper."

"Of course," agreed Louise; "we all would. And I think we could turn out a very creditable paper--for Millville. But wouldn't it cost a lot of money?"

"That isn't the present question," replied Uncle John. "The main thing is, do you girls want to be tied down to such a task? Every day in the week, all during our summer holiday--"

"Why, you've made our whole lives a holiday, Uncle John," interrupted Patsy, "and we've been so coddled and swamped with luxuries that we are just now in serious danger of being spoiled! You don't want three spoiled nieces on your hands, do you? And please make allowance for our natural impetuosity and eagerness to be up and doing. We love the farm, but our

happiness here would be doubled if we had some occupation to keep us busy, and this philanthropic undertaking would furnish us with no end of fun, even while we were benefiting our fellow man."

"All jabber, dear," exclaimed Beth. "I admit the fun, but where does the philanthropy come in?"

"Don't you see?" asked Patsy. "Both Uncle John and that tramp we encountered have met on common ground to bewail the lack of a daily newspaper 'in our midst'--to speak in journalistic parlance. At the paper mill at Royal are over two hundred workmen moaning in despair while they lose all track of the world's progress. At Huntingdon, not five miles distant, are four or five hundred people lacking all the educational advantages of an up-to-date--or is 'down-to-date' proper?--press. And Millville--good gracious! What would sleepy Millville folks think of having a bright, newsy, metropolitan newspaper left on their doorsteps every morning, or evening, as the case may be?"

"H-m," said Uncle John; "I scent a social revolution in the wilds of Chazy County."

"Let's start it right away!" cried Patsy. "The 'Millville Tribune.' What do you say, girls?"

"Why 'Tribune?'" asked Louise.

"Because we three will run it, and we're a triumvirate--the future tribunal of the people in this district."

"Very good!" said Uncle John, nodding approval. "A clever idea, Patsy."

"But it's all nonsense, sir," observed Arthur Weldon, in astonishment. "Have you any idea of the details of this thing you are proposing?"

"None whatever," said the little millionaire. "That's the beauty of the scheme, Arthur; it may lead us into a reg'lar complicated mix-up, and the joy of getting untangled ought to repay us for all our bother."

"Perhaps so--if you ever untangle," said the young man, smiling at the whimsical speech. Then he turned to his young bride. "Do you want to go into this thing, Louise?" he asked.

"Of course I do," she promptly replied. "It's the biggest thing in the way of a sensation that Patsy's crazy brain has ever evolved, and I'll stand by the Millville Tribune to the last. You mustn't forget, Arthur, that I shall be able to publish all my verses and stories, which the Century and Harpers' so heartlessly turned down."

"And Beth?"

"Oh, I'm in it too," declared Beth. "There's something so delightfully mysterious and bewildering in the idea of our editing and printing a daily paper here in Millville that I can hardly wait to begin the experiment."

"It's no experiment whatever," asserted Patsy boldly. "The daily newspaper is an established factor in civilization, and 'whatever man has done, man can do'--an adage that applies equally to girls."

"Have you any notion of the cost of an outfit such as is required to print a modern daily?" asked Arthur.

"Oh, two or three hundred, perhaps, but--"

"You're crazy, child! That wouldn't buy the type."

"Nevertheless," began Patsy, argumentatively, but her uncle stopped her.

"You needn't figure on that," he said hastily. "The outfit shall be my contribution to the enterprise. If you girls say you're anxious and willing to run a newspaper, I'll agree to give you a proper start."

"Oh, thank you, Uncle!"

"Of course we're willing!"

"It is all absolutely settled, so far as we are concerned," said Patsy, firmly. "How long will it take to get the things here, Uncle?"

Mr. Merrick considered a moment.

"There's a long-distance telephone over at Cotting's General Store, in town," he said. "I'll drive over and get Major Doyle on the wire and have him order the stuff sent out at once."

"Oh, no!" protested Patsy; "don't tell daddy of this plan, please. He'd think we were all fit subjects for the lunatic asylum."

"Major Doyle wouldn't be far wrong in that conclusion," suggested Arthur.

"I'd like to surprise him by sending him the first copy of the Millville Tribune," added the major's daughter.

"Then," said Mr. Merrick, "I'll call up Marvin, my banker. He'll perhaps attend to the matter more understandingly and more promptly than the major would. Tell Hucks to harness Joe to the buggy, Patsy, and I'll go at once."

"We'll all go!" exclaimed Beth.

"Of course," added Louise; "we are all equally interested in this venture."

So Patsy had old Hucks hitch Joe to the surrey, and the three girls accompanied their uncle in his drive to town, leaving Arthur Weldon shaking his head in a deprecating way but fully realizing that no protest of his would avail to prevent this amazing undertaking.

"That old man is as much a child as Beth or Patsy," he reflected. "It puzzles me to explain how he made all those millions with so little worldly wisdom."

CHAPTER IV - THE WAY INTO PRINT

Sam Cotting's General Store at Millville divided importance with Bob West's hardware store but was a more popular loafing place for the sparse population of the tiny town. The post office was located in one corner and the telephone booth in another, and this latter institution was regarded with much awe by the simple natives. Once in awhile some one would telephone over to the Junction on some trivial business, but the long-distance call was never employed except by the "nabobs"--the local name for John Merrick and his nieces--or by the manager of the new mill at Royal, who had extended the line to his own office in the heart of the pine forest.

So, when Uncle John and the girls entered Cotting's store and the little gentleman shut himself up in the telephone booth, a ripple of excitement spread throughout the neighborhood. Skim Clark, the youthful hope of the Widow Clark, who "run the Emporium," happened to be in the store and he rushed out to spread the news that "the nabob's talkin' to New Yoruk!"

This information demanded immediate attention. Marshall McMahan McNutt, familiarly known as "Peggy" McNutt--because he had once lost a foot in a mowing machine--and who was alleged to be a real estate agent, horse doctor, fancy poultry breeder and palmist, and who also dabbled in the sale of subscription books, life insurance, liniment and watermelons, quickly slid off his front porch across the way and sauntered into Cotting's to participate in the excitement. Seth Davis, the blacksmith, dropped his tools and hurried to the store, and the druggist three doors away--a dapper gentleman known as Nib Corkins--hurriedly locked his door and attended the meeting. Presently the curious group was enlarged by the addition of Nick Thome the liveryman, Lon Taft, a carpenter and general man-of-all-

work, and Silas Caldwell the miller, the latter a serious individual who had "jest happened to come acrost from the mill in the nick o' time."

Sam Cotting, being himself of great local importance, had never regarded with favor the rivalry of the nabob, but he placed stools near the telephone booth for the three girls, who accepted the courtesy with a graciousness that ought to have disarmed the surly storekeeper. They could not fail to be amused at the interest they excited, and as they personally knew every one of the town people they pleasantly nodded to each arrival and inquired after their health and the welfare of their families. The replies were monosyllables. Millville folks were diffident in the presence of these city visitors and while they favored the girls with rather embarrassing stares, their chief interest was centered on the little man in the telephone booth, who could plainly be seen through the glass door but might not be heard, however loudly he shouted.

"Talkin' to New Yoruk" was yet a marvelous thing to them, and much speculation was exchanged in low tones as to the probable cost of such a conversation as Mr. Merrick was now indulging in.

"Costs a dollar to connect, ye know," remarked Peggy McNutt to Ned Long. "Bet a cookie he's runnin' the blame bill up to two dollars, with all this chinnin'. Why can't th' ol' nabob write a letter, like common folks, an' give his extry cash to the poor?"

"Meanin' you, Peggy?" asked Nib Corkins, with a chuckle.

"He might do wuss ner that," retorted Peggy. "Lor' knows I'm poor enough. You don't ketch me a-talkin' to New York at a dollar a throw, Nib, do ye?"

Meantime Mr. Merrick had succeeded in getting Mr. Marvin, of the banking house of Isham, Marvin & Co., on the wire.

"Do me a favor, Marvin," he said. "Hunt up the best supply house and have them send me a complete outfit to print a daily newspaper. Everything must be modern, you know, and don't let them leave out anything that might come handy. Then go to Corrigan, the superintendent of the railroad, and have him send the freight up here to Chazy Junction by a special engine, for I don't want a moment's delay and the regular freight takes a week or so. Charge everything to my account and impress upon the dealer the need of haste. Understand all that, Marvin?"

"I think I do, sir," was the reply; "but that's a pretty big order, Mr. Merrick. The outfit for a modern daily will cost a small fortune."

"Never mind; send it along."

"Very well. But you'd better give me some details. How big a newspaper do you want to print?"

"Hold the wire and I'll find out," said Uncle John. Then he opened the door of the booth and said: "Patsy, how big a thing do you want to print?"

"How big? Oh, let me see. Four pages will do, won't it, Louise?"

"Plenty, I should say, for this place," answered Louise.

"And how many columns to a page?" asked Uncle John.

"Oh, six or seven. That's regular, I guess."

"Make it six," proposed Beth. "That will keep us busy enough."

"All right," said Uncle John, and closed the door again.

This conversation was of the most startling nature to the assembled villagers, who were all trying to look unconcerned and as if "they'd just dropped in," but were unable to dissemble their curiosity successfully. Of course much of this interchange of words between the man in the booth and the girls outside was Greek to them all, but "to print" and "columns" and "pages" could apply only to one idea, which, while not fully grasped, was tremendously startling in its suggestion. The Merrick party was noted for doing astonishing things in the past and evidently, in the words of Peggy McNutt, they were "up to some blame foolishness that'll either kill this neighborhood or make it talked about."

"It's too dead a'ready to kill," responded Nick Thorne gloomily. "Even the paper mill, four mile away, ain't managed to make Millville wiggle its big toe. Don't you worry over what the nabob'll do, Peggy; he couldn't hurt nuthin' if he tried."

The door opened again and Mr. Merrick protruded a puzzled countenance.

"He wants to know about a stereotype plant, Patsy. What'll I tell him?"

Patsy stared. Louise and Beth shook their heads.

"If it belongs to the--the thing we want, Uncle, have 'em send it along," said Patsy in desperation.

"All right."

A few minutes later the little man again appealed to them.

"How'll we run the thing, girls; steam or electricity?"

Patsy's face was a blank. Beth giggled and Louise frowned.

"Of course it'll have to be run," suggested Mr. Merrick; "but how? That's the question."

"I--I hadn't given that matter thought," admitted Patsy. "What do you think, Uncle?"

He considered, holding open the door while he thoughtfully regarded the silent but interested group of villagers that eagerly hung upon every word that passed.

"Cotting," called Mr. Merrick, "how do they run the paper mill at Royal?"

"'Lectricity! 'Lectricity, sir!" answered half a dozen at once.

"They develops the power from the Royal Waterfall of the Little Bill," explained Cotting, with slow and pompous deliberation. "Mr. Skeelty he tol' me they had enough 'lectric'ty to light up the whole dum country fer ten mile in all directions, 'sides a-runnin' of the mill."

"Who's Skeelty?"

"Manager o' the mill, sir, an' part owner, he says."

"Has he a telephone?"

"Yes, Mr. Merrick."

"Thank you."

Mr. Merrick shut the door and called up Skeelty. Five minutes of bargaining settled the question and he then connected with Mr. Marvin again and directed him to have the presses and machinery equipped to run by electricity. Thinking he had now given the banker all the commissions he could attend to with celerity, Uncle John next called up Major Doyle and instructed his brother-in-law to send four miles of electric cable, with fittings and transformers, and a crew of men to do the work, and not to waste a moment's time in getting them to Millville.

"What in blazes are ye up to now, John?" inquired the major, on receiving this order.

"None of your business, Gregory. Obey orders."

"Going to light the farm and turn night into day?" persisted the major.

"This is Patsy's secret, and I'm not going to give it away," said Mr. Merrick. "Attend to this matter promptly, Major, and you'll see the result when you come to us in July for your vacation."

Having attended to all the requirements of the projected Millville Tribune, as he thought, Mr. Merrick called the operator for the amount of his bill and paid it to Sam Cotting--three dollars and eighty cents. The sum fairly made the onlookers gasp, and as the Merrick party passed out, Silas, the miller, said solemnly:

"Don't anybody tell me talk is cheap, arter this. John Merrick may be a millionaire, but ef he keeps this thing up long he'll be a pauper. That's my prophe-sigh."

"Yer off yer base, Si," said McNutt "Joe Wegg tol' me once thet the nabob's earnin's on his money were more'n he could spend ef he lays awake nights a-doin' it. Joe says it keeps pilin' up on him, till sometimes it drives him nigh desp'rit. I hed an idee I'd ask him to shuck off some of it onter me. I could stan' the strain all right, an' get plenty o' sleep too."

"Ye won't hev no call to stan' it, Peggy," pre-dcted Lon Tait. "Milyunhairs may spend money foolish, but they don't never give none away. I've done sev'ral odd jobs fer Mr. Merrick, but he's never give me more'n jest wages."

"Well," said McNutt with a sigh, "while he's in easy reach there orter be some sort o' pickings fer us, an' it's our duty to git all we can out'n him--short o' actoo-al robbery. What do ye s'pose this new deal means, boys? Sounds like printin' somethin', don't it?"

"P'raps it's some letterheads fer the Wegg Farm," suggested Nib Corkins. "These Merricks do everything on a big scale."

"Four pages, an' six columns to a page?" asked Cotting scornfully. "Sounds to me more like a newspaper, folks!"

There was a moment's silence, during which they all stared at the speaker fearfully. Then said Skim Clark, in his drawling, halting way:

"Ef thet's the case, an' there's goin' ter be a newspaper here in Millville, we may as well give up the struggle, fer the town'll be ruined!"

CHAPTER V - DIVIDING THE RESPONSIBILITY

The rest of that day and a good share of the night was devoted to an earnest consultation concerning the proper methods of launching the Millville Daily Tribune.

"We must divide the work," said Patsy, "so that all will have an equal share of responsibility. Louise is to be the literary editor and the society editor. That sounds like a good combination."

"There is no society here," objected Louise.

"Not as we understand the term, perhaps," replied Miss Doyle; "but every community, however small, believes it is a social center; and so it is--to itself. If there is a dance or a prayer meeting or a christening or illness, it must be recorded in our local columns. If Bob West sells a plow we've got to mention the name of the farmer who bought it; if there's a wedding, we'll make a double-header of it; if a baby is born, we will--will--"

"Print its picture in the paper. Eh, Uncle John?" This from Beth.

"Of course," said Mr. Merrick. "You must print all the home news, as well as the news of the world."

"How are you going to get the news of the world?" asked Arthur.

"How? How?"

"That was my question."

"Private wire from New York," said Mr. Merrick, as the girls hesitated how to meet this problem. "I'll arrange with the telegraph company to-morrow to have an extension of the wire run over from Chazy Junction. Then we'll hire an operator--a girl, of course--to receive the news in the office of the paper."

"But who will send us the news?" asked Beth.

"The Associated Press, I suppose, or some news agency in New York. I'll telegraph to-morrow to Marvin to arrange it."

Arthur whistled softly.

"This newspaper is going to cost something," he murmured. Uncle John looked at him with a half quizzical, half amused expression.

"That's what Marvin warned me yesterday, when I ordered the equipment," said he. "He told me that before I got through with this deal it would run up into the thousands. And he added that Millville wasn't worth it."

"And what did you say to that, Uncle John?" asked Beth.

"In that case, I said, I would be sure to get some pleasure and satisfaction out of your journalistic enterprise. My last financial statement showed a frightful condition of affairs. In spite of Major Doyle's reckless investments of my money, and--and the little we manage to give to deserving charities, I'm getting richer every day. When a small leak like this newspaper project occurs, it seems that Fortune is patting me on the back. I've no idea what a respectable newspaper will cost, but I hope it will cost a lot, for every dollar it devours makes my mind just that much easier."

Arthur Weldon laughed.

"In that case, sir," said he, "I can make no further protest. But I predict you will find the bills--eh--eh--entirely satisfactory."

"You mentioned an office, just now, Uncle," observed Louise. "Must we have a business office?"

"To be sure," Mr. Merrick replied. "We must find a proper location, where we can install the presses and all the type and machinery that go to making up a newspaper. I hadn't thought of this before, but it is a serious matter, my dears. We may have to build a place."

"Oh, that would take too long, entirely," said Patsy. "Can't we put it in the barn, Uncle?"

"What would happen to the horses and cows? No; we'll take a look over Millville and see what we can find there."

"You won't find much," predicted Beth. "I can't think of a single unoccupied building in the town."

"Then we'll put it in a tent," declared Patsy.

"Don't borrow trouble," advised Uncle John. "Wait till we've gone over the ground together. Our truck will require a pretty big place, for Marvin said one freight car wouldn't hold all the outfit. He's going to send two cars, anyhow."

"Have him fill up the second with print paper," proposed Arthur.

"Ah; that's another thing I hadn't thought of," said Mr. Merrick. "How big a daily edition will you print, Patsy?"

"Let's see," pondered the girl. "There are about two hundred at Royal, say four hundred at Huntingdon, at Millville about--about--"

"Say fifteen," said Uncle John; "that's six hundred and fifteen, and--"

"And the farmers, of course. There must be at least a hundred and fifty of 'em in the county, so that makes seven hundred and seventy-five copies a day."

"Wait a moment!" cried Arthur, somewhat bewildered by this figuring. "Do you suppose every inhabitant--man, woman and child--will subscribe for your paper?"

Patsy blushed.

"Why, no, of course not," she acknowledged frankly. "How many do you think will subscribe, Arthur? Remember, it's to be a great newspaper."

"Four pages of six columns each. Plenty big enough for Millville," he said, thoughtfully. "My advice, girls, is to print a first edition of about four hundred copies and distribute the papers free in every house within a radius of five or six miles from Millville. These will be samples, and after the people have had a chance to read them you can ask them to subscribe. By the way, what will you charge for subscription?"

"How much, Uncle?" asked Patsy, appealingly.

"A penny paper is the most popular," he said, regarding her with merry, twinkling eyes. "Say thirty cents a month, or three-fifty a year. That's as much as these poor people can stand."

"I think so too," replied the girl, seriously.

"But it seems to me a penny paper isn't dignified," pouted Louise. "I had intended to print all my poems in it, and I'm sure that ought to make it worth at least five cents a copy."

"That will make it worth more, my dear," commented Uncle John; "but frequently one must sell property for less than it's actually worth. You must remember these people have not been used to spending much money on literature, and I imagine you'll have to coax them to spend thirty cents a month. Many of the big New York papers are sold for a penny, and without any loss of dignity, either."

"Do you think we can make it pay on that basis, Uncle?" asked Beth.

Uncle John coughed to gain time while he thought of a suitable reply. "That, my dear," he informed his niece, "will depend upon how many subscribers

you can get. Subscribers and advertisers are necessary to make any paper pay."

"Advertisers!"

"Of course," said practical Beth. "Every merchant in Millville and Huntingdon will naturally advertise in our paper, and we'll make the major get us a lot from New York."

"Oh," said Patsy; "I see. So that difficulty is settled."

Arthur smiled, but held his peace. Uncle John's round face was growing merrier every minute.

"Patsy, do you think we shall make any money from this venture?" asked Louise.

"We ought to, if we put our hearts and souls into the thing," was the reply. "But before we divide any profits we must pay back to Uncle John the original investment."

"We don't especially care to make any profit, do we?" inquired Beth. "It's fun for us, you know, and a--a--great educational experience, and--and--a fine philanthropy--and all that. We don't need the money, so if the paper pays a profit at a cent a copy we'd better cut down the price."

"Don't do that yet," advised Uncle John, soberly. "There will be expenses that as yet you don't suspect, and a penny for a paper is about as low as you can go."

"What's to be my position on the staff, Patsy?" asked Beth, turning to her cousin.

"You're a good mathematician, Beth, so I propose you act as secretary and treasurer, and keep the books."

"No; that's too mechanical; no bookkeeping for me. I want something literary."

"Then you can be sporting editor."

"Goodness, Patsy! There will be no sporting news in Millville."

"There will be a ball game occasionally, and I saw some of the men pitching quoits yesterday. But this is to be a newspaper reflecting the excitement of the entire world, Beth, and all the telegraphic news of a sporting character you must edit and arrange for our reading columns. Oh, yes; and you'll take care of the religious items too. We must have a Sunday Sermon, by some

famous preacher, Uncle. We'll print that every Saturday, so those who can't go to church may get as good a talk as if they did--and perhaps a better one."

"That will be fine," he agreed. "How about murders, crimes and divorces?"

"All barred. Nothing that sends a cold chill down your back will be allowed in our paper. These people are delightfully simple; we don't want to spoil them."

"Cut out the cold chills and you'll spoil your newspaper," suggested Arthur. "People like to read of other folks' horrors, for it makes them more contented with their own lot in life."

"False philosophy, sir!" cried Fatsy firmly. "You can't educate people by retailing crimes and scandals, and the Millville Tribune is going to be as clean as a prayer book, if I'm to be managing editor."

"Is that to be your office, dear?" asked Louise.

"I think so. I've a heap of executive ability, and I'm running over with literary--eh--eh--literary discrimination. In addition to running the thing, I'll be the general news editor, because I'm better posted on newspaper business than the other girls."

"How does that happen?" inquired Louise, wonderingly.

"Why, I--I read the papers more than you or Beth. And I've set myself to master every detail of the business. No more crocheting or fancy work--no novel reading--no gossipy letter writing. From this day on we must attend strictly to business. If we're to become journalist, girls, we must be good ones--better than the ordinary--so that Uncle John may point to us with pride, and the columns of the Millville Daily Tribune will be quoted by the New York and Chicago press. Only in that way can we become famous throughout the world!"

"Pass me the bonbons, dear," sighed Louise. "It's a high ambition, isn't it?"

"A very laudable ambition," added Uncle John approvingly. "I hope my clever nieces will be able to accomplish it."

"How about pictures?" asked Beth. "Modern newspapers are illustrated, and have cartoons of the leading events of the day."

"Can't we buy those things somewhere?" asked Patsy, appealing to Uncle John again. "There isn't an artist among us, of any account; and we shall be too busy to draw pictures."

"We must hire an artist," said Mr. Merrick, adding the item to his memoranda. "I'll speak to Marvin about it."

All these details were beginning to bewilder the embryo journalists. It is quite possible that had not Uncle John placed his order for presses and type so promptly the girls might have withdrawn from the proposition, but the die was now cast and they were too brave--perhaps too stubborn--to "back down" at this juncture.

"I realize," said Patsy, slowly and with a shake of her flaming head, "that we have undertaken an important venture. Our new enterprise is a most serious one, girls, for there is nothing greater or grander in our advanced age than the daily newspaper; no power so tremendous as the Power of the Press."

"Yes, the press must be powerful or it wouldn't print clearly," remarked Beth.

"We are to become public mentors to the simple natives of Chazy County," continued Patsy, warming up to her subject and speaking oratorically. "We shall be the guiding star of the--er--er--the benighted citizens of Millville and Huntingdon. We must lead them in politics, counsel them in the management of their farms and educate them to the great World Movements that are constantly occurring."

"Let's put all that rot in our prospectus," said Louise, looking at her cousin admiringly. "Can you remember it, Patsy, or had I better write it down now? I like that about teaching the farmers how to run their farms; it's so practical."

"You wait," said Patsy unflinchingly. "I'll write 'em an editorial that will make their eyes roll. But it won't do a bit of harm for you and Beth to jot down all the brilliant thoughts you run across, for the benefit of our subscribers."

"We haven't any subscribers yet," remarked Beth, placidly.

"I'll overcome that defect," said Uncle John. "I want to subscribe right now for ten copies, to be mailed to friends of mine in the city who--who need educating. I'll pay in advance and collect of my friends when I see 'em."

This was certainly encouraging and Patsy smiled benignantly.

"I'll take five more yearly subscriptions," said Arthur.

"Oh, but you're going to be on the staff!" cried Patsy.

"Am I?"

"Certainly. I've been thinking over our organization and while it is quite proper for three girls to run paper, there ought to be a man to pose as the editor in chief. That'll be you, Arthur."

"But you won't print my name?"

"Oh, yes we shall. Don't groan, sir; it's no disgrace. Wait till you see the Millville Tribune. Also we shall print our own names, in that case giving credit to whom credit is due. The announcement will run something like this: 'Arthur Weldon, General Manager and Editor in Chief; P. Doyle, General News Editor; L. Merrick Weldon, Society and Literary Editor; E. DeGraf, Sporting Editor, Secretary and Treasurer.' You see, by using our initials only, no one will ever suspect we are girls."

"The Millville people may," said Arthur, slyly, "and perhaps the disguise will be penetrated by outsiders. That will depend on the paper."

"I don't like that combination of sporting editor and secretary and treasurer," objected Beth. "It isn't the usual thing in journalism, I'm sure. Suppose you call me Editor of Special Features, and let it go at that?"

"Have we any special features?" asked Louise.

"Oh, yes," said Arthur; "there's Beth's eyebrows, Patsy's nose, and--"

"Do be sensible!" cried Patsy. "This isn't a joking matter, sir. Our newspaper will have plenty of special features, and Beth's suggestion is a good one. It sounds impressive. You see, Arthur, we've got to use you as a figurehead, but so you won't loaf on your job I've decided to appoint you Solicitor of Advertising and Subscriptions."

"Thank you, my dear," he said, grinning in an amused way.

"You and Louise, who still like to be together, can drive all over the county getting subscriptions, and you can write letters on our new stationery to all the big manufacturers of soaps and breakfast foods and beauty powders and to all the correspondence schools and get their advertisements for the Tribune. If you get a good many, we may have to enlarge the paper."

"Don't worry, Miss Doyle; I'll try to keep within bounds."

And so they went on, laying plans and discussing details in such an earnest way that Uncle John became as enthusiastic as any of them and declared in no uncertain tone that the Millville Daily Tribune was bound to be a "howling success."

After the girls had retired for the night and the men sat smoking together in Uncle John's own room, Arthur said:

"Tell me, sir, why you have encouraged this mad project."

The little millionaire puffed his pipe in silence a moment. Then he replied:

"I'm educating my girls to be energetic and self-reliant. I want to bring out and develop every spark of latent ability there is in them. Whether the Millville Tribune succeeds or fails is not important; it will at least keep them busy for a time, along new lines, and tax their best resources of intellect and business ability. In other words, this experience is bound to do 'em good, and in that way I figure it will be worth all it costs--and more. I like the originality of the idea; I'm pleased with the difficulties I see looming ahead; I'm quite sure my girls will rise to every occasion and prove their grit." He paused to knock the ashes from his pipe. "I'm worth a lot of money, Arthur," he continued, meekly, "and some day these three girls will inherit immense fortunes. It is my duty to train them in all practical business ways to take care of their property."

"I follow your line of reasoning, sir," observed Arthur Weldon; "but this absurd journalistic venture is bound to result in heavy financial loss."

"I know it, my boy. I'm sure of it. But can't you see that the lesson they will learn will render them more cautious in making future investments? I'm going to supply a complete newspaper outfit--to the last detail--and give 'em a good running start. Then I shall sit back and watch results. If they lose money on running expenses, as they surely will, they'll first take it out of their allowances, then sell their jewelry, and finally come to me for help. See? The lesson will be worth while, Arthur, and aside from that--think of the fun they'll have!"

CHAPTER VI - MR. SKEELTY OF THE MILL

The next morning they drove to town again, passing slowly up the street of the little village to examine each building that might be a possible location for a newspaper office. Here is a map that Patsy drew of Millville, which gives a fair idea of its arrangement: Counting the dwellings there were exactly twelve buildings, and they all seemed occupied.

When they reached the hardware store, opposite Cotting's, Mr. West, the proprietor, was standing on the broad platform in front of it. In many respects Bob West was the most important citizen of Millville. Tall and gaunt, with great horn spectacles covering a pair of cold gray eyes, he was usually as reserved and silent as his neighbors were confiding and talkative. A widower of long standing, without children or near relatives, he occupied a suite of well-appointed rooms over the hardware store and took his meals at the hotel. Before Mr. Merrick appeared on the scene West had been considered a very wealthy man, as it was known he had many interests outside of his store; but compared with the multi-millionaire old Bob had come to be regarded more modestly, although still admitted to be the village's "warmest" citizen. He was an authority in the town, too, and a man of real importance.

Mr. Merrick stopped his horse to speak with the hardware man, an old acquaintance.

"West," said he, "my girls are going to start a newspaper in Millville."

The merchant bowed gravely, perhaps to cover the trace of a smile he was unable to repress.

"It's to be a daily paper, you know," continued Mr. Merrick, "and it seems there's a lot of machinery in the outfit. It'll need quite a bit of room, in other words, and we're looking for a place to install it."

West glanced along the street--up one side and down the other--and then shook his head negatively.

"Plenty of land, but no buildings," said he. "You might buy the old mill and turn it into a newspaper office. Caldwell isn't making much of a living and would be glad to sell out."

"It's too dusty and floury," said Patsy. "We'd never get it clean, I'm sure."

"What's in that shed of yours?" asked Uncle John, pointing to a long, low building' that adjoined the hardware store.

West turned and looked at the shed reflectively.

"That is where I store my stock of farm machinery," he said. "There's very little in there now, for it's a poor season and I didn't lay in much of a supply. In fact, I'm pretty well cleaned out of all surplus stock. But next spring I shall need the place again."

"Good!" cried Mr. Merrick. "That solves our problem. Has it a floor?"

"Yes; an excellent one; but only one small window."

"We can remedy that," declared Uncle John. "Here's the proposition, West: Let us have the shed for six months, at the end of which time we will know whether the Millville Tribune is a success or not. If it is, we'll build a fine new building for it; if it don't seem to prosper, we'll give you back the shed. What do you say?"

West thought it over.

"There is room on the rear platform, for all the farm machinery I now have on hand. All right, Mr. Merrick; I'll move the truck out and give you possession. It won't make a bad newspaper office. But of course you are to fit up the place at your own expense."

"Thank you very much, sir!" exclaimed Uncle John. "I'll set Lon Taft at work at once. Where can he be found?"

"Playing billiards at the hotel, usually. I suppose he is there now."

"Very good; I'll hunt him up. What do you think of our newspaper scheme, West?"

The old merchant hesitated. Then he said slowly:

"Whatever your charming and energetic nieces undertake, sir, will doubtless be well accomplished. The typical country newspaper groans under a load of debt and seldom gets a fair show to succeed; but in this case there will be no lack of money, and--why, that settles the question, I think. Money is the keystone to success."

"Mr. West," said Louise, with dignity, "we are depending chiefly on the literary merit of our newspaper to win recognition."

"Of course; of course!" said he hastily. "Put me down as a subscriber, please, and rely upon my support at all times. It is possible, young ladies--nay, quite probable, I should say--that your originality and genius will yet make Millville famous."

That speech pleased Uncle John, and as the hardware merchant bowed and turned away, Mr. Merrick said in his cheeriest tones: "He's quite right, my dears, and we're lucky to have found such a fine, roomy place for our establishment. Before we go after the carpenter to fix it up I must telephone to Marvin about the things we still need."

Over the long-distance telephone Mr. Marvin reported that he had bought the required outfit and it was even then being loaded on the freight cars.

"I've arranged for a special engine," he added, "and if all goes well the freight will be on the sidetrack at Chazy Junction on Monday morning. The dealer will send down three men to set up the presses and get everything in running order. But he asks if you have arranged for your workmen. How about it, Mr. Merrick? have you plenty of competent printers and pressmen at Millville?"

"There are none at all," was the reply. "Better inquire how many we will need, Marvin, and send them down here. And, by the way, hire women or girls for every position they are competent to fill. This is going to be a girls' newspaper, so we'll have as few men around as possible."

"I understand, sir."

Uncle John ordered everything he could think of and told his agent to add whatever the supply man thought might be needed. This business being accomplished, he found Lon Taft at the hotel and instructed the carpenter to put rows of windows on both sides of the shed and to build partitions for an editorial office and a business office at the front.

This was the beginning of a busy period, especially for poor Uncle John, who had many details to attend to personally. The next morning the electricians arrived and began stringing the power cables from the paper mill to the newspaper office. This rendered it necessary for Mr. Merrick to make a trip to Royal, to complete his arrangement with Mr. Skeelty, the manager. He drove over with Arthur Weldon, in the buggy--four miles of hill climbing, over rough cobble-stones, into the pine forest.

Arriving there, the visitors were astonished at the extent of the plant so recently established in this practically unknown district. The great mill, where the wood pulp was made, was a building constructed from pine slabs and cobblestones, material gathered from the clearing in which it stood, but it was quite substantial and roomy. Adjoining the mill was the factory building where the pulp was rolled into print paper. Surrounding these huge buildings were some sixty small dwellings of the bungalow type, for the use of the workmen, built of rough boards, but neat and uniform in appearance.

Almost in the center of this group stood the extensive storehouse from which all necessary supplies were furnished the mill hands, the cost being deducted from their wages. The electric power plant was a building at the edge of Royal Waterfall, the low and persistent roar of which was scarcely drowned by the rumble of machinery. Finally, at the edge of the clearing nearest the mills, stood the business office, and to this place Mr. Merrick and Arthur at once proceeded.

They found the office a busy place. Three or four typewriters were clicking away, operated by sallow-faced girls, and behind a tall desk were two bookkeepers, in one of whom Uncle John recognized--with mild surprise--the tramp he had encountered at Chazy Junction on the morning of his arrival. The young fellow had improved in appearance, having discarded his frayed gray suit for one of plain brown khaki, such as many of the workmen wore, a supply being carried by the company's store. He was clean-shaven and trim, and a gentlemanly bearing had replaced the careless, half defiant attitude of the former hobo. It was evident he remembered meeting Mr. Merrick, for he smiled and returned the "nabob's" nod.

Mr. Skeelty had a private enclosed office in a corner of the room. Being admitted to this sanctum, the visitors found the manager to be a small, puffy individual about forty-five years of age, with shrewd, beadlike black eyes and an insolent assumption of super-importance. Skeelty interrupted his task of running up columns of impressive figures to ask his callers to be seated, and opened the interview with characteristic abruptness.

"You're Merrick, eh? I remember. You want to buy power, and we have it to sell. How much will you contract to take?"

"I don't know just how much we need," answered Uncle John. "We want enough to run a newspaper plant at Millville, and will pay for whatever we use. I've ordered a meter, as you asked me to do, and my men are now stringing the cables to make the connection."

"Pah! a newspaper. How absurd," said Mr. Skeelty with scornful emphasis. "Your name, Merrick, is not unknown to me. It stands for financial success, I understand; but I'll bet you never made your money doing such fool things as establishing newspapers in graveyards."

Uncle John looked at the man attentively.

"I shall refrain from criticising your conduct of this mill, Mr. Skeelty," he quietly observed, "nor shall I dictate what you may do with your money--provided you succeed in making any."

The manager smiled broadly, as if the retort pleased him.

"Give an' take, sir; that's my motto," he said.

"But you prefer to take?"

"I do," was the cheerful reply. "I'll take your paper, for instance--if it isn't too high priced."

"In case it is, we will present you with a subscription," said Uncle John. "But that reminds me: as a part of our bargain I want you to allow my nieces, or any representative of the Millville Tribune, to take subscriptions among your workmen."

Mr. Skeelty stared at him a moment. Then he laughed.

"They're mostly foreigners, Mr. Merrick, who haven't yet fully mastered the English language. But," he added, thoughtfully, "a few among them might subscribe, if your country sheet contains any news of interest at all. This is rather a lonely place for my men and they get dissatisfied at times. All workmen seem chronically dissatisfied, and their women constantly urge them to rebellion. Already there are grumblings, and they claim they're buried alive in this forlorn forest. Don't appreciate the advantages of country life, you see, and I've an idea they'll begin to desert, pretty soon. Really, a live newspaper might do them good--especially if you print a little socialistic drivel now and then." Again he devoted a moment to thought, and then continued: "Tell you what I'll do, sir; I'll solicit the subscriptions myself, and deduct the price from the men's wages, as I do the cost of their other supplies. But the Company gets a commission for that, of course."

"It's a penny paper," said Uncle John. "The subscription is only thirty cents a month."

"Delivered?"

"I suppose so."

"Well, I'll pay you twenty cents, and keep the balance for commission. That's fair enough."

"Very well, Mr. Skeelty. We're after subscriptions more than money, just now. Get all you can, at that rate."

After signing a contract for the supply of electrical power, whereby he was outrageously robbed but the supply was guaranteed, Mr. Merrick and Arthur returned to the farm.

"That man," said Louise's young husband, referring to the manager of the paper mill, "is an unmitigated scoundrel, sir."

"I won't deny it," replied Mr. Merrick. "It occurs to me he is hiring those poor workmen at low wages and making a profit on all their living necessities, which he reserves the right of supplying from his own store. No wonder the poor fellows get dissatisfied."

CHAPTER VII - THE SKETCH ARTIST

During the next three days so many things happened at Millville that the natives were in a panic of excitement. Not only was electricity brought from the paper mill, but a telegraph wire was run from Chazy Junction to Bob West's former storage shed and a telephone gang came along and placed a private wire, with long-distance connections, in the new newspaper office. The office itself became transformed--"as full o' winders as a hothouse!" exclaimed Peggy McNutt, with bulging eyes--and neat partitions were placed for the offices. There was no longer any secret as to the plans of the "nabobs"; it was generally understood that those terribly aggressive girls were going to inflict a daily paper on the community. Some were glad, and some rebelled, but all were excited. A perpetual meeting was held at Cotting's store to discuss developments, for something startling occurred every few minutes.

"It's a outrage, this thing," commented young Skim Clark despondently. "They're tryin' to run mother out o' business--an' she a widder with me to look after! Most o' the business at the Emporium is done in newspapers an' magazines an' sich; so these gals thought they'd cut under an' take the business away from her."

"Can't the Widder Clark sell the new paper, then?" asked the blacksmith.

"I dunno. Hadn't thought o' that," said Skim. "But the price is to be jus' one cent, an' we've ben gittin' five cents fer all the outside papers. Where's the profit comin' from, on one cent, I'd like to know? Why, we make two or three cents on all the five cent papers."

"As fer that," remarked the druggist, "we'll get a cheap paper--if it's any good--an' that's somethin' to be thankful for."

"'Twon't be any good," asserted Skim. "Ma says so."

But no one except McNutt was prepared to agree with this prediction. The extensive plans in preparation seemed to indicate that the new paper would be fully equal to the requirements of the populace.

On Monday, when the news spread that two big freight cars had arrived at the Junction, and Nick Thorne began working three teams to haul the outfit to Millville, the rest of the town abandoned all business other than watching the arrival of the drays. Workmen and machinists arrived from the city and began unpacking and setting up the presses, type cases and all other

paraphernalia, every motion being watched by eager faces that lined the windows. These workmen were lodged at the hotel, which had never entertained so many guests at one time in all its past history. The three girls, even more excited and full of awe than the townspeople, were at the office early and late, taking note of everything installed and getting by degrees a fair idea of the extent of their new plaything.

"It almost takes my breath away, Uncle," said Patsy. "You've given the Tribune such a splendid start that we must hustle to make good and prove we are worthy your generosity."

"I sat up last night and wrote a poem for the first page of the first number," announced Louise earnestly.

"Poems don't go on the first page," observed Patsy; "but they're needed to fill in with. What's it about, dear?"

"It's called 'Ode to a Mignonette,'" answered Louise. "It begins this way:

"Wee brown blossom, humble and sweet, Content on my bosom lying,
Who would guess from your quiet dress The beauty there is lying
Under the rust?"

"Hm," said Patsy, "I don't see as there's any beauty under the rust, at all. There's no beauty about a mignonette, anyhow, suspected or unsuspected."

"She means 'fragrance,'" suggested Beth. "Change it to: 'The fragrance there is lying under the rust.' That'll fix it all right, Louise."

"It doesn't seem right, even then," remarked Uncle John. "If the fragrance lies under the rust, it can't be smelt, can it?"

"I did not anticipate all this criticism," said Louise, with an air of injured dignity. "None of the big publishing houses that returned my poems ever said anything mean about them; they merely said they were 'not available.' However, as this poem has not made a hit with the managing editor, I'll tear it up and write another."

"Don't do that," begged Patsy. "Save it for emergencies. We've got to fill twenty-four columns every day, remember!"

By Wednesday night the equipment was fully installed and the workmen departed, leaving only Jim McGaffey, an experienced pressman, and Lawrence Doane--familiarily called Larry--who was to attend to the electrotyping and "make-up." The press was of the best modern construction, and folded, cut and counted the papers automatically, with a capacity for printing three thousand copies an hour.

"And at that rate," observed Patsy, "It will run off our regular edition in eight minutes."

Aside from the newspaper press there were two "job" presses and an assortment of type for printing anything that might be required, from a calling card to a circus poster. A third man, who came from the city Thursday morning, was to take charge of the job printing and assist in the newspaper work. Three girls also arrived, pale-faced, sad-eyed creatures, who were expert typesetters. Uncle John arranged with Mrs. Kebble, the landlady at the hotel, to board all the "help" at moderate charge.

It had been decided, after much consultation, to make the Tribune a morning paper. At first it was feared this would result in keeping the girls up nights, but it was finally arranged that all the copy they furnished would be turned in by nine o'clock, and Miss Briggs, the telegraph editor, would attend to anything further that came in over the wires. The advantages of a morning edition were obvious.

"You'll have all day to distribute a morning paper," Arthur pointed out, "whereas an evening paper couldn't get to your scattered subscribers until the next morning."

Miss Briggs, upon whom they were to rely so greatly, proved to be a woman of tremendous energy and undoubted ability. She was thirty-five years of age and had been engaged in newspaper work ever since she was eighteen. Bright and cheerful, of even temper and shrewd comprehension, Miss Briggs listened to the eager explanations of the three girls who had undertaken this queer venture, and assured them she would assist in making a newspaper that would be a credit to them all. She understood clearly the conditions; that inexperience was backed by ample capital and unpractical ideas by unlimited enthusiasm.

"This job may not last long," she told herself, "but while it does it will be mighty amusing. I shall enjoy these weeks in a quiet country town after the bustle of the big city."

So here were seven regular employees of the Millville Daily Tribune already secured and the eighth was shortly to appear. Preparations were well under way for a first edition on the Fourth of July and the office was beginning to hum with work, when one afternoon a girl strolled in and asked in a tired voice for the managing editor.

She was admitted to Patsy's private room, where Beth and Louise were also sitting, and they looked upon their visitor in undisguised astonishment.

She was young; perhaps not over twenty years of age. Her face bore marks of considerable dissipation and there was a broad scar underneath her right eye. Her hair was thin, straggling and tow-colored; her eyes large, deep-set and of a faded blue. The girl's dress was as queer and untidy as her personal appearance, for she wore a brown tailored coat, a short skirt and long, buttoned leggings. A round cap of the same material as her dress was set jauntily on the back of her head, and over her shoulder was slung a fiat satchel of worn leather. There was little that was feminine and less that was attractive about the young woman, and Patsy eyed her with distinct disfavor.

"Tommy sent me here," said the newcomer, sinking wearily into a chair. "I'm hired for a month, on good behavior, with a chance to stay on if I conduct myself in a ladylike manner. I've been working on the Herald, you know; but there was no end of a row last week, and they fired me bodily. Any booze for sale in this town?"

"It is a temperance community," answered Patsy, stiffly.

"Hooray for me. There's a chance I'll keep sober. In that case you've acquired the best sketch artist in America."

"Oh! Are you the artist, then?" asked Patsy, with doubtful intonation.

"I don't like the word. I'm not a real artist--just a cartoonist and newspaper hack. Say, it's funny to see me in this jungle, isn't it? What joy I'll have in astonishing the natives! I s'pose a picture's a picture, to them, and Art an impenetrable mystery. What sort of stuff do you want me to turn out?"

"I--I'm not sure you'll do," said Miss Doyle, desperately. "I--we--that is--we are three quite respectable young women who have under-taken to edit the Millville Daily Tribune, and the people we have secured to assist us are all--all quite desirable, in their way. So--; ahem!--so--"

"That's all right," remarked the artist composedly. "I don't know that I blame you. I can see very well the atmosphere is not my atmosphere. When is the next train back to New York?"

"At four o'clock, I believe."

"I'll engage a nice upholstered seat in the smoking car. But I've several hours to loaf, and loafing is my best stunt. Isn't this a queer start for girls like you?" looking around the "den" critically. "I wonder how you got the bug, and what'll come of it. It's so funny to see a newspaper office where everything is brand new, and--eminently respectable. Do you mind my lighting a cigarette? This sort of a deal is quite interesting to an old-timer

like me; but perhaps I owe you an apology for intruding. I had a letter from Tommy and one from a big banker--Marvin, I guess his name is."

She drew two letters from her satchel and tossed them on the desk before Patsy.

"They're no good to me now," she added. "Where's your waste basket?"

The managing editor, feeling embarrassed by the presence of the artist, opened the letters. The first was from Mr. Marvin, Uncle John's banker, saying:

"After much negotiation I have secured for you the best newspaper illustrator in New York, and a girl, too, which is an added satisfaction. For months I have admired the cartoons signed 'Het' in the New York papers, for they were essentially clever and droll. Miss Hewitt is highly recommended but like most successful artists is not always to be relied upon. I'm told if you can manage to win her confidence she will be very loyal to you."

The other letter was from the editor of a great New York journal. "In giving you Hetty," he said, "I am parting with one of our strongest attractions, but in this big city the poor girl is rapidly drifting to perdition and I want to save her, if possible, before it is too late. She has a sweet, lovable nature, a generous heart and a keen intellect, but these have been so degraded by drink and dissipation that you may not readily discover them. My idea is that in a country town, away from all disreputable companionship, the child may find herself, and come to her own again. Be patient with her and help her all you can. Her wonderful talent will well repay you, even if you are not interested in saving one of God's creatures."

Silently Patsy passed the letters to Beth and Louise. After reading them there was a new expression on the faces they turned toward Hetty Hewitt.

"Forgive me," said Patsy, abruptly. "I--I think I misjudged you. I was wrong in saying what I did."

"No; you were quite right." She sat with downcast eyes a moment, musing deeply. Then she looked up with a smile that quite glorified her wan face. "I'd like to stay, you know," she said humbly. "I'm facing a crisis, just now, and on the whole I'd rather straighten up. If you feel like giving me a chance I--I'd like to see if I've any reserve force or whether the decency in me has all evaporated."

"We'll try you; and I'm sure you have lots of reserve force, Hetty," cried Patsy, jumping up impulsively to take the artist's soiled, thin hand in her

own. "Come with me to the hotel and I'll get you a room. Where is your baggage?"

"Didn't bring it. I wasn't sure I'd like the country, or that you'd care to trust me. In New York they know me for what I'm worth, and I get lots of work and good advice--mixed with curses."

"We'll send for your trunk," said Patsy, leading the girl up the street.

"No; it's in hock. But I won't need it. With no booze to buy I can invest my earnings in wearing apparel. What a picturesque place this is! Way back in the primitive; no hint of those namby-pamby green meadows and set rows of shade trees that make most country towns detestable; rocks and boulders--boulders and rocks--and the scraggly pines for background. The wee brook has gone crazy. What do you call it?"

"Little Bill Creek."

"I'm going to stab it with my pencil. Where it bumps the rocks it's obstinate and pig-headed; where it leaps the little shelves of slate it's merry and playful; where it sweeps silently between the curving banks it is sulky and resentful. The Little Bill has moods, bless its heart! Moods betoken character."

Patsy secured for Hetty a pleasant room facing the creek.

"Where will you work, at the office or here?" she asked.

"In the open, I guess. I'll run over the telegraph news to get a subject for the day's cartoon, and then take to the woods. Let me know what other pictures you want and I'll do 'em on the run. I'm a beast to work."

Arthur Weldon, in his capacity as advertising manager, wrote to all the national advertisers asking their patronage for the Millville Daily Tribune. The letters were typewritten by the office stenographer on newly printed letterheads that Fitzgerald, the job printer, had prepared. Some of the advertisers were interested enough in Arthur's novel proposition to reply with questions as to the circulation of the new paper, where it was distributed, and the advertising rates. The voting man answered frankly that they had 27 subscribers already and were going to distribute 400 free copies every day, for a time, as samples, with the hope of increasing the subscription list. "I am not sure you will derive any benefit at all from advertising in our paper," he added; "but we would like to have you try it, and you can pay us whatever you consider the results warrant."

To his astonishment the advertisements arrived, a great many from very prominent firms, who accepted his proposal with amusement at his originality and a desire to help the new venture along.

"Our square statement of facts has given us a good start," he told the girls. "I'm really amazed at our success, and it's up to you to make a paper that will circulate and make trade for these trustful advertisers."

With the local merchants the results were less satisfying. Bob West put in a card advertising his hardware business and Nib Corkins cautiously invested a half dollar to promote his drug store and stock of tarnished cheap jewelry; but Sam Cotting said everybody knew what he had for sale and advertising wouldn't help him any. Arthur drove to Huntingdon with Louise and while the society editor picked up items her husband interviewed the merchants. The Huntingdon people were more interested in the new paper than the Millville folk, and Arthur quoted such low prices that several advertisements were secured. Two bright boys of this thriving village were also employed to ride over to Millville each morning, get a supply of Tribunes and distribute a sample copy to every house in the neighborhood.

"Fitz" set up the "ads" in impressive type and the columns of the first edition began to fill up days before the Fourth of July arrived. Louise had a story and two poems set in type and read over the proofs dozens of times with much pride and satisfaction, while Beth prepared an article on the history of baseball and the probable future of our national game.

They did not see much of their artist during the first days following her arrival, but one afternoon she brought Patsy a sketch and asked:

"Who is this?"

Patsy glanced at it and laughed gleefully. It was Peggy McNutt, the fish-eyed pooh-bah of Millville, who was represented sitting on his front porch engaged in painting his wooden foot. This was one of McNutt's recognized amusements. He kept a supply of paints of many colors, and every few days appeared with his rudely carved wooden foot glistening with a new coat of paint and elaborately striped. Sometimes it would be blue with yellow stripes, then green with red stripes, and anon a lovely pink decorated with purple. One drawback to Peggy's delight in these transformations was the fact that it took the paint a night and a day to dry thoroughly, and during this period of waiting he would sit upon his porch with the wooden foot tenderly resting upon the rail--a helpless prisoner.

"Some folks," he would say, "likes pretty neckties; an' some wears fancy socks; but fer my part I'd ruther show a han'some foot ner anything. It don't cost as much as wearin' socks an' neckties, an' it's more artistic like."

Hetty had caught the village character in the act of striping the wooden foot, and his expression of intense interest in the operation was so original, and the likeness so perfect, from the string suspenders and flannel shirt to the antiquated straw hat and faded and patched overalls, that no one would be likely to mistake the subject. The sketch was entitled "The Village Artist," and Patsy declared they would run it on an inside page, just to make the Millville people aware of the "power of the press." Larry made an etching of it and mounted the plate for a double column picture. The original sketch Patsy decided to have framed and to hang it in her office.

CHAPTER VIII - THE MILLVILLE DAILY TRIBUNE

The first edition of the Millville Daily Tribune certainly proved it to be a wonderful newspaper. The telegraphic news of the world's doings, received and edited by the skillful Miss Briggs, was equal to that of any metropolitan journal; the first page cartoon, referring to the outbreak of a rebellion in China, was clever and humorous enough to delight anyone; but the local news and "literary page" were woefully amateurish and smacked of the schoolgirl editors who had prepared them. Perhaps the Chazy County people did not recognize these deficiencies, for the new paper certainly created a vast amount of excitement and won the praise of nearly all who read it.

On the eventful night of the Tribune's "first run" our girls were too eager to go home and await its appearance, so they remained at the office to see the birth of their enterprise, and as it was the night preceding the Fourth of July Uncle John gave an exhibition of fireworks in front of the newspaper office, to the delight of the entire population.

The girl journalists, however, were not so greatly interested in fireworks as in the birth of their fascinating enterprise. Wearing long gingham aprons they hovered over the big table where the forms were being locked up, and watched anxiously every movement of the workmen. It was exceedingly interesting to note how a column of the first page was left open until the last, so that copy "hot from the wire" of the very latest news might be added before going to press. Finally, at exactly two o'clock, the forms were locked, placed upon the bed of the press, and McGaffey, a sour-faced individual whose chief recommendation was his ability as a pressman, began to make ready for the "run."

Outside the brilliantly lighted windows, which were left open for air, congregated a wondering group of the Millville people, many of whom had never been up so late before in all their lives. But the event was too important to miss. The huge, complicated press had already inspired their awe, and they were eager to "see it work" as it printed the new paper.

The girls tolerated this native curiosity with indulgent good humor and at midnight even passed out sandwiches to the crowd, a supply having been secured for the workmen. These were accepted silently, and as they munched the food all kept their eyes fixed upon the magicians within.

There was a hitch somewhere; McGaffey muttered naughty words under his breath and plied wrenches and screwdrivers in a way that brought a thrill of anxiety, approaching fear, to every heart. The press started half a dozen times, only to be shut down abruptly before it had printed a single

impression. McGaffey counseled with Larry, who shook his head. Fitzgerald, the job printer, examined the machinery carefully and again McGaffey screwed nuts and regulated the press. Then he turned on the power; the big cylinder revolved; the white paper reeled out like a long ribbon and with a rattle and thump the first copy of the Millville Daily Tribune was deposited, cut and folded, upon the table placed to receive it. Patsy made a rush for it, but before she could reach the table half a dozen more papers had been piled above it, and gathering speed the great press hummed busily and the pile of Tribunes grew as if by magic.

Patsy grabbed the first dozen and handed them to Beth, for they were to be reserved as souvenirs. Then, running back to the table, she seized a bunch and began distributing them to the watchers outside the window. The natives accepted them eagerly enough, but could not withdraw their eyes from the marvelous press, which seemed to possess intelligence almost human.

Each of the three girl journalists now had a copy in hand, scanning it with boundless pride and satisfaction. It realized completely their fondest hopes and they had good cause to rejoice.

Then Uncle John, who ought to have been in bed and sound asleep at this uncanny hour of night, came bouncing in, accompanied by Arthur Weldon. Each made a dive for a paper and each face wore an expression of genuine delight. The roar of the press made conversation difficult, but Mr. Merrick caught his nieces in his arms, by turn, and gave each one an ecstatic hug and kiss.

Suddenly the press stopped.

"What's wrong, McGaffey?" demanded Patsy, anxiously.

"Nothing, miss. Edition off, that's all."

"What! the entire four hundred are printed?"

"Four twenty-five. I run a few extrys."

And now a shriek of laughter came from the windows as the villagers, slowly opening the papers they held, came upon the caricature of Peggy McNutt. The subject of the cartoon had, with his usual aggressiveness, secured the best "standing room" available, and his contemplative, protruding eyes were yet fixed upon the interior of the workroom. But now, his curiosity aroused, he looked at the paper to see what his neighbors were laughing at, and his expression of wonder slowly changed to a broad grin. He straightened up, looked triumphantly around the circle and exclaimed:

"By gum, folks, this 'ere paper's going to be a go! I didn't take no stock in it till now, but them fool gals seem to know their business, an' I'll back 'em to the last ditch!"

CHAPTER IX - TROUBLE

Of course the girls exhausted their store of "effusions" on the first two or three papers. A daily eats up "copy" very fast and the need to supply so much material began to bewilder the budding journalists. There was not sufficient local news to keep them going, but fortunately the New York news service supplied more general news than they could possibly use, and, besides, Mr. Marvin, foreseeing this dilemma, had sent on several long, stout boxes filled with "plate matter," which meant that a variety of stories, poems, special articles and paragraphs of every sort had been made into stereotyped plates of column width which could be placed anywhere in the paper where a space needed to be filled. This material, having been prepared by skilled writers, was of excellent character, so that the paper gained in its class of contents as the girlish contributions began to be replaced by "plates." The nieces did not abandon writing, however, and all three worked sedulously to prepare copy so that at least one column of the Tribune each day was filled with notes from their pens.

Subscriptions came in freely during those first days, for farmers and villagers alike were proud of their local daily and the price was so low that no one begrudged the investment. But Uncle John well knew that if every individual in the county subscribed, and the advertising patronage doubled, the income would fall far short of running expenses.

Saturday night, when the pay roll had to be met, the girls consulted together seriously. In spite of the new subscriptions received, a deficiency must be supplied, and they quietly advanced the money from their private purses. This was no great hardship, for each had an ample allowance from Uncle John, as well as an income from property owned in her own name.

"It's only about thirty dollars apiece," said Patsy. "I guess we can stand that until--until more money begins coming in."

On Saturday evening there was an invasion of workmen from Royal, many of whom were rough foreigners who came to Millville in search of excitement, as a relief from their week's confinement at the pine woods settlement at the mill. Skeelty, who thought he knew how to manage these people, allowed every man, at the close of work on Saturday, to purchase a pint of whiskey from the company store, charging an exorbitant price that netted a huge profit. There was no strong drink to be had at Millville, so the workmen brought their bottles to town, carousing on the way, and thought it amusing

to frighten the simple inhabitants of the village by their rude shouts and ribald songs.

This annoyance had occurred several times since the establishment of the mill, and Bob West had protested vigorously to Mr. Skeelty for giving his men whiskey and turning them loose in a respectable community; but the manager merely grinned and said he must keep "the boys" satisfied at all hazards, and it was the business of the Millville people to protect themselves if the workmen became too boisterous.

On this Saturday evening the girls were standing on the sidewalk outside the printing office, awaiting the arrival of Arthur with the surrey, when a group of the Royal workmen appeared in the dim light, swaggering three abreast and indulging in offensive language. Uncle John's nieces withdrew to the protection of the doorway, but a big bearded fellow in a red shirt discovered them, and, lurching forward, pushed his evil countenance in Patsy's face, calling to his fellows in harsh tones that he had "found a partner for a dance."

An instant later he received a swinging blow above the ear that sent him sprawling at full length upon the sidewalk, and a quiet voice said:

"Pardon me, ladies; it seemed necessary."

All three at once recognized the supposed tramp whom they had seen the morning of their arrival, but whom Uncle John had reported to be one of the bookkeepers at the paper mill. The young fellow had no time to say more, for the downfall of their comrade brought a shout of rage from the group of workmen, numbering nearly a dozen, and with one accord they rushed upon the man who had dared champion the defenseless girls.

Beth managed to open the door of the office, through which Patsy and Louise slipped instantly, but the younger girl, always cool in emergencies, held the door ajar while she cried to the young man:

"Quick, sir--come inside!"

Really, he had no time to obey, just then. With his back to the door he drove his fists at his assailants in a dogged, persistent way that felled three more of them before the others drew away from his stalwart bows. By that time Larry and Fitzgerald, who had been summoned by Louise, rushed from the office armed with iron bars caught up at random, both eager for a fight. The workmen, seeing the reinforcements, beat a retreat, carrying their sadly pommelled comrades with them, but their insulting language was not restricted until they had passed out of hearing.

Then the young man turned, bowed gravely to the girls, who had now ventured forth again, and without waiting to receive their thanks marched calmly down the street.

When Arthur reached home with the girls, Mr. Merrick was very indignant at his report of the adventure. He denounced Skeelty in unmeasured terms and declared he would find a way to protect Millville from further invasion by these rough and drunken workmen.

There was no Sunday paper, so the girlish editors found the morrow a veritable day of rest. They all drove to Hooker's Falls to church and returned to find that old Nora had prepared a fine chicken dinner for them. Patsy had invited Hetty Hewitt, in whom she was now greatly interested, to dine with them, and to the astonishment of all the artist walked over to the farm arrayed in a new gown, having discarded the disreputable costume in which she had formerly appeared. The new dress was not in the best of taste and its loud checks made dainty Louise shudder, but somehow Hetty seemed far more feminine than before, and she had, moreover, washed herself carefully and tried to arrange her rebellious hair.

"This place is doing me good," she confided to her girl employers, after dinner, when they were seated in a group upon the lawn. "I'm getting over my nervousness, and although I haven't drank a drop stronger than water since I arrived. I feel a new sort of energy coursing through my veins. Also I eat like a trooper--not at night, as I used to, but at regular mealtime. And I'm behaving quite like a lady. Do you know, I wouldn't be surprised to find it just as amusing to be respectable as to--to be--the other thing?"

"You will find it far more satisfactory, I'm sure," replied Patsy encouragingly. "What most surprises me is that with your talent and education you ever got into such bad ways."

"Environment," said Hetty. "That's what did it. When I first went to New York I was very young. A newspaper man took me out to dinner and asked me to have a cocktail. I looked around the tables and saw other girls drinking cocktails, so I took one. That was where I turned into the rocky road. People get careless around the newspaper offices. They work under a constant nervous strain and find that drink steadies them--for a time. By and by they disappear; others take their places, and they are never heard of again except in the police courts. I knew a girl, society editor of a big paper, who drew her five thousand a year, at one time. She got the cocktail habit and a week or so ago I paid her fine for getting pinched while intoxicated. She was in rags and hadn't a red cent. That set me thinking, and when Tommy fired me from his paper and said the best he could do was to get me a job in the country, it seemed as if my chance to turn over a new leaf had arrived. I've turned it,"

she added, with a pathetic sigh; "but whether it'll stay turned, or not, is a question for the puzzle page."

"Haven't you a family to look after you--or for you to look after?" asked Beth.

"No. Brother and I were left orphans in a Connecticut town, and he went out West, to Chicago, and promised to send for me. Must have forgot that promise, I guess, for I've never heard of Dan since. I could draw pictures, so I went to New York and found a job. Guess that's my biography, and it isn't as interesting as one of Hearst's editorials, either."

Hetty seemed pleased and grateful to note the frank friendliness of her girlish employers, in whom she recognized the admirable qualities she had personally sacrificed for a life of dissipation. In the privacy of her room at the hotel she had read the first copy of the Millville Tribune and shrieked with laughter at the ingenuous editorials and schoolgirl essays. Then she grew sober and thoughtful, envying in her heart the sweetness and simplicity so apparent in every line. Here were girls who possessed something infinitely higher than journalistic acumen; they were true women, with genuine womanly qualities and natures that betrayed their worth at a glance, as do ingots of refined gold. What would not this waif from the grim underworld of New York have given for such clear eyes, pure mind and unsullied heart? "I don't know as I can ever swim in their pond," Hetty reflected, with honest regret, "but there's a chance I can look folks square in the eye again--and that wouldn't be so bad."

Monday morning, when Patsy, Louise and Beth drove to their office, Miss Briggs said nonchalantly:

"McGaffey's gone."

"Gone! Gone where?" asked Patsy.

"Back to New York. Caught a freight from the Junction Saturday night."

"Isn't he coming back?" inquired Beth.

"Here's a letter he left," said Miss Briggs.

They read it together. It was very brief; "Climate don't suit me. No excitement. I've quit. McGaffey."

"I suppose," said Patsy, with indignation, "he intended to go, all the while, and only waited for his Saturday pay."

Miss Briggs nodded. She was at the telegraph instrument.

"What shall we do?" asked Louise. "Can anyone else work the press?"

"I'll find out," said Patsy, marching into the workroom.

Neither Fitz nor Larry would undertake to run the press. They said the machine was so complicated it required an expert, and unless an experienced pressman could be secured the paper must suspend publication.

Here was an unexpected dilemma; one that for a time dazed them.

"These things always happen in the newspaper business," remarked Miss Briggs, when appealed to. "Can't you telegraph to New York for another pressman?"

"Yes; but he can't get here in time," said Patsy. "There's no Monday train to Chazy Junction, at all, and it would be Wednesday morning before a man could possibly arrive. To shut down the paper would ruin it, for everyone would think we had failed in our attempt and it might take us weeks to regain public confidence."

"I know," said Miss Briggs, composedly. "A paper never stops. Somehow or other it always keeps going--even if the world turns somersaults and stands on its head. You'll find a way, I'm sure."

But the bewildered girls had no such confidence. They drove back to the farm to consult with Uncle John and Arthur.

"Let's take a look at that press, my dears," said Mr. Merrick. "I'm something of a mechanic myself, or was in my young days, and I may be able to work this thing until we can get a new pressman."

"I'll help you," said Arthur. "Anyone who can run an automobile ought to be able to manage a printing press."

So they went to the office, took off their coats and examined the press; but the big machine defied their combined intelligence. Uncle John turned on the power. The cylinder groaned, swung half around, and then the huge wooden "nippers" came down upon the table with a force that shattered them to kindlings. At the crash Mr. Merrick involuntarily shut down the machine, and then they all stood around and looked gloomily at the smash-up and wondered if the damage was irreparable.

"Couldn't we print the paper on the job press?" asked the little millionaire, turning to Fitzgerald.

"In sections, sir," replied Fitz, grinning. "Half a page at a time is all we can manage, but we might be able to match margins so the thing could be read."

"We'll try it," said Uncle John. "Do your best, my man, and if you can help us out of this bog you shall be amply rewarded."

Fitz looked grave.

"Never knew of such a thing being done, sir," he remarked; "but that's no reason it's impossible."

"'Twill be a horror of a make-up," added Larry, who did not relish his part in the experiment.

Uncle John put on his coat and went into the front office, followed by Arthur and the girls in dismal procession.

"A man to see the manager," announced Miss Briggs, nodding toward a quiet figure seated on the "waiting bench."

The man stood up and bowed. It was the young bookkeeper from the paper mill, who had so bravely defended the girls on Saturday night. Uncle John regarded him with a frown.

"I suppose Skeelty has sent you to apologize," he said.

"No, sir; Skeelty is not in an apologetic mood," replied the man, smiling. "He has fired me."

"What for?"

"Interfering with his workmen. The boys didn't like what I did the other night and threatened to strike unless I was put in the discard."

"And now?" asked Uncle John, looking curiously at the man.

"I'm out of work and would like a job, sir."

"What can you do?"

"Anything."

"That means nothing at all."

"I beg your pardon. Let me say that I'm not afraid to tackle anything."

"Can you run a power printing press?"

"Yes, sir."

"Ever had any experience?"

The young man hesitated.

"I'm not sure," he replied slowly; "but I think I have."

This statement would not have been encouraging under ordinary circumstances, but in this emergency Uncle John accepted it.

"What is your name?" he asked.

Another moment's hesitation.

"Call me Smith, please."

"First name?"

The man smiled.

"Thursday," he said.

All his hearers seemed astonished at this peculiar name, but Mr. Merrick said abruptly: "Follow me, Thursday Smith."

The man obeyed, and the girls and Arthur trotted after them back to the pressroom.

"Our pressman has deserted us without warning," explained Mr. Merrick. "None of our other employees is able to run the thing. If you can master it so as to run off the paper tonight, the job is yours."

Thursday Smith took off his jacket--a cheap khaki affair--and rolled up his sleeves. Then he carefully looked over the press and found the damaged nippers. Without a word he picked up a wrench, released the stub ends of the broken fingers, gathered the pieces in his hand and asked: "Where is there a carpenter shop?"

"Can you operate this press?" asked Mr. Merrick.

"Yes, sir."

"The carpenter shop is a little shanty back of the hotel. You'll find Lon Taft there."

Smith walked away, and Mr. Merrick drew a long breath of relief.

"That's good luck," he said. "You may quit worrying, now, my dears."

"Are you sure he's a good pressman, Uncle?"

"No; but he is sure. I've an idea he wouldn't attempt the thing, otherwise."

Mr. Merrick returned to the farm, while Arthur drove Louise over to Huntingdon to gather items for the paper, and Patsy and Beth sat in the office arranging copy.

In an hour Smith came back with new nippers, which he fitted to the steel frame. Then he oiled the press, started it going a few revolutions, to test its condition, and handled the machinery so dexterously and with such evident confidence that Larry nodded to Fitz and muttered, "He'll do."

McGaffey, knowing he was about to decamp, had not kept the press very clean; but Thursday Smith put in the afternoon and evening removing grease, polishing and rubbing, until the huge machine shone resplendent. The girls went home at dinner time, but they sent Arthur to the office at midnight to see if the new pressman was proving capable. The Tuesday morning Tribune greeted them at the breakfast table, and the presswork was remarkably clean and distinct.

CHAPTER X - THURSDAY SMITH

In a day or so Mr. Merrick received a letter from Mr. Skeelty, the manager of the paper mill. He said: "I understand you have employed one of my discharged workmen, who is named Thursday Smith. My men don't want him in this neighborhood, and have made a strong protest. I therefore desire you to discharge the fellow at once, and in case you refuse to accede to this reasonable demand I shall shut off your power."

Mr. Merrick replied: "Shut off the power and I'll sue you for damages. My contract with you fully protects me. Permit me a request in turn: that you mind your own business. The Millville Tribune will employ whomsoever it chooses."

Uncle John said nothing to the girls concerning this correspondence, nor did he mention it to the new pressman.

On Wednesday Larry and Fitz sent in their "resignations," to take effect Saturday night. They told Patsy, who promptly interviewed them, that the town was altogether too slow for men accustomed to the city, but to Smith they admitted they feared trouble from the men at the mill.

"I talked with one of the mill hands last night," said Larry, "and they're up to mischief. If you stay here, my boy, you'd better watch out, for it's you they're after, in the first place, and Skeelty has told 'em he wouldn't be annoyed if they wiped out the whole newspaper plant at the same time."

Thursday nodded but said nothing. He began watching the work of the two men with comprehensive care. When Mr. Merrick came down to the office during the forenoon to consult with his nieces about replacing the two men who had resigned, Smith asked him for a private interview.

"Come into the office," said Uncle John.

When the man found the three girl journalists present he hesitated, but Mr. Merrick declared they were the ones most interested in anything an employee of the paper might have to say to his principals.

"I am told, sir," Thursday began, "that the people at the mill have boycotted this paper."

"They've cancelled all their subscriptions," replied Beth; "but as they had not paid for them it won't hurt us any."

"It seems the trouble started through your employing me," resumed the young man; "so it will be best for you to let me go."

"Never!" cried Mr. Merrick, firmly. "Do you suppose I'll allow that rascal Skeelty to dictate to us for a single minute? Not by a jug full! And the reason the men dislike you is because you pounded some of them unmercifully when they annoyed my girls. Where did you learn to use your fists so cleverly, Smith?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Well, you have earned our gratitude, and we're going to stand by you. I don't mind a bit of a row, when I'm on the right side of an argument. Do you?"

"Not at all, sir; but the young ladies--"

"They're pretty good fighters, too; so don't worry."

Thursday was silent a moment. Then he said:

"Fitzgerald and Doane tell me they're going to quit, Saturday."

"It is true," replied Patsy. "I'm sorry, for they seem good men and we may have trouble replacing them."

"They are not needed here, Miss Doyle," said Smith. "There isn't a great deal of electrotyping to do, or much job printing. More than half the time the two men are idle. It's the same way with my own job. Three hours a day will take care of the press and make the regular run. If you will permit me, I am sure I can attend to all the work, unaided."

They looked at one another in amazement.

"How about the make-up?" asked Uncle John.

"I can manage that easily, sir. I've been watching the operation and understand it perfectly."

"And you believe you can do the work of three men?"

"Three men were unnecessary in a small plant like this, sir. Whoever sent them to you did not understand very well your requirements. I've been watching the compositors, too, and your three girls are one too many. Two are sisters, and can set all the type very easily. I recommend that you send the other back to New York."

They considered this advice seriously.

"I think Mr. Smith is right," observed Patsy. "The girls have not seemed busy, at all, and spend most of their time laughing and talking together."

"It will cut down expenses a lot," said Beth, "and I'm sure we ought to be able to run this paper more economically than we have been doing."

Uncle John looked at the man thoughtfully.

"Where did you learn the printing business?" he asked.

"I--I don't know, sir."

"What offices have you worked in?"

"I cannot tell you that, sir."

"You seem to answer all my questions with the statement that you 'don't know,'" asserted Mr. Merrick, with an annoyed frown. "Is there any reason you should refuse to tell us of your former life?"

"None whatever, sir."

"Who are you, Smith?"

"I--I don't know, sir."

Mr. Merrick was getting provoked.

"This obstinacy is not likely to win our confidence," he said. "Under the circumstances I think we ought to know something more about you, before we allow you to undertake so much responsibility. You seem a bright, able young man, and I've no doubt you understand the work you're about to undertake, but if we have no knowledge of your antecedents you may cause us considerable future trouble."

Smith bowed his head and his cheeks flamed red.

"I have no knowledge of my antecedents to confide to you, sir," he said in a low voice.

Uncle John sighed regretfully and turned away, but Patsy looked at the man with new interest.

"Won't you please explain that a little more fully?" she gently inquired.

"I am quite willing to tell all I know," said he; "but that is very little, I assure you. Two years ago last May, on the morning of Thursday, the twenty-second, I awoke to find myself lying in a ditch beside a road. Of my life previous to that time I have no knowledge whatever."

The three girls regarded him with startled eyes. Uncle John turned from the window to examine the young man with new interest.

"Were you injured?" he asked.

"My right ankle was sprained and I had a cut under my left eye--you can see the scar still."

"You have no idea how you came there?"

"Not the slightest. I did not recognize the surrounding country; I had no clear impression as to who I was. There was a farmhouse a quarter of a mile away; I limped to it and they gave me some breakfast. I found I was fifty-six miles from New York. The farmer had heard of no accident; there was no railway nearer than six miles; the highway was little used. I told the good people my story and they suspected me of being drunk or crazy, but did not credit a single word I said."

"That was but natural," said Uncle John.

"After breakfast I took stock of myself. In my pockets I found a twenty-dollar bill and some silver. I wore a watch and chain and a ring set with a good-sized diamond. My clothing seemed good, but the ditch had soiled it. I had no hat, nor could the farmer find one when I sent him back to look for it. My mind was not wholly a blank; I seemed to have a fair knowledge of life, and when the farmer mentioned New York the city seemed familiar to me. But in regard to myself, my past history--even my name--I was totally ignorant. All personal consciousness dated from the moment I woke up in the ditch."

"How wonderful!" exclaimed Louise.

"And you haven't solved the mystery yet, after two years?" asked Patsy.

"No, Miss Doyle. I hired the farmer to drive me to the railway station, where I took the train to New York. I seemed to know the city, but no recollection guided me to home or friends. I went to a small hotel, took a room, and began to read all the newspapers, seeking to discover if anyone was reported missing. The sight of automobiles led me to conceive the theory that I had been riding in one of those machines along a country road when something threw me out. My head might have struck a stump or stone and the blow rendered me insensible. Something in the nature of the thing, or in my physical condition, deprived me of all knowledge of the past. Since then I have read of several similar cases. The curious thing about my own experience was that I could find no reference to my disappearance, in any way, nor could I learn of any automobile accident that might account for it. I walked the streets day after day, hoping some acquaintance would accost

me. I waited patiently for some impulse to direct me to my former haunts. I searched the newspapers persistently for a clue; but nothing rewarded me.

"After spending all my money and the proceeds of my watch and diamond, I began to seek employment; but no one would employ a man without recommendations or antecedents. I did not know what work I was capable of doing. So finally I left the city and for more than two years I have been wandering from one part of the country to another, hoping that some day I would recognize a familiar spot. I have done odd jobs, at times, but my fortunes went from bad to worse until of late I have become no better than the typical tramp."

"How did you secure employment as a book-keeper for Skeelty?" asked Uncle John.

"I heard a new mill had started at Royal and walked up there to inquire for work. The manager asked if I could keep books, and I said yes."

"Have you ever kept books before?"

"Not that I know of; but I did it very well. I seemed to comprehend the work at once, and needed no instruction. Often during these two years I have encountered similar curious conditions. I sold goods in a store and seemed to know the stocks; I worked two weeks in a telegraph office and discovered I knew the code perfectly; I've shod horses for a country blacksmith, wired a house for electric lights and compounded prescriptions in a drug store. Whatever I have undertaken to do I seem able to accomplish, and so it is hard for me to guess what profession I followed before my memory deserted me."

"You did not retain any position for long, it seems," remarked Uncle John.

"No; I was always impatient to move on, always hoping to arrive at some place so familiar that my lost memory would return to me. The work I have mentioned was nearly all secured during the first year. After I became seedy and disreputable in appearance people were more apt to suspect me and work was harder to obtain."

"Why did you come to Millville?" asked Louise.

"You brought me here," he answered, with a smile. "I caught a ride on your private car, when it left New York, not caring much where it might take me. When I woke up the next morning the car was sidetracked at Chazy Junction, and as this is a section I have never before explored I decided to stay here for a time. That is all of my story, I believe."

"Quite remarkable!" declared Mr. Merrick, emphatically. The girls, too, had been intensely interested in the strange recital.

"You seem educated," said Patsy thoughtfully; "therefore you must have come from a good family."

"That does not seem conclusive," replied Thursday Smith, deprecatingly, "although I naturally hope my family was respectable. I have been inclined to resent the fact that none of my friends or relatives has ever inquired what became of me."

"Are you sure they have not?"

"I have watched the papers carefully. In two years I have followed several clues. A bricklayer disappeared, but his drowned body was finally found; a college professor was missing, but he was sixty years of age; a young man in New York embezzled a large sum and hid himself. I followed that trail, although regretfully, but the real embezzler was caught the day I presented myself in his place. Perhaps the most curious experience was in the case of a young husband who deserted his wife and infant child. She advertised for him; he had disappeared about the time I had found myself; so I went to see her."

"What was the result?" asked Beth.

"She said I was not her husband, but if he failed to come back I might take his place, provided I would guarantee to support her."

During the laugh that followed, Thursday Smith went back to his work and an animated discussion concerning his strange story followed.

"He seems honest," said Louise, "but I blame a man of his ability for becoming a mere tramp. He ought to have asserted himself and maintained the position in which he first found himself."

"How?" inquired Patsy.

"At that time he was well dressed and had a watch and diamond ring. If he had gone to some one and frankly told his story he could surely have obtained a position to correspond with his personality. But instead of this he wasted his time and the little capital he possessed in doing nothing that was sensible."

"It is easy for us to criticise the man," remarked Beth, "and he may be sorry, now, that he did not act differently. But I think, in his place, I should have made the same attempt he did to unravel the mystery of his lost identity. So much depended upon that."

"It's all very odd and incomprehensible," said Uncle John. "I wonder who he can be."

"I suppose he calls himself Thursday because that was the day he first found himself," observed Patsy.

"Yes; and Smith was the commonest name he could think of to go with it. The most surprising thing," added their uncle, "is the fact that a man of his standing was not missed or sought for."

"Perhaps," suggested Louise, "he had been insane and escaped from some asylum."

"Then how did he come to be lying in a ditch?" questioned Patsy; "and wouldn't an escaped maniac be promptly hunted down and captured?"

"I think so," agreed Mr. Merrick. "For my part, I'm inclined to accept the man's theory that it was an automobile accident."

"Then what became of the car, or of the others in it?"

"It's no use," said Beth, shaking her head gravely. "If Thursday Smith, who is an intelligent young man, couldn't solve the mystery himself, it isn't likely we can do so."

"We know as much as he does, as far as that is concerned," said Patsy, "and our combined intelligence ought at least to equal his. I'm sorry for the poor man, and wish we might help him to come to his own again."

They all agreed to this sentiment and while the girls attended to their editorial duties they had the amazing story of Thursday Smith uppermost in their minds. When the last copy had been placed in the hands of Miss Briggs and they were driving to the farm--at a little after six o'clock--they renewed the interesting discussion.

Just before reaching the farm Hetty Hewitt came out of the wood just in front of them. She was clothed in her short skirt and leggings and bore a fishing rod and a creel.

"What luck?" asked Patsy, stopping the horse.

"Seven trout," answered the artist. "I might have caught more, but the poor little creatures squirmed and struggled so desperately that I hadn't the heart to destroy any more of them. Won't you take them home for Mr. Merrick's breakfast?"

Patsy looked at the girl musingly.

"Jump in, Hetty," she said; "I'm going to take you with us for the night. The day's fishing has tired you; there are deep circles under your eyes; and that stuffy old hotel isn't home-like. Jump in."

Hetty flushed with pleasure, but hesitated to accept the invitation.

"I--I'm not dressed for--"

"You're all right," said Beth, supporting her cousin's proposition. "We'll lend you anything you need."

"Do come, Miss Hewitt," added Louise.

Hetty sighed, then smiled and finally climbed into the surrey.

"In New York," she said, as they started on, "I've sometimes hobnobbed with editors; but this is somewhat different."

"In what way?" asked Patsy casually.

"You're not real journalists, you know, and--"

"Why aren't we journalists?" asked Louise.

For a moment Hetty was puzzled how to reply.

"You are doing very good editorial work," she said mendaciously, "but, after all, you are only playing at journalism. The real journalist--as I know him--is a Bohemian; a font of cleverness running to waste; a reckless, tender-hearted, jolly, careless ne'er-do-well who works like a Trojan and plays like a child. He is very sophisticated at his desk and very artless when he dives into the underworld for rest and recreation. He lives at high tension, scintillates, burns his red fire without discrimination and is shortly extinguished. You are not like that. You can't even sympathize with that sort of person. But I can, for I'm cut from a remnant of the same cloth."

"Scintillate all you want to, Hetty," cried Patsy with a laugh; "but you're not going to be extinguished. For we, the imitation journalists, have taken you under our wings. There's no underworld at Millville, and the only excitement we can furnish just now is a night with us at the old farm."

"That," replied Hetty, "is indeed a real excitement. You can't quite understand it, perhaps; but it's so--so very different from what I'm accustomed to."

Uncle John welcomed the girl artist cordially and under his hospitable roof the waif soon felt at ease. At dinner the conversation turned upon Thursday Smith and his peculiar experience. Beth asked Hetty if she knew the man.

"Yes," replied the girl; "I've seen him at the office and we've exchanged a word or two. But he boards with Thorne, the liveryman, and not at the hotel."

"You have never seen him before you met him here?"

"Never."

"I wonder," said Louise musingly, "if he is quite right in his mind. All this story may be an hallucination, you know."

"He's a very clever fellow," asserted Hetty, "and such a loss of memory is by no means so uncommon as you think. Our brains are queer things--mine is, I know--and it doesn't take much to throw their machinery out of gear. Once I knew a reporter who was worried and over-worked. He came to the office one morning and said he was George Washington, the Commander of the Continental Army. In all other ways he was sane enough, and we humored him and called him 'General.' At the end of three months the idea quit him as suddenly as it had come on, and he was not only normal but greatly restored in strength of intellect through the experience. Perhaps some of the overworked brain cells had taken a rest and renewed their energy. It would not surprise me if some day Thursday Smith suddenly remembered who he was."

[Footnote: This anecdote is true.--Author.]

"In the meantime," said Uncle John, "I'm going to make an effort to discover his identity."

"In what way, Uncle?" asked Patsy.

"I'll set Fogerty, who is a clever detective, at work. No man can disappear from his customary haunts without leaving some sort of a record behind him, and Fogerty may be able to uncover the mystery in a short time."

"Then we'll lose our pressman," declared Beth; "for I'm positive that Thursday Smith was a person of some importance in his past life."

CHAPTER XI - THE HONER'BLE OJOY BOGLIN

One morning while Patsy was alone in her office, busied over her work, the door softly opened and a curious looking individual stood before her.

He was thin in form, leathery skinned and somewhat past the middle age of life. His clothing consisted of a rusty black Prince Albert coat, rusty trousers to match, which were carefully creased, cowhide shoes brilliant with stove polish, a tall silk hat of antiquated design, and a frayed winged collar decorated with a black tie on which sparkled a large diamond attached to a chain. He had chin whiskers of a sandy gray color and small gray eyes that were both shrewd and suspicious in expression.

He stood in the doorway a moment, attentively eyeing the girl, while she in turn examined him with an amusement she could not quite suppress. Then he said, speaking in a low, diffident voice:

"I'm lookin' for the editor."

"I am the editor," asserted Patsy.

"Really?"

"It is quite true."

He seemed disconcerted a moment, striving to regain his assurance. Then he took out a well-worn pocketbook and from its depths abstracted a soiled card which, leaning forward, he placed carefully upon the table before Patsy. She glanced at it and read: "Hon. Ojoy Boglin, Hooker's Falls, Chazy County."

"Oh," said she, rather surprised; "are you Mr. Boglin?"

"I am the Honer'ble Ojoy Boglin, miss," he replied, dwelling lovingly upon the "Honer'ble."

"I have not had the honor of your acquaintance," said she, deciding she did not like her visitor. "What is your business, please?"

The Hon. Ojoy coughed. Then he suddenly remembered he was in the presence of a lady and took off his hat. Next he slid slowly into the vacant chair at the end of the table.

"First," he began, "I want to compliment you on your new paper. It's a good thing, and I like it. It's what's been needed in these 'ere parts a long time, and it's talked about all over Chazy County."

"Thank you," said the editor briefly, for the praise was given in a perfunctory way that irritated her.

"The only other papers in this senatorial deestric', which covers three counties," continued the visitor, in impressive tones, "air weeklies, run by political mud-slingers that's bought up by the Kleppish gang."

"What is the Kleppish gang?" she asked, wonderingly.

"The supporters o' that rascal, Colonel Kleppish, who has been occupyin' my berth for goin' on eight years," he said with fierce indignation.

"I fear I do not understand," remarked Patsy, really bewildered. "What was your berth, which Colonel Kleppish has--has usurped?"

"See that 'Honer'ble' on the card?"

"I do."

"That means I were senator--state senator--which makes any common man honer'ble, accordin' to law, which it's useless to dispute. I were elected fer this deestric', which covers three counties," he said proudly, "an' I served my country in that capacity."

"Oh, I see. But you're not state senator now?"

"No; Kleppish beat me for the nomination, after I'd served only one term."

"Why?"

"Eh? Why did he git the nomination? 'Cause he bought up the newspapers--the country weeklies--and set them to yellin' 'graft.' He made 'em say I went into office poor, and in two years made a fortune."

"Did you?" asked the girl.

He shuffled in his seat.

"I ain't used to talkin' politics with a girl," he admitted; "but seein' as you're the editor of this paper--a daily, by Jupel!--you've probably got a head on you and understand that a man don't get into office for his health. There's a lot of bother in servin' your country, and a man oughter be well paid for it. I did jest like the others do--like Kleppish is doin' right now--but the reg'lar voters don't understand politics, and when the howl went up about graft, backed

by Kleppish's bought-up newspapers, they turned me down cold. I've been eight years watchin' for a chance to get in again, an' now I've got it."

"This is very interesting, I'm sure," remarked Patsy; "but our paper doesn't go much into local politics, Mr. Boglin, and I'm very busy to-day."

"Honer'ble Ojoy Boglin," he said, correcting her; but he did not take the hint to leave.

Patsy picked up her pencil as if to resume her work, while he eyed her with a countenance baffled and uncertain. Presently he asked:

"Has Kleppish got this paper too?"

"No," she coldly replied.

"I thought I'd likely head him off, you being so new. See here, Editor--"

"I am Miss Doyle, sir."

"Glad to know you, Miss Doyle. What I was about to remark is this: The election for senator comes up agin in September and I want this paper to pull for me. Bein' as it's a daily it's got more power than all of Kleppish's weeklies put together, and if you work the campaign proper I'll win the nomination hands down. This is a strong Republican deestic', and to git nominated on the Republican ticket is the same as an election. So what I want is the nomination. What do you say?"

Patsy glared at him and decided that as far as appearances went he was not a fit candidate for any office, however humble. But she answered diplomatically:

"I will inquire into the condition of politics in this district, Mr. Boglin, and try to determine which candidate is the most deserving. Having reached a decision, the Millville Tribune will espouse the cause of the best man--if it mentions local politics at all."

The Hon. Ojoy gave a dissatisfied grunt.

"That means, in plain words," he suggested, "that you'll give Kleppish a chance to bid against me. But I need this paper, and I'm willin' to pay a big price for it. Let Kleppish go, and we'll make our dicker right now, on a lib'ral basis. It's the only way you can make your paper pay. I've got money, Miss Doyle. I own six farms near Hooker's Falls, which is in this county, and six hundred acres of good pine forest, and I'm director in the Bank of Huntingdon, with plenty of money out on interest. Also I own half the stock in the new paper mill at Royal--"

"You do?" she exclaimed. "I thought Mr. Skeelty--"

"Skeelty's the head man, of course," he said. "He came to me about the mill proposition and I went in with him. I own all the forest around Royal. Bein' manager, and knowin' the business, Skeelty stood out for fifty-one shares of stock, which is the controllin' interest; but I own all the rest, and the mill's makin' good money. People don't know I'm in that deal, and of course this is all confidential and not to be talked about."

"Very well, sir. But I fear you have mistaken the character of our paper," said Patsy quietly. "We are quite independent, Mr. Boglin, and intend to remain so--even if we can't make the paper pay. In other words, the Millville Daily Tribune can't be bought."

He stared in amazement; then scratched his ear with a puzzled air.

"Such talk as that means somethin'," he asserted, gropingly, "but what it means, blamed if I know! Newspapers never turn money down unless they're a'ready bought, or have got a grouch of their own.... Say!" he suddenly cried, as an inspiration struck him, "you ain't got anything agin the mill at Royal, or agin Skeelty, have you?"

"I have, sir!" declared Patsy, raising her head to frown discouragingly upon the Honer'ble Ojoy. "Mr. Skeelty is acting in a very disagreeable manner. He has not only boycotted our paper and refused to pay for the subscriptions he engaged, but I understand he is encouraging his workmen to annoy the Millville people, and especially this printing office."

"Well--durn--Skeelty!" ejaculated Mr. Boglin, greatly discomposed by this statement. "But I'll fix all that, Miss Doyle," he added, eagerly. "Skeelty's my partner and he's got to do what I say or I'll make trouble for him. You dicker with me for the support of your paper and I'll guarantee a hundred subscriptions from Royal and get you an apology from Skeelty and a promise he'll behave an' keep his men to home. And all that's outside the price I'll agree to pay."

Patsy's eyes were full of scorn.

"I won't dicker with you an instant," she firmly declared. "I don't know Colonel Kleppish, or what his character is, but I'm very sure he's the better man and that the people have made no mistake in electing him in your place. No respectable candidate for office would attempt to buy the support of a newspaper, and I advise you to change the wording on your card. Instead of 'Honorable' it should read 'Dishonorable' Ojoy Boglin. Good day, sir!"

Mr. Boglin's face turned white with rage. He half rose from his seat, but sat down again with a vicious snarl.

"I've coaxed, so far, young woman," he said grimly, "but I guess it's time I showed my hand. You'll either run this paper in my interest or I'll push Skeelty on to make the town too hot to hold you. I've got power in this county, even if I ain't senator, and you'll feel that power if you dare oppose me. Take your choice, girl--either to make good money out o' this campaign, or be run out of town, neck an' crop! It's up to you to decide."

"In thirty seconds," said Patsy, her face as white as was Boglin's, "I shall ring this bell to summon my men to throw you out."

The Honer'ble Ojoy slowly rose and put on his hat.

"Look out!" he said warningly.

"I will," snapped Patsy.

"This ain't the end of it, girl!"

"There are ten seconds left," she said.

He picked up his card, turned his back and walked out, leaving his opponent trembling betwixt agitation and righteous indignation. A few moments later Bob West came in and looked at the girl editor curiously.

"Ojoy Boglin has been here," he said.

"The Honer'ble Ojoy, if you please," answered Patsy, with a laugh that bordered on hysteria.

The hardware man nodded, his eyes reading her face.

"You were quite right to turn him down," he asserted.

"It was the only thing to do," responded the girl, wondering how he knew.

"But Boglin is a dangerous man," resumed West. "Look out for him. Miss Doyle."

"Yes; he told me to do that, and I will," said she, more quietly. "He is Skeelty's partner."

"And you're not afraid of him?"

"Why should I be, Mr. West?"

He smiled.

"I'm justice of the peace here. If there's a hint of trouble from Boglin or Skeelty, come directly to me."

"Thank you, Mr. West. I will."

With this he nodded cheerfully and went away.

CHAPTER XII - MOLLY SIZER'S PARTY

The people of Chazy County were very proud of the Millville Tribune, the only daily paper in that section of the state. It was really a very good newspaper, if small in size, and related the news of the day as promptly as the great New York journals did.

Arthur Weldon had not been very enthusiastic about the paper at any time, although he humored the girls by attending in a good-natured way to the advertising, hiring some of the country folk to get subscriptions, and keeping the books. He was a young man of considerable education who had inherited a large fortune, safely invested, and therefore had no need, through financial necessity, to interest himself in business of any sort. He allowed the girls to print his name as editor in chief, but he did no editorial work at all, amusing himself these delightful summer days by wandering in the woods, where he collected botanical specimens, or sitting with Uncle John on the lawn, where they read together or played chess. Both the men were glad the girls were happy in their work and enthusiastic over the success of their audacious venture. Beth was developing decided talent as a writer of editorials and her articles were even more thoughtful and dignified than were those of Patsy. The two girls found plenty to occupy them at the office, while Louise did the reportorial work and flitted through Millville and down to Huntingdon each day in search of small items of local interest. She grew fond of this work, for it brought her close to the people and enabled her to study their characters and peculiarities. Her manner of approaching the simple country folk was so gracious and winning that they freely gave her any information they possessed, and chatted with her unreservedly.

Sometimes Louise would make her rounds alone, but often Arthur would join her for an afternoon drive to Huntingdon, and it greatly amused him to listen to his girl-wife's adroit manner of "pumping the natives."

About halfway to Huntingdon was the Sizer Farm, the largest and most important in that vicinity. Old Zeke Sizer had a large family--five boys and three girls--and they were noted as quite the most aggressive and disturbing element in the neighborhood. Old Zeke was rude and coarse and swore like a trooper, so his sons could not be expected to excel him in refinement. Bill Sizer, the eldest, was a hard drinker, and people who knew him asserted that he "never drew a sober breath." The other sons were all quarrelsome in disposition and many a free fight was indulged in among them whenever disputes arose. They were industrious farmers, though, and the three girls

and their mother worked from morning till night, so the farm prospered and the Sizers were reputed to be "well-off."

Molly, the eldest girl, had attracted Louise, who declared she was pretty enough to arrest attention in any place. Indeed, this girl was a "raving beauty" in her buxom, countrified way, and her good looks were the pride of the Sizer family and the admiration of the neighbors. The other two were bouncing, merry girls, rather coarse in manner, as might be expected from their environment; but Molly, perhaps fully conscious of her prettiness, assumed certain airs and graces and a regal deportment that brought even her big, brutal brothers to her feet in adoration.

The Sizers were among the first subscribers to the Millville Tribune and whenever Louise stopped at the farmhouse for news the family would crowd around her, ignoring all duties, and volunteer whatever information they possessed. For when they read their own gossip in the local column it gave them a sort of proprietary interest in the paper, and Bill had once thrashed a young clerk at Huntingdon for questioning the truth of an item the Sizers had contributed.

One day when Louise and Arthur stopped at the farm, Mollie ran out with an eager face to say that Friday was her birthday and the Sizers were to give a grand party to celebrate it.

"We want you to come over an' write it up, Mrs. Weldon," said the girl. "They're comin' from twenty mile around, fer the dance, an' we've got the orchestra from Malvern to play for us. Pop's goin' to spend a lot of money on refreshments an' it'll be the biggest blow-out Chazy County ever seen!"

"I think I can write up the party without being present, Mollie," suggested Louise.

"No; you come over. I read once, in a novel, how an editor come to a swell party an' writ about all the dresses an' things--said what everybody wore, you know. I'm goin' to have a new dress, an' if ever'thing's described right well we'll buy a lot of papers to send to folks we know in Connecticut."

"Well," said Louise, with a sigh, "I'll try to drive over for a little while. It is to be Saturday, you say?"

"Yes; the birthday's Friday and the dance Saturday night, rain or shine. An' you might bring the chief editor, your husband, an' try a dance with us. It wouldn't hurt our reputation any to have you folks mingle with us on this festive occasion," she added airily.

They had a good laugh over this invitation when it was reported at Mr. Merrick's dinner table, and Patsy insisted that Louise must write up the party.

"It will be fun to give it a 'double head' and a big send-off," she said. "Write it up as if it were a real society event, dear, and exhaust your vocabulary on the gowns. You'll have to invent some Frenchy names to describe those, I guess, for they'll be wonders; and we'll wind up with a list of 'those present.'"

So on Saturday evening Arthur drove his wife over to the Sizer farm, and long before they reached there they heard the scraping of fiddles, mingled with shouts and boisterous laughter. It was a prohibition district, to be sure, but old Sizer had imported from somewhere outside the "dry zone" a quantity of liquors more remarkable for strength than quality, and with these the guests had been plied from the moment of their arrival. Most of them were wholly unused to such libations, so by the time Arthur and Louise arrived, the big living room of the farmhouse presented an appearance of wild revelry that was quite deplorable.

Molly welcomed them with wild enthusiasm and big Bill, her adoring brother, demanded in a loud voice if Arthur did not consider her the "Belle of Chazy County."

"They ain't a stunner in the state as kin hold a candle to our Molly," he added, and then with uncertain gait he left the "reporters" with the promise to "bring 'em a drink."

"Come, Louise," said Arthur, quietly, "let's get out of here."

He drew her to the door and as a dance was just starting they managed to escape without notice.

"What a disgraceful scene!" cried Louise, when they were on their way home; "and to think of such a shocking carousal being held in good old Chazy County, where morals are usually irreproachable! I shall not mention the affair in the Tribune at all."

But Patsy, who had a managing editor's respect for news of any sort, combatted this determination and begged Louise to write up Molly Sizer's party without referring to its deplorable features.

"It isn't policy to offend the Sizers," she said, "for although they are coarse and common they have shown a friendly spirit toward the paper. Moreover, the enmity of such people--which would surely result from our ignoring the birthday party--would keep us in hot water."

So Louise, though reluctantly, wrote up the party and the manuscript was sent over to Miss Briggs Sunday afternoon, so it would get a place in Monday morning's Tribune.

Uncle John had the paper at breakfast on Monday, and he gave an amused laugh as his eye caught the report of the Sizer party.

"This is a good one on you, Louise," he exclaimed. "You say that Miss Molly, 'looking more lovely than ever in her handsome new gown, greeted her guests with a roughish smile.'"

"A what?" demanded Louise, horrified.

"A 'roughish' smile."

"Oh; that's a mistake," she said, glancing at the item. "What I said was a 'roguish' smile; but there's been a typographical error which Miss Briggs must have overlooked in reading the proof."

"Nevertheless," remarked Arthur, "the statement isn't far wrong. Everything was rough, including the smiles, as far as I noted that remarkable gathering."

"But--see here!" cried Patsy; "that's a dreadful mistake. That spoils all the nice things you said about the girl, Louise. I hope the Sizers won't notice it."

But the Sizers did, and were frantic with rage over what they deemed was a deliberate insult to Molly. Several young men who had come from distances to attend the birthday party had stayed over Sunday at the farmhouse, where the revelry still continued in a fitful way, due to vain attempts to relieve racking headaches by further libations. Monday morning found the dissipated crew still the guests of the Sizers, and when big Bill slowly spelled out the assertion made by the Tribune that his sister had "a roughish smile" loud cries of indignation arose. Molly first cried and then had hysterics and screamed vigorously; Bill swore vengeance on the Millville Tribune and all connected with it, while the guests gravely asserted it was "a low-down, measly trick" which the Sizers ought to resent. They all began drinking again, to calm their feelings, and after the midday dinner Bill Sizer grabbed a huge cowhide whip and started to Millville to "lick the editor to a standstill." A wagonload of his guests accompanied him, and Molly pleaded with her brother not to hurt Mrs. Weldon.

"I won't; but I'll cowhide that fresh husband of hers," declared Bill. "He's the editor--the paper says so--and he's the one I'm after!"

CHAPTER XIII - BOB WEST INTERFERES

It was unfortunate that at that time Thursday Smith had gone up the electric line toward Royal, to inspect it. In the office were Patsy, Hetty Hewitt--who was making a drawing--Arthur Weldon, engaged upon his books, and finally, seated in an easy-chair from which he silently watched them work, old Bob West, the hardware man. Louise and Beth had driven over to the Junction to write up an accident, one of the trainmen having caught his hand in a coupling, between two freight cars.

Bob West often dropped into the office, which was next door to his own place of business, but he was a silent man and had little to say on these visits. In his early days he had wandered pretty much over the whole world, and he could relate some interesting personal adventures if he chose. In this retired village West was the one inhabitant distinguished above his fellows for his knowledge of the world. In his rooms over the store, where few were ever invited, he had a fine library of unusual books and a rare collection of curios gathered from foreign lands. It was natural that such a man would be interested in so unique an experiment as the Millville Tribune, and he watched its conduct with curiosity but a constantly growing respect for the three girl journalists. No one ever minded when he came into the office, nodded and sat down. Sometimes he would converse with much freedom; at other times the old gentleman remained an hour without offering a remark, and went away with a brief parting nod.

It was West who first saw, through the window, the wagonload of men from the Sizer farm come dashing up the street at a gallop. Instinctively, perhaps, he knew trouble was brewing, but he never altered his expression or his attitude, even when the wagon stopped at the printing office and the passengers leaped out.

In marched Bill Sizer at the head of his following, cowhide in hand. Patsy, her face flushing scarlet, stood up and faced the intruders.

"Stand back, girl!" cried Sizer in a fierce tone; "it's that coward editor I'm after," pointing his whip with trembling hand at Arthur. "My sister Molly may be rough, an' hev a rough smile, but I'll be dinged ef I don't skin the man thet prints it in a paper!"

"Good fer you, Bill!" murmured his friends, approvingly.

Arthur leaned back and regarded his accuser in wonder. The big table, littered with papers, was between them.

"Come out o' there, ye measly city chap, an' take yer medicine," roared Bill, swinging his whip. "I'll larn ye to come inter a decent neighborhood an' slander its women. Come outer there!"

West had sat quietly observing the scene. Now he inquired, in composed tones:

"What's the trouble, Bill?"

"Trouble? Trouble, West? Why, this lyin' scoundrel said in his paper thet our Molly had a rough smile. That's the trouble!"

"Did he really say that?" asked West.

"Course he did. Printed it in the paper, for all to read. That's why I've come to cowhide the critter within an inch o' his life!"

"Good fer you, Bill!" cried his friends, encouragingly.

"But--wait a moment!" commanded West, as the maddened, half drunken young farmer was about to leap over the table to grasp his victim; "you're not going at this thing right, Bill Sizer."

"Why ain't I, Bob West?"

"Because," answered West, in calm, even tones, "this insult is too great to be avenged by a mere cowhiding. Nothing but blood will wipe away the dreadful stain on your sister's character."

"Oh, Mr. West!" cried Patsy, horrified by such a statement.

"Eh? Blood?" said Bill, stupefied by the suggestion.

"Of course," returned West. "You mustn't thrash Mr. Weldon; you must kill him."

A delighted chorus of approval came from Sizer's supporters.

"All right, then," said the bully, glaring around, "I--I'll kill the scandler!"

"Hold on!" counselled West, seizing his arm. "This affair must be conducted properly--otherwise the law might cause us trouble. No murder, mind you. You must kill Weldon in a duel."

"A--a what? A duel!" gasped Sizer.

"To be sure. That's the way to be revenged. Hetty," he added, turning to the artist, who alone of the observers had smiled instead of groaned at the old gentleman's startling suggestion, "will you kindly run up to my rooms and get a red leather case that lies under the shell cabinet? Thank you, my dear."

Hetty was off like a flash. During her absence an intense silence pervaded the office, broken only by an occasional hiccough from one of Mr. Sizer's guests. Patsy was paralyzed with horror and had fallen back into her chair to glare alternately at Bob West and the big bully who threatened her cousin's husband. Arthur was pale and stern as he fixed a reproachful gaze on the hardware merchant. From Miss Briggs' little room could be heard the steady click-click of the telegraph instrument.

But the furious arrival of the Sizer party had aroused every inhabitant of Millville and with one accord they dropped work and rushed to the printing office. By this time the windows were dark with groups of eager faces that peered wonderingly through the screens--the sashes being up--and listened to the conversation within.

While Hetty was gone not a word was spoken, but the artist was absent only a brief time. Presently she reentered and laid the red leather case on the table before Bob West. The hardware man at once opened it, displaying a pair of old-fashioned dueling pistols, with long barrels and pearl handles. There was a small can of powder, some bullets and wadding in the case, and as West took up one of the pistols and proceeded to load it he said in an unconcerned voice:

"I once got these from an officer in Vienna, and they have been used in more than a score of duels, I was told. One of the pistols--I can't tell which it is--has killed a dozen men, so you are going to fight with famous weapons."

Both Arthur and Bill Sizer, as well as the groups at the window, watched the loading of the pistols with fascinated gaze.

"Bob's a queer ol' feller," whispered Peggy McNutt to the blacksmith, who stood beside him. "This dool is just one o' his odd fancies. Much he keers ef they kills each other er not!"

"Mr. West," cried Patsy, suddenly rousing from her apathy, "I'll not allow this shameful thing! A duel is no better than murder, and I'm sure there is a law against it."

"True," returned West, ramming the bullet into the second pistol; "it is quite irregular and--er--illegal, I believe. Perhaps I shall go to jail with whichever of the duelists survives; but you see it is a point of honor with us all. Molly

Sizer has seemingly been grossly maligned in your paper, and the editor is responsible. Are you a good shot, Bill?"

"I--I guess so," stammered Sizer.

"That's good. Weldon, I hear, is an expert with the pistol."

Arthur did not contradict this statement, although he was positive he could not hit a barn at twenty yards.

"Now, then, are we ready?" staid West, rising. "Come with me, gentlemen."

"What ye goin' to do, Bob?" asked Sizer, anxiously.

"I'll explain," replied the hardware man, leading the way to the street. Everyone followed him and the crowd at the windows joined the group outside. "Of course you mustn't shoot in the main street, for you might hit some one, or break windows; but back of this row of buildings is a lane that is perfectly clear. You will stand back to back in the center of the block and then, at my word, you will each march to the end of the block and pass around the buildings to the lane. As soon as you come in sight of one another you are privileged to fire, and I suppose Bill Sizer will try to kill you, Mr. Weldon, on the spot, and therefore you will try to kill him first."

"But--look a-here, Bob!" cried Sizer; "it ain't right fer him to take a shot at me. You said fer me to kill him, but ye didn't say nuth'n about his shootin' at me."

"That's all right, Bill," returned West. "You're in the right, and the right ought to win. But you must give the man a chance for his life, you know."

"That weren't in the bargain."

"It is now, by the laws of dueling."

"He--he might shoot me," urged Bill.

"It isn't likely. Although he's a dead shot, you have right on your side, and you must be sure to fire as soon as you get within good range. It won't be considered murder; it will only be a duel, and the law will deal lightly with you."

"That's right, Bill," asserted one of Sizer's friends. "Bob West's a justice o' the peace himself, an' he orter know."

"I do know," declared West gravely.

He placed Arthur Weldon and Bill Sizer back to back in the middle of the street and handed each a pistol.

"Now, then," said he, "you both understand the rules, which I have explained, and the spectators will bear witness that, whatever happens, this affair has been conducted in a regular manner, with no favor shown to either. You are both brave men, and this duel will vindicate your honor. If you are fortunate enough to survive, you will be heroes, and all your differences will be wiped off the slate. But as one or both may fall, we, the citizens of Millville, hereby bid you a solemn and sad farewell."

Impressed by this speech, Sizer's friends began to shake hands with him.

"All ready!" called West. "One--two--three----go!"

At the word the two, back to back, started for the opposite ends of the little street, and at once the crowd made a rush between the buildings to gain the rear, where they might witness the shooting in the lane when the duelists met. Arthur had been thinking seriously during these proceedings and had made up his mind it was in no degree his duty to be bored full of holes by a drunken countryman like Bill Sizer, just because there had been a typographical error in the Millville Tribune. So, when he got to the end of the street, instead of turning into the lane he made for the farm, holding the long dueling pistol gingerly in his hand and trotting at a good pace for home.

Footsteps followed him. In sudden panic he increased his run; but the other was faster. A heavy hand grasped his shoulder and swung him around, while old Bob West, panting for breath, exclaimed:

"Stop, you fool--stop! The other one is running."

"The other one!" echoed Arthur, wonderingly.

"Of course. Bill Sizer was sure to run; he's a coward, as all bullies are. Quick, Weldon, save the day and your reputation or I'll never stand your friend again."

Arthur understood now. He turned and ran back faster than he had come, swung into the lane where the crowd was cautiously peering from the shelter of the buildings, and waving his pistol in a reckless way that made Bob West shudder, he cried out:

"Where is he? Where's Sizer? Why don't he show up and be shot, like a man?"

No Sizer appeared. He was even then headed cross-lots for home, leaving his friends to bemoan his cowardice. As for Arthur, the crowd gave him a cheer

and condemned his opponent's conduct in no measured terms. They were terribly disappointed by Big Bill's defection, for while not especially bloodthirsty they hated to see the impending tragedy turn out a farce.

In the printing office Patsy was laughing hysterically as her horror dissolved and allowed her to discover the comic phase of the duel. She literally fell on Arthur's neck as he entered, but the next moment pushed him away to face the hardware merchant.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. West," said she with twinkling eyes. "I suspected you of being a cold-blooded ruffian, when you proposed this duel; but I now see that you understand human nature better than the whole caboodle of us put together! Arthur, thank Mr. West for saving you from a flogging."

"I do, indeed!" said Arthur fervently.

CHAPTER XIV - THE DANGER SIGNAL

By this time the Tribune had become the pride of all Millville, yet the villagers could not quite overcome their awe and wonder at it. Also the newspaper was the pride of the three girl journalists, who under the tutelage of Miss Briggs were learning to understand the complicated system of a daily journal. Their amateurish efforts were gradually giving way to more dignified and readable articles; Beth could write an editorial that interested even Uncle John, her severest critic; Louise showed exceptional talent for picking up local happenings and making news notes of them, while Patsy grabbed everything that came to her net--locals, editorials, telegraphic and telephone reports from all parts of the world--and skillfully sorted, edited and arranged them for the various departments of the paper. It was mighty interesting to them all, and they were so eager each morning to get to work that they could scarcely devote the proper time to old Nora's famous breakfasts.

"We made a mistake. Uncle," said Patsy to Mr. Merrick, "in starting the Tribune in the wrong place. In a few weeks we must leave it and go back to the city, whereas, had we established our paper in New York--"

"Then it never would have been heard of," interrupted practical Beth. "In New York, Patsy dear, we would become the laughing stock of the town. I shudder when I think what a countrified paper we turned out that first issue."

"But we are fast becoming educated," declared Patsy. "I'm not ashamed of the Tribune now, even in comparison with the best New York dailies."

Beth laughed, but Uncle John said judicially:

"For Millville, it's certainly a marvel. I get the world news more concisely and more pleasantly from its four pages than when I waded through twenty or thirty of the big pages of a metropolitan newspaper. You are doing famously, my dears. I congratulate you."

"But we are running behind dreadfully," suggested Arthur, the bookkeeper, "even since Thursday Smith enabled us to cut down expenses so greatly. The money that comes in never equals what we pay out. How long can you keep this up, girls?"

They made no reply, nor did Uncle John discuss the financial condition of the newspaper. He was himself paying some heavy expenses that did not appear on the books, such as the Associated Press franchise, the telegraph

bills and the electric power; but he was quite delighted to take care of these items and regretted he had not assumed more of the paper's obligations. He knew the expenses were eating big holes in the incomes of his three nieces, yet they never complained nor allowed their enthusiasm to flag.

Mr. Merrick, who had tested these girls in more ways than one, was watching them carefully, and fully approved their spirit and courage under such trying conditions. Major Doyle, Patsy's father, when the first copy of the Millville Tribune was laid on his desk in the city, was astounded at the audacity of this rash venture. When he could command his temper to write calmly he sent a letter to Mr. Merrick which read: "Taken altogether, John, you're the craziest bunch of irresponsibles outside an asylum. No wonder you kept this folly a secret from me until you had accomplished your nefarious designs. The Millville Daily Tribune is a corker and no mistake, for our Patsy's at the head of your lunatic gang. I'll go farther, and say the paper's a wonder. I believe it is the first daily newspaper published in a town of six inhabitants, that has ever carried the Associated Press dispatches, But, allow me to ask, why? The lonely inhabitants of the desert of Chazy County don't need a daily--or a weekly--or a monthly. A semi-annual would about hit their gait, and be more than they deserve. So I've decided it's merely a silly way to spend money--and an easy way, too, I'll be bound. Oblige me by explaining this incomprehensible eccentricity."

To this, a mild protest for the major, Uncle John replied: "Dear Major Doyle: Yours received. Have you no business of your own to attend to? Affectionately yours, John Merrick."

The major took the hint. He made no further complaint but read the paper religiously every day, gloating over Patsy's name as managing editor and preserving the files with great care. He really enjoyed, the Millville Tribune, and as his summer vacation was shortly due he anticipated with pleasure a visit to the farm and a peep at the workings of "our Patsy's" famous newspaper. The other girls he ignored. If Patsy was connected with the thing, her adoring parent was quite sure she was responsible for all the good there was in it.

The paper printed no mention of the famous duel. But Hetty made a cartoon of it, showing the lane, with its fringe of spectators, Arthur Weldon standing manfully to await his antagonist and big Bill Sizer, in the distance, sprinting across the fields in the direction of home. This cartoon was highly prized by those who had witnessed the adventure and Peggy McNutt pinned it on the wall of his real estate office beside the one Hetty had made of himself. Bill Sizer promptly "stopped the paper," that being the only vengeance at hand, and when Bob West sent a boy to him demanding the return of the pistol,

Bill dispatched with the weapon the following characteristic note, which he had penned with much labor:

"Bob west sir you Beet me out uv my Reeveng and Made me look like a bag uv Beens. but I will skware this Thing sum da and yu and that edyter hed better Watch out. i don't stand fer no Throwdown like that Wm. Sizer."

However, the bully received scant sympathy, even from his most intimate friends, and his prestige in the community was henceforth destroyed. Arthur did not crow, for his part. He told the girls frankly of his attempt to run away and evade the meeting, which sensible intention was only frustrated by Bob West's interference, and they all agreed he was thoroughly justified. The young man had proved to them his courage years before and none of the girls was disposed to accuse him of cowardice for not wishing to shoot or be shot by such a person as Bill Sizer.

A few days following the duel another incident occurred which was of a nature so startling that it drove the Sizer comedy from all minds. This time Thursday Smith was the hero.

Hetty Hewitt, it seems, was having a desperate struggle to quell the longings of her heart for the allurements of the great city. She had been for years a thorough Bohemienne, frequenting cafes, theatres and dance halls, smoking and drinking with men and women of her class and, by degrees, losing every womanly quality with which nature had generously endowed her. But the girl was not really bad. She was essentially nervous and craved excitement, so she had drifted into this sort of life because no counteracting influence of good had been injected into her pliable disposition. None, that is, until the friendly editor for whom she worked, anticipating her final downfall, had sought to save her by sending her to a country newspaper. He talked to the girl artist very frankly before she left for Millville, and Hetty knew he was right, and was truly grateful for the opportunity to redeem herself. The sweet girl journalists with whom she was thrown in contact were so different from any young women she had heretofore known, and proved so kindly sympathetic, that Hetty speedily became ashamed of her wasted life and formed a brave resolution to merit the friendship so generously extended her.

But it was hard work at first. She could get through the days easily enough by wandering in the woods and taking long walks along the rugged country roads; but in the evenings came the insistent call of the cafes, the cheap orchestras, vaudeville, midnight suppers and the like. She strenuously fought this yearning and found it was growing less and less powerful to influence her. But her nights were yet restless and her nerves throbbing from the effects of past dissipations. Often she would find herself unable to

sleep and would go out into the moonlight when all others were in bed, and "prowl around with the cats," as she expressed it, until the wee hours of morning. Often she told Patsy she wished there was more work she could do. The drawings required by the paper never occupied her more than a couple of hours each day. Sometimes she made one of her cleverest cartoons in fifteen or twenty minutes.

"Can't I do something else?" she begged. "Let me set type, or run the ticker--I can receive telegrams fairly well--or even write a column of local comment. I'm no journalist, so you'll not be envious."

But Patsy shook her head.

"Really, Hetty, there's nothing else you can do, and your pictures are very important to us. Rest and enjoy yourself, and get strong and well. You are improving wonderfully in health since you came here."

Often at midnight Hetty would wander into the pressroom and watch Thursday Smith run off the edition on the wonderful press, which seemed to possess an intelligence of its own, so perfectly did it perform its functions. At such times she sat listlessly by and said little, for Thursday was no voluble talker, especially when busied over his press. But a certain spirit of comradeship grew up between these two, and it was not unusual for the pressmen, after his work was finished and the papers were neatly piled for distribution to the carriers at daybreak, to walk with Hetty to the hotel before proceeding to his own lodgings in the little wing of Nick Thorne's house, which stood quite at the end of the street. To be sure, the hotel adjoined the printing office, with only a vacant lot between, but Hetty seemed to appreciate this courtesy and would exchange a brief good night with Smith before going to her own room. Afterward she not infrequently stole out again, because sleep would not come to her, and then the moon watched her wanderings until it dipped behind the hills.

On the night we speak of, Hetty had parted from Thursday Smith at one o'clock and crept into the hallway of the silent, barnlike hotel; but as soon as the man turned away she issued forth again and walked up the empty street like a shadow. Almost to Thompson's Crossing she strolled, deep in thought, and then turned and retraced her steps. But when she again reached the hotel she was wide-eyed as ever; so she passed the building, thinking she would go on to Little Bill Creek and sit by the old mill for a time.

The girl was just opposite the printing office when her attention was attracted by a queer grating noise, as if one of the windows was being pried up. She stopped short, a moment, and then crept closer to the building. Two

men were at a side window of the pressroom, which they had just succeeded in opening. As Hetty gained her point of observation one of the men slipped inside, but a moment later hastily reappeared and joined his fellow. At once both turned and stole along the side of the shed directly toward the place where the girl stood. Her first impulse was to run, but recollecting that she wore a dark gown and stood in deep shadow she merely flattened herself against the building and remained motionless. The men were chuckling as they passed her, and she recognized them as mill hands from Royal.

"Guess that'll do the job," said one, in a low tone.

"If it don't, nothin' will," was the reply.

They were gone, then, stealing across the road and beating a hasty retreat under the shadows of the houses.

Hetty stood motionless a moment, wondering what to do. Then with sudden resolve she ran to Thorne's house and rapped sharply at the window of the wing where she knew Thursday Smith slept. She heard him leap from bed and open the blind.

"What is it?" he asked.

"It's me, Thursday--Hetty," she said. "Two men have just broken into the pressroom, through a window. They were men from Royal, and they didn't steal anything, but ran away in great haste. I--I'm afraid something is wrong, Thursday!"

Even while she spoke he was rapidly dressing.

"Wait!" he called to her. In a few moments he opened the door and joined her.

Without hesitation he began walking rapidly toward the office, and the girl kept step with him. He asked no questions whatever, but as soon as she had led him to the open window he leaped through it and switched on an electric light. An instant later he cried aloud, in a voice of fear:

"Get out, Hetty! Run--for your life!"

"Run yourself, Thursday, if there's danger," she coolly returned.

But he shouted "Run--run--run!" in such thrilling, compelling tones that the girl shrank away and dashed across the vacant lot to the hotel before she turned again in time to see Smith leap from the window and make a dash toward the rear. He was carrying something--something extended at arms'

length before him--and he crossed the lane and ran far into the field before stooping to set down his burden.

Now he was racing back again, running as madly as if a troop of demons was after him. A flash cleft the darkness; a deep detonation thundered and echoed against the hills; the building against which Hetty leaned shook as if an earthquake had seized it, and Thursday Smith was thrown flat on his face and rolled almost to the terrified girl's feet, where he lay motionless. Only the building saved her from pitching headlong too, but as the reverberations died away, to be followed by frantic screams from the rudely wakened population of Millville, Hetty sank upon her knees and turned the man over, so that he lay face up.

He opened his eyes and put up one hand. Then he struggled to his feet, trembling weakly, and his white face smiled into the girl's anxious one.

"That was a close call, dear," he whispered; "but your timely discovery saved us from a terrible calamity. I--I don't believe there is much harm done, as it is."

Hetty made no reply. She was thinking of the moments he had held that deadly Thing in his hands, while he strove to save lives and property from destruction.

The inevitable crowd was gathering now, demanding in terrified tones what had happened. Men, women and children poured from the houses in scant attire, all unnerved and fearful, crying for an explanation of the explosion.

"Keep mum, Hetty," said Smith, warningly. "It will do no good to tell them the truth."

She nodded, realizing it was best the villagers did not suspect that an enemy of the newspaper had placed them all in dire peril.

"Dynamite?" she asked in a whisper.

"Yes; a bomb. But for heaven's sake don't mention it."

Suddenly a man with a lantern discovered a great pit in the field behind the lane and the crowd quickly surrounded it. From their limited knowledge of the facts the explosion seemed unaccountable, but there was sufficient intelligence among them to determine that dynamite had caused it and dug this gaping hole in the stony soil. Bob West glanced at the printing office, which was directly in line with the explosion; then he cast a shrewd look into the white face of Thursday Smith; but the old hardware merchant merely muttered under his breath something about Ojoy Boglin and shook his head determinedly when questioned by his fellow villagers.

Interest presently centered in the damage that had been done. Many window panes were shattered and the kitchen chimney of the hotel had toppled over; but no person had been injured and the damage could easily be repaired. While the excitement was at its height Thursday Smith returned to his room and went to bed; but long after the villagers had calmed down sufficiently to seek their homes Hetty Hewitt sat alone by the great pit, staring reflectively into its ragged depths. Quaint and curious were the thoughts that puzzled the solitary girl's weary brain, but prominent and ever-recurring was the sentence that had trembled upon Thursday Smith's lips: "It was a close call, dear!"

The "close call" didn't worry Hetty a particle; it was the last word of the sentence that amazed her. That, and a new and wonderful respect for the manliness of Thursday Smith, filled her heart to overflowing.

CHAPTER XV - A CLEVER IDEA

Neither Thursday nor Hetty allowed a word to escape concerning the placing of the bomb in the Tribune office, but the explosion was public knowledge and many were bothering their heads to explain its meaning.

John Merrick, when he heard the news, looked very grave and glanced uneasily into the unconscious faces of his three beloved nieces. A man of much worldly experience, in spite of his simple, ingenuous nature, the little man began carefully piecing together parts of the puzzle. Thursday Smith's defense of the girl journalists, whereby he had severely pounded some of the workmen who had insulted them, had caused the man to be denounced by the colony at Royal. Mr. Skeelty, the manager, had demanded that Smith be discharged by Mr. Mirrick, and being refused, had threatened to shut off the power from the newspaper plant. Skeelty dared not carry out this threat, for fear of a lawsuit, but his men, who had urged the matter of Smith's discharge upon their manager, were of the class that seeks revenge at any cost. At this juncture Ojoy Boglin, Skeelty's partner and the owner of all the pine forest around Royal, had become the enemy of the newspaper and was aware of the feeling among the workmen. A word from Boglin, backed by Skeelty's tacit consent, would induce the men to go to any length in injuring the Millville Tribune and all concerned in its welfare.

Considering these facts, Mr. Merrick shrewdly suspected that the dynamite explosion had been the work of the mill hands, yet why it was harmlessly exploded in a field was a factor that puzzled him exceedingly. He concluded, from what information he possessed, that they had merely intended this as a warning, which if disregarded might be followed by a more serious catastrophe.

The idea that such a danger threatened his nieces made the old gentleman distinctly nervous.

There were ways to evade further molestation from the lawless element at the mill. The Hon. Ojoy could be conciliated; Thursday Smith discharged; or the girls could abandon their journalistic enterprise altogether. Such alternatives were mortifying to consider, but his girls must be protected from harm at any cost.

While he was still considering the problem, the girls and Arthur having driven to the office, as usual, Joe Wegg rode over from Thompson's Crossing on his sorrel mare for a chat with his old friend and benefactor. It was this

same young man--still a boy in years--who had once owned the Wegg Farm and disposed of it to Mr. Merrick.

Joe was something of a mechanical genius and, when his father died, longed to make his way in the great world. But after many vicissitudes and failures he returned to Chazy County to marry Ethel Thompson, his boyhood sweetheart, and to find that one of his father's apparently foolish investments had made him rich.

Ethel was the great-granddaughter of the pioneer settler of Chazy County-- Little Bill Thompson--from whom the Little Bill Creek and Little Bill Mountain had been named. It was he who first established the mill at Millville; so, in marrying a descendant of Little Bill Thompson, Joe Wegg had become quite the most important resident of Chazy County, and the young man was popular and well liked by all who knew him.

After the first interchange of greetings Joe questioned Mr. Merrick about the explosion of the night before, and Uncle John frankly stated his suspicions.

"I'm sorry," said Joe, "they ever started that mill at Royal Falls. Most of the workmen are foreigners, and all of them rude and reckless. They have caused our quiet, law-abiding people no end of trouble and anxiety already. It is becoming a habit with them to haunt Millville on Saturday nights, when they are partly intoxicated, and they've even invaded some of the farmhouses and frightened the women and children. I've talked to Bob West about it and he has promised to swear in Lon Taft and Seth Davis as special constables, to preserve order; but he admits we are quite helpless to oppose such a gang of rowdies. I've also been to see Mr. Skeelty, to ask him to keep his men at home, but he answered gruffly that he had no authority over his employees except during working hours, and not much authority even then."

"Skeelty doesn't seem the right man to handle those fellows," observed Mr. Merrick thoughtfully; "but as he owns the controlling interest in his company, and Boglin is fully as unreasonable, we cannot possibly oust him from control. If the men determined to blow up all Millville with dynamite I'm sure Skeelty would not lift a finger to prevent it."

"No; he's deathly afraid of them, and that's a fact," said Joe.

They sat in silence a while.

"Your report of Skeelty's threat to cut off your electric power," said young Wegg, "reminds me of a plan I've had in mind for some time. I find I've too much time on my hands, Mr. Merrick, and I cannot be thoroughly happy unless I'm occupied. Ethel's farms are let on shares and I'm a drone in the world's busy hive. But we're anchored here at Millville, so I've been

wondering what I could do to improve the place and keep myself busy. It has seemed to me that the same rush of water in Little Bill Creek that runs the dynamos at Royal is in evidence--to a lesser extent--at the old milldam. What would you think of my putting in an electric plant at the mill, and lighting both Millville and Huntingdon, as well as all the farmhouses?"

"Not a bad idea, Joe," said Uncle John approvingly.

"Electric lights have a civilizing influence," continued the young man. "I'm quite sure all the farmers between here and Huntingdon would use them, at a reasonable price. I can also run a line to Hooker's Falls, and one to Chazy Junction. Plenty of poles can be cut from our pine forests and the wires will be the chief expense. I may not make money, at first, but I'll play pretty nearly even and have something to do."

"Do you think you could furnish enough power for our printing office?" asked Mr. Merrick.

"Yes; and a dozen factories, besides. I've an idea the thing may bring factories to Millville."

"Then get at it, Joe, and build it quick. I've a notion we shall have an open rupture with Skeelty before long."

Joe Wegg smiled.

"You're going to accuse me, sir, of asking advice after I've made up my mind," said he; "but the fact is, I have bought the mill of Silas Caldwell already. He's been wanting to dispose of the property for some time."

"Good!" exclaimed Uncle John.

"Also I--I've ordered a dynamo and machinery. It all ought to be here in a few days."

"Better yet!" cried Mr. Merrick. "You've relieved my mind of a great weight, Joe."

"Now about Thursday Smith," said the young man. "Don't you think it would be policy for you to let him go, Mr. Merrick?"

"No."

"He's a clever fellow. I can use him at my lighting plant."

"Thank you, Joe; but that wouldn't help any. As long as he's in Millville he will be an object of vengeance to those anarchistic mill hands. The only way to satisfy them in to drive Smith out of town, and--I'll be hanged if I'll do it!

He hasn't done anything wrong, and I'm interested in the fellow's curious history. I've put his case in the hands of a famous New York detective--Fogerty--with instructions to discover who he is, and I can't let a lot of rowdies force me to abandon the man for no reasonable cause."

"Don't blame you, sir," said Joe. "If it wasn't this Thursday Smith, some other would incur the hatred of the Royal workmen, and as they're disposed to terrorize us we may as well fight it out on this line as any other. The whole county will stand by you, sir."

"The only thing I dread is possible danger to my girls."

"Keep 'em away from the office evenings," advised Joe. "During the day they are perfectly safe. If anything happens, it will be at night, and while the newspaper office may some time go flying skyward the girls will run no personal danger whatever."

"Maybe so, Joe. How queer it is that such a condition should exist in Millville--a little forgotten spot in the very heart of civilization and the last place where one might expect excitement of this sort. But I won't be cowed; I won't be driven or bullied by a pack of foreign hounds, I assure you! If Skeelty can't discipline his men, I will."

In furtherance of which assertion, Mr. Merrick went to town and wired a message to the great Fogerty.

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, thet'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
goodby 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!"

CHAPTER XVII - THE PENALTIES OF JOURNALISM

Two strange men appeared in Millville--keen, intelligent looking fellows--and applied to Joe Wegg for jobs. Having received a hint from Mr. Merrick, Joe promptly employed the strangers to prepare the old mill for the reception of the machinery for the lighting plant, and both of them engaged board at the hold.

"Thursday," said Hetty, as she watched the pressman that night, "there's a New York detective here--two of them, I think."

"How do you know?"

"I recognized one of them, who used to prowl around the city looking for suspicious characters. They say they've come to work on the new electric plant, but I don't believe it."

Thursday worked a while in silence.

"Mr. Merrick must have sent for them," he suggested.

"Yes. I think he suspects about the bomb."

"He ought to discharge me," said Thursday.

"No; he's man enough to stand by his guns. I like Mr. Merrick. He didn't become a millionaire without having cleverness to back him and I imagine he is clever enough to thwart Skeelty and all his gang."

"Perhaps I ought to go of my own accord," said Thursday.

"Don't do that. When you've found a friend like Mr. Merrick, stick to him. I imagine those detectives are here to protect you, as well as the printing plant. It won't be so easy to set a bomb the next time."

Smith looked at her with a smile. There was a glint of admiration in his eyes.

"You're not a bad sleuth yourself, Hetty," he remarked. "No detective could have acted more wisely and promptly than you did that night."

"It was an accidental discovery, Thursday. Sometimes I sleep."

That was a good deal of conversation for these two to indulge in. Hetty was talkative enough, at times, and so was Thursday Smith, when the humor seized him; but when they were together they said very little. The artist

would stroll into the pressroom after the composers had finished their tasks and watch the man make up the forms, lock them, place them on the press and run off the edition. Then he would glance over the paper while Thursday washed up and put on his coat, after which he accompanied her to the door of her hotel and with a simple "good night" proceeded up the street to his own lodging.

There are surprises in the newspaper business, as our girl journalists were fast discovering. It was a real calamity when Miss Briggs, who had been primarily responsible for getting the Millville Daily Tribune into proper working order, suddenly resigned her position. They had depended a great deal on Miss Briggs, so when the telegraph editor informed them she was going back to New York, they were positively bewildered by her loss. Questions elicited the fact that the woman was nervous over the recent explosion and looked for further trouble from the mill hands. She also suspected the two recent arrivals to be detectives, and the town was so small and so absolutely without police protection that she would not risk her personal safety by remaining longer in it.

"Perhaps I'm homesick," she added. "It's dreadfully lonely here when I'm not at work, and for that reason I've tried to keep busy most of the time. Really, I'm astonished to think I've stood this isolation so long; but now that my mind is made up, I'm going, and it is useless to ask me to remain."

They offered her higher wages, and Mr. Merrick himself had a long talk with her, but all arguments were unavailing.

"What shall we do, Thursday?" asked Patsy in despair. "None of us understands telegraphy."

"Hetty Hewitt does," he suggested.

"Hetty! I'm afraid if I asked her to assume this work she also would leave us."

"No; she'll stay," he said positively.

"But she can't edit the telegraph news. Suppose she took the messages, who would get the night news in shape for the composers? My uncle would not like to have me remain here until midnight, but even if he would permit it I have not yet mastered the art of condensing the dispatches and selecting just such items as are suitable for the Tribune."

"I'll do that, Miss Doyle," promised Smith.

"I've been paying especial attention to the work of Miss Briggs, for I had an idea she was getting uneasy. And I can take all the day messages, too. If

Hetty will look after the wires evenings I can do the rest of the telegraph editor's work, and my own, too."

"Good gracious, Thursday!" exclaimed Patsy; "you'll be running the whole paper, presently."

"No; I can't do the typesetting. But if the Dwyer girls stick to their job--and they seem quite contented here--I'll answer for the rest of the outfit."

"I'm glad the Dwyer girls seem contented," she answered; "but I'm afraid to depend upon anyone now--except you."

He liked that compliment, but said nothing further. After consulting with Louise and Beth, Patsy broached the subject to Hetty, and the artist jumped at the opportunity to do something to occupy her leisure time. The work brought her in contact with Thursday Smith more than ever, and when Miss Briggs departed bag and baggage for New York, the paper suffered little through her defection.

"Newspaper folk," remarked Major Doyle, who was now at the farm enjoying his vacation and worshipping at the shrine of the managing editor in the person of his versatile daughter, "are the most unreliable of any class in the world. So I've often been told, and I believe it. They come and go, by fits and starts, and it's a wonder the erratic rascals never put a paper out of business. But they don't. You never heard of a newspaper that failed to appear just because the mechanical force deserted and left it in the lurch. By hook or crook the paper must be printed--and it always is. So don't worry, mavourneen; when your sallow-faced artist and your hobo jack-of-all-trades desert you, there'll still be a way to keep the Millville Tribune going, and therefore the world will continue to whirl on its axis."

"I don't believe Thursday will ever desert, and Hetty likes us too well to leave us in the lurch; but suppose those typesetters take a notion to flit?"

"Then," said matter-of-fact Beth, "we'll fill the paper with ready-made plate stuff and telegraph for more compositors."

"That's it," agreed the major, "Those people are always to be had. But don't worry till the time comes. As me grandfather, the commodore, once said: 'Never cross a bridge till ye come to it.'"

"It wasn't your grandfather who originated that remark," said Uncle John.

"It was, sir! I defy you to prove otherwise."

"I'm not certain you ever had a grandfather; and he wasn't a commodore, anyhow."

"Sir!" cried the major, glaring at his brother-in-law, "I have his commission, somewhere--laid away."

"Never mind," said Patsy, cheerfully, for these fierce arguments between her father and uncle--who were devotedly attached to one another--never disturbed her in the least, "the Tribune's running smoothly just now, and the work is keeping us delightfully busy. I think that never in my life have I enjoyed myself more than since I became a journalist."

"Is the thing paying dividends?" inquired the major.

Arthur laughed.

"I've just been figuring up the last month's expenditures and receipts," said he. "The first month didn't count, for we were getting started."

"And what's the result?" asked the Major.

"Every paper we send out--for one cent--costs us eighty-eight cents to manufacture."

There was a painful silence for a time, broken by the major's suggestive cough.

"I hope," said the old soldier, solemnly, "that the paper's circulation is very small."

"The smallest of any daily paper in all the civilized word, sir," declared the bookkeeper.

"Of course," remarked Louise, with dignity; "that is what distinguishes it. We did not undertake this publication to make money, and it does not cost us more than we are willing to pay for the exceptional experiences we are gaining."

The major raised his eyebrows; Arthur whistled softly; Uncle John smiled; but with one accord they dropped the disagreeable subject.

CHAPTER XVIII - OPEN WARFARE

Joe Wegg's machinery and dynamos arrived promptly and the electric plant was speedily installed at the old mill. So energetically had the young man supervised his work that poles and wires were all in place as far up the road as Thompson's Crossing and a branch line run to the Wegg Farm, by the time the first test was made.

All Millville celebrated that first night when its streets shone resplendent under the glare of electric lights. There was a public bonfire near the mill, speeches were made, and afterward Mr. Merrick served a free supper to the villagers, in the hall over Sam Cotting's General Store, where the girls assisted in waiting upon the guests, and everybody was happy and as hilarious as the fumes of good coffee could make them.

More speeches were made in the hall, and one of these was by Peggy McNutt, who had painted his wooden foot blue with red stripes in honor of the occasion. He said, according to the report afterward printed in the Tribune:

"Feller Citizens! This 'ere town's bloomin' like a new mown rose. I'll bet anybody anything there ain't another town in Ameriky what's gone ahead like we hev in the past few months that's jest past. (Applause.) If I do say it myself, we're the mos'--eh--the mos'--eh--progressioning community in--in--this community. Our community hes put out a daily paper what's a credit to--to--our community, especially the poetry; we've got a paper mill at Royal what makes paper fer New Yoruk; an' now, to cap the climate, our community hes lighted our community with 'lectric lights fit fer Lundon, New Yoruk, Canada or--or--or--our community. (Laughter and cries of "Cut out the community, Peggy!") No! Never, feller citizens, will I cut out a community what's done so much fer our--our community. If I do say it myself, the eyes of the com--of the world is upon us, an' I'm proud of the things that's ben did by our feller citizens, with my full approval, in this 'ere--this 'ere--er--community!" (Cheers and a sandwich, which last offering was received by Mr. McNutt in his back hair as he turned to descend from the rostrum.)

Joe Wegg is reported to have said: "Neighbors, this electric plant is no plaything. It is going to give you all better light, at no more cost to you than kerosene. But it will do more than that: it will run machinery of all kinds better than steam will. You've seen electricity running the newspaper press, and the same current has operated the big paper mills at Royal. Here in this audience is a gentleman from Connecticut who has accepted my invitation

to look over our village with a view to building a factory here, using the power I shall hereafter be able to furnish. I am in correspondence with two other manufacturers, whom I hope to induce to locate in Millville.

(Enthusiastic cheers.) Job Fisher, who used to live at Malvern, is planning to start a lumber mill, to cut the pine just north of here; so you see we are about to arouse from our long sleep and have a great future before us if we keep wide awake. Another item of news merits your attention. Bartlett has sold sixty acres of his farm to Dr. Adam Matthews, for many years a prominent physician of Boston, who is going to build a good house on the land and become a citizen of Millville. We've always had to go to Huntingdon for a doctor, but now Dr. Matthews has promised to look after the health of the Millville people, although he has retired from city practice. More people will come here from time to time, attracted by our enterprise and the rugged beauty of our county; real estate will become more valuable, trade will prosper and every one of the old inhabitants will find opportunities to make money." (Great applause.)

A general discussion followed concerning the "doin's of Joe Wegg" and the prophecies he had made. Opinion seemed divided as to whether the promised "boom" was desirable for Millville or not. Some of the good villagers were averse to personal activity and feared the new order of things might disturb their comfort; in others a mild ambition had been awakened. But while they feasted at Mr. Merrick's expense and gravely canvassed the situation, the newly installed electric lights suddenly failed. Darkness fell upon the assemblage and there was an awed hush until Sam Cotting lighted the old reliable kerosene lamps.

Joe Wegg was as much astonished as anyone.

"There has been an accident to the machinery," he said to Mr. Merrick. "I'll run over to the mill and see what has happened."

"I will go with you," said Arthur Weldon, and Major Doyle also decided to accompany the young man.

Uncle John and his three nieces remained in the hall, and Mr. Merrick took occasion to make a little speech in which he explained that a hitch in the working of the electric plant was liable to happen at first, but after a few days the dynamos could be fully depended upon.

He had scarcely finished this explanation when Arthur came running back into the hall in much excitement. He approached Mr. Merrick and said in a low voice:

"The machinery is all right, sir. Some one has cut the wires."

"Cut the wires!"

"Yes. Joe thinks it's the work of the mill hands. The wires are cut in all directions, and several of the men from Royal have been seen loitering around by Cox and Booth, the detectives."

The girls overheard this assertion, and Patsy exclaimed:

"I'm going to the office, to make sure our power hasn't been tampered with."

The meeting broke up at once and the villagers trooped out to investigate. Mr. Merrick and Arthur walked with the girls to the printing office, where they found Thursday Smith and Hetty working by the light of tallow candles.

"The power is off," said Smith quietly.

"Then the wire from Royal has also been cut," said Patsy. "What shall we do? His paper must come out to-morrow morning, in spite of anything and everything!"

"Do you know who cut the wires?" inquired Thursday.

"We think the mill hands must have done it."

"Not with Skeelty's consent, I'll be bound," said Mr. Merrick. "The manager is too fearful of a damage suit to play any tricks."

"A cut wire may be repaired," suggested the pressman, and even as he spoke Joe Wegg came in, accompanied by the two detectives and the major.

"Cox has interviewed one of the workmen from Royal," said Joe, "and the fellow says there's a strike at the mill and everything is closed down. Skeelty is barricaded in his office building, wild with fear, for the men have captured the company's store and helped themselves to the stock of liquors. The man Cox spoke with, who seems to be a well disposed fellow, predicts all kinds of trouble, and perhaps rioting, before this thing is ended."

They listened to this report in amazement.

"I conjecture," said the major, "that the rascally manager has given his men too much leeway. He's encouraged them in mischief until they've taken the bit between their teeth and turned against even their master. I have no personal acquaintance with the villain, but I imagine it serves him right."

"But, dear me!" cried Patsy, wringing her hands; "what'll become of the paper? It's nearly ten o'clock now."

Thursday turned to Joe Wegg.

"Can't we connect our supply wire with your new plant, so as to use your power?" he asked.

"Easily. An hour's work will serve to make the connection. But unless we watch the wire every minute those fellows will cut it again. The town's full of the rascals, and they're not exactly sober, either."

"Watch the wire; that's the idea," said Uncle John. "It's only a short distance to the mill, and I'm sure the villagers will volunteer for this duty."

"Of course," said Joe. "Major Doyle, will you mount guard over my men at the dynamos, to see they're not interfered with, while I look after the wire?"

"Sure enough; it'll remind me of the old war times," said the major readily.

"Where is Arthur?" asked Louise.

"We left him at the mill."

They left the office at once, Joe to get his line-men at work, and the major to join Weldon in guarding the dynamos. One of the detectives went with Mr. Wegg, but the other, whose name was Booth, remained to guard the printing office. Mr. Merrick now proposed that he take the girls home. Patsy and Beth refused to leave until the emergency was past, when the major and Arthur could drive them to the farm, but Louise was tired and went with Uncle John in his buggy, the surrey being left for the rest of the party to use. Arthur ran over for a moment to say everything was quiet at the mill and he did not think there would be any further trouble, and the report considerably reassured them.

CHAPTER XIX - A MERE MATTER OF REVENGE

Hetty and Thursday continued to work on the paper.

"We'll have everything ready by the time the line is connected," said the artist. "Then it will be but a few moments' work to run off the edition."

Patsy and Beth held candles for them, for the electric lights had been cut off with the power; so, seeing them all busily engaged, Arthur Weldon decided to return to the mill to join the Major. Booth sat in the front office, near the door, and in the darkness Arthur nearly stumbled over him.

"Going away, sir?" asked the man.

"Yes; I'll see if I can be of any assistance at the mill."

"Be careful. Those workmen have been drifting into town in squads, the last few minutes, and most of them are reckless with drink."

"I'll watch out," said Arthur.

In the middle of the road a group of mill hands conversed excitedly in some foreign tongue; but they paid no attention to Weldon as he passed them. Others joined them, presently, and one began a harangue in a loud voice, to which they listened eagerly. Then Bob West slipped across from the hardware store and ran against the detective in the doorway of the printing office.

"Who's this?" he demanded, holding the man in a firm grip.

"Booth, sir."

"Good. I could not recognize you in this darkness. Are you armed?"

"Yes."

"Then you and I will defend this door. Who is inside?"

"The pressman--Thursday Smith--and three of the girls."

"The compositors?"

"No; they've gone to the hotel. Miss Doyle, Miss DeGraf, and--Hetty Hewitt."

West went into the hack room, which was faintly illumined by candles stuck here and there. The girls and Smith were all bending over the imposing stone, where the forms of the paper were being made up.

"Here," said West, taking a revolver from his pocket and laying it on the table; "I'm afraid there may be an attack on this office in a few minutes, for I understand the language of those strikers and have been listening to them. If any of the mill hands attempt to break into this room don't be afraid to shoot."

"Why should the men wish to attack us, sir?" asked Patsy wonderingly.

"There are several reasons. They're after Smith, for one thing. They've an old grudge against him to settle. Aside from the mere matter of revenge I overheard one of them telling his friends to smash the press and keep the paper from coming out, and Mr. Boglin would pay them well for the job."

Smith carelessly thrust the revolver into his hip pocket.

"The paper will come out if Mr. Wegg gives us the power," he said.

"Can you let me have a revolver, Mr. West?" asked Hetty.

"Could you use it?"

"I think so."

He looked at her a moment and then took a second revolver from his pocket.

"I've robbed my hardware stock," he said with a smile. "But I advise you girls to keep your hands off the thing unless a crisis arises. I don't imagine the gang will get past me and Booth at the entrance, but if any stragglers come your way Smith has authority to drive them back. I'm justice of the peace, and I hereby appoint you all special officers of the law."

He said this lightly, fearing to alarm the girls unnecessarily, and then passed through the doorway and joined Booth at the front.

The telephone rang and Patsy answered it.

"How soon will the forms be ready?" asked Arthur's voice.

"In ten minutes--perhaps five," she answered.

"We'll have the power on in ten minutes more. Tell Smith not to lose an instant's time in running off the edition, for we don't know how long we can keep the line open. The strikers are threatening us, even now."

"All right," called Patsy; "just give us the power for a few minutes, and we'll be through for to-night."

She went back to Thursday and reported.

"There may be a few typographical errors, and I'm afraid it's a bad make-up," he remarked; "but I'll have the thing on the press in five minutes."

With mallet and shooting-stick he tightened the quoins, then lifted the heavy iron frames filled with type and slid them onto the bed of the press. They gave him all the light the flickering candles afforded as he adjusted the machinery, and all were bending over the press when a low, distant growl was heard, rising slowly to a frenzied shout. A revolver popped--another--followed by wild cries from the street.

The girls grew a little pale, but Thursday Smith put his hand on the lever of the press and said:

"All right. The moment they give us the current we're ready to run."

Patsy straightened up with a sigh of relief, then gave a low cry as the screens of the two windows of the pressroom were smashed in and through the openings men began to tumble into the room. At once Hetty confronted them with leveled revolver and the sight caused them to hesitate.

"Out o' the way, you women!" called a burly fellow who wore a green sweater and an oilskin hat; "we don't want to hurt you if we can help. There's the one we're after!" He pointed a finger at Thursday Smith.

"You can't have him," retorted Beth, half shielded behind the militant Hetty. "This is private property, and you're trespassing. Unless you go away at once you will suffer the consequences."

This defense seemed to surprise them, for they fell back a little toward the windows. At that moment, with a low rumble, the press started, moving slowly at first but gradually acquiring speed. The sight aroused the resentment of the invaders.

"Stop that press!" yelled their spokesman excitedly. "Stop it, Smith, or we'll put both you and the machine out of business."

Thursday paid no attention to anything but his press. The huge cylinder of white paper was unrolling, passing under the platen and emerging at the other end as neatly folded copies of the Millville Daily Tribune.

With a roar of rage the big fellow leaped forward, but at the action a shot rang out and he fell headlong almost at the foot of the press.

Beth and Patsy turned their heads an instant to glance at Hetty. The artist's face was white and set; her eyes sparkled brilliantly; she held the still smoking weapon in readiness for another shot.

But the men were awed by the fall of their leader. They watched Beth leap to the platform beside Thursday Smith and draw his revolver from his pocket, where he had placed it. Hetty's courage had inspired her, and Beth had handled pistols before. The men read the determined eyes fixed upon them; they noted Smith's indifference to their threats. The defenders of the press and pressman were only girls, but they were girls evidently not afraid to shoot.

No advance was made and the tableau was dramatic. Smith watched his press with undivided attention and it clattered away at full speed until the frail building shook with its powerful, steady motion. Then suddenly it began to slow down. The power was off, and the machine came to an abrupt stop.

Thursday stepped from the platform and looked at the index of the counter.

"Four hundred and sixty-three. Twenty-two short, Miss Doyle," he announced.

"That'll do, Thursday."

He came to her side, then, facing the sullen, glowering group of mill hands.

"Boys," said he, "it won't do you any good to interfere with us to-night. The paper for to-morrow morning is already printed, and Ojoy Boglin isn't a big enough man to stop it, now or ever. Better go back to Royal and settle your troubles with Skeelty, for if you stay here the citizens of Millville are in the mood to shoot you down like dogs."

They stood undecided a moment, but the argument had evidently struck home.

"What's the matter with Harris?" asked one, pointing to the motionless form of the man in the green sweater. "Is he dead?"

"I suppose so," answered Thursday coolly; but he stooped to examine Hetty's victim, rolling him over so that his face was upward. "No; he isn't hurt much, I'm sorry to say. The bullet glanced off his forehead and stunned him, that's all. Take the brute, if you want him, and go."

They obeyed in silence. Several stepped forward and raised the unconscious Harris, bearing him to the window, where they passed him to those without. Then they also retreated through the windows and the room was cleared.

Only then did Hetty and Beth venture to lower their weapons.

"Oh, dear!" cried Patsy, in a low, agitated voice; "I'm so glad you didn't kill him, Hetty."

"I'm not," returned the artist doggedly. "He deserved death, at the least, and by killing him I'd have cheated the gallows."

Then she glanced around at the horrified faces of her friends and burst into tears.

CHAPTER XX - DEFENDING THE PRESS

In the front room Bob West and the detective were having a busy time. At the first rush they each fired a shot over the heads of the mob, merely to let them know the place was guarded. In the darkness it was impossible for the strikers to tell how many armed men confronted them, so they fell back a little, but formed a cordon around the entire building. From the printing office to the old mill was a distance of only a few hundred feet, and every able-bodied inhabitant of Millville except Peggy McNutt and Sara Cotting-- who had discreetly disappeared at the first sign of danger--was assisting Joe Wegg to protect the electric cable he was trying to connect. The men from Royal were scattered all along the line, peering through the dim light to discover a vulnerable point of attack but deterred from interfering by the determination of the stalwart defenders. Mobs are invariably cowardly, and this one, composed of the lowest strata of mixed American and foreign laborers, was no exception to the general rule. However, when word was finally passed along from the mill that the dynamo was running and supplying power to the printing press, a howl of rage went up and a sudden rush was made for the line, the attack concentrating at one point.

The defenders promptly grouped themselves in front of the threatened pole and Seth Davis, the blacksmith, wielding a heavy sledge hammer, did valiant service, clearing a space around him with little difficulty. Joe Wegg, Arthur Weldon, Cox the detective, Lon Taft, Nick Thome and even little Skim Clark were all in the melee, fighting desperately for time to enable Thursday Smith to work his press, using whatever cudgels they had been able to pick up to keep the assailants from the pole. Slowly, however, they were forced back by superior numbers until finally one of the mill hands clambered up the pole and cut the wire.

"Never mind," said Arthur to Joe, as they retreated fighting toward the printing office; "I think they've had time to run off the edition, provided Smith was ready with the forms."

The mob was by this time in an ugly mood and the nearer Joe and Arthur edged toward the printing office the more numerous their enemies became. The Millville people were getting rather the worst of the scrimmage when out rushed Thursday Smith, swinging a stout iron bar he had taken from the press, and with this terrible weapon he struck out so vigorously that the diversion in their favor enabled the retreating villagers to gain the office,

where Booth and Bob West fired several shots that effectually checked the mob.

"Stand back, ye villains!" cried a loud voice, as Major Doyle marched calmly down the road from the mill; "how dare ye interfere with a gentleman?"

One of the leaders confronted him menacingly. The major slapped his face with the flat of his hand and then kicked the fellow in the shins.

"Didn't I say to get out o' my way?" he roared, and to the surprise of everyone--even the major, perhaps--they fell hack and allowed him to walk leisurely into the printing office.

Having succeeded in their primary attempt to cut the wire, and finding the determined band of defenders more dangerous than they had thought, the workmen retreated in the direction of Royal, where there was more to be gained by rioting than in Millville.

When at last the town was clear of them, Arthur, who was considerably battered and bruised but pleased with the triumphant ending of the adventure, drove the girls and the major to the farm. They urged Hetty to accompany them, but she declared she was not a bit nervous and preferred to sleep at the hotel.

"I think the trouble is over for to-night," said West, and all agreed with him. Cox and Booth decided to sleep in the printing office, and after the girls had driven away with their escorts and the villagers had dispersed to their homes, Thursday put on his coat and walked to the hotel with Hetty.

"All that row was about me," he remarked disconsolately.

"But they didn't get you," said Hetty, triumph in her voice.

"No."

He did not mention her bravery, or the loyal support of Beth and Patsy, but after a moment he added: "I'm not worth defending."

"How do you know?" asked Hetty. "It occurs to me, Mr. Smith, that you are as much a stranger to yourself as to us."

"That is true."

"And in emergencies you are not averse to defending others. Of course Miss DeGraf and her cousin wanted the paper printed, at all hazards. I don't blame them for that; but I--"

She hesitated.

"You simply stood by a comrade. Thank you, Hetty."

"Good night, Thursday."

"Will you be able to sleep to-night?"

"I'm going straight to bed. The rumpus has quieted my nerves."

"Good night, then."

In the early morning Mr. Merrick was awakened by a red glare that flooded his bedroom. Going to the window he found the sky at the north full of flame. He threw on his bathrobe and went to the door of Arthur Weldon's room, arousing the young man with a rap on the panels.

"The settlement at Royal is burning," he reported.

Arthur came out, very weary and drowsy, for he had not been asleep long and the strenuous work of the night had tired him.

"Let it burn," he said, glancing through a window at the lurid light of the conflagration. "We couldn't be of any use going over there and, after all, it isn't our affair to relieve Skeelty."

Then he told Uncle John of the riot in the village, for the old gentleman had been sound asleep when the party returned to the farm.

"The blaze is the work of those crazy strikers, I suppose," said Mr. Merrick. "It looks from here as if they had set fire to their own homes, as well as to the paper mills and office and store buildings. It will be fortunate if the forest does not also burn."

"Don't worry, sir," advised Arthur. "We'll discover the extent of the fire by daylight. For my part, I'm going back to bed, and it will be well for you to follow my example."

"Another item for the paper," whispered a soft voice, and there was Patsy beside them at the window.

Mr. Merrick sighed.

"I had no idea so much excitement could possibly happen at Millville," said he. "If this keeps on we'll have to go back to New York for quiet. But let us get to bed, my dear, for to-morrow is likely to be a busy day for us all."

CHAPTER XXI - THE COMING OF FOGERTY

The homeless mill hands flocked to Chazy Junction next day, from whence a freight train distributed them over other parts of the country. The clearing at Royal Falls was now a heap of charred embers, for every one of the cheap, rough-board buildings had been consumed by the fire.

Skeelty had watched the destruction of his plant with feelings of mingled glee and disgust. He was insured against loss, and his rash workmen, who had turned upon him so unexpectedly, had accidentally settled the strike and their own future by starting the fire during their drunken orgies. There being no longer a mill to employ them they went elsewhere for work, rather glad of the change and regretting nothing. As for the manager, he stood to lose temporary profits but was not wholly displeased by the catastrophe. Transportation of his manufactured products had been so irregular and undefendable that even while he watched the blaze he determined to rebuild his plant nearer the main line of a railway, for many such locations could be found where the pine was as plentiful as here.

At dawn he entered the hotel at Millville with his arms full of books and papers which he had succeeded in saving from the fire, and securing a room went directly to bed. It was afternoon when he awoke and after obtaining a meal he strolled out into the village and entered the newspaper office.

"Here's an item for your paper," he said to Patsy, who was busy at her desk. "The mills at Royal will never be rebuilt, and Millville has lost the only chance it ever had of becoming a manufacturing center. The whole settlement, which belonged to Boglin and myself, went up in smoke, and I'm willing to let it go at that. I shall collect the insurance, make myself good, and if anything's left over, that fool Boglin is welcome to it. I admit I made a mistake in ever allowing him to induce me to build at Royal. Boglin owned the land and I used his money, so I gave up to him; but I'm through with the honer'ble ass now. Put it all in the paper; it'll make him feel good. You might add that I'm taking the evening train for New York, shaking the dust of your miserable village from my feet for good and all."

"Thank you, sir," said Patsy, brightly; "the Millville people will appreciate their good luck, I'm sure."

Skeelty hung around the town for awhile, sneering at the new electric light plant and insolently railing at any of the natives who would converse with him. Then he hired Nick Thorne to drive him over to Chazy Junction, and that was the last Millville ever saw of him.

During this day Joe Wegg's men succeeded in repairing all the wires which had been tampered with and in making a proper and permanent connection of the cable to the printing office. That evening the village was again brilliantly lighted and thereafter the big dynamos whirled peacefully and without interruption.

The girls had a busy day, as Uncle John had predicted, for all the exciting incidents of the evening and night before had to be written up and the next day's paper teemed with "news" of a character to interest all its readers. Beth's editorial declared the neighborhood well rid of the paper mill, which had been of little advantage but had caused no end of annoyance because of the rough and mischievous character of the workmen employed. In this statement nearly everyone agreed with her.

Several had been wounded in the riot of the eventful evening, but none seriously injured. The workmen took away their damaged comrades and Lon Taft drove over to Huntingdon and had his head sewed up by the doctor. Other villagers suffered mere bruises, but all who engaged in the fight posed as heroes and even Peggy McNutt, who figured as "not present," told marvelous tales of how he had worsted seven mill hands in a stand-up fight, using only his invincible fists.

The following forenoon the liveryman at the Junction brought to Millville a passenger who had arrived by the morning train--a quiet, boyish-looking man with a shock of brick-red hair and a thin, freckled face. He was driven directly to the Merrick farm, where Uncle John received him cordially, but with surprise, and at once favored the new arrival with a long interview in his private room.

The girls, who had not yet gone to the office, awaited somewhat impatiently the result of this conference, for they already knew the red-headed youth to be the great Fogerty--admitted by even his would-be rivals, the king of New York detectives. Also they knew that Uncle John had employed him some time ago to ferret out the mystery of the identity of Thursday Smith, and the fact of Fogerty's presence indicated he had something to report.

However, when Mr. Merrick came out of the private room his usually cheery countenance wore a troubled expression. Fogerty was invariably placid and inscrutable, so no explanation could be gleaned from his demeanor.

"Ready for town, my dears?" asked Uncle John.

"Yes; the surrey is waiting," answered Louise.

"Then go along, and Fogerty and I will join you at the office presently. I want to confer with the major and Arthur before--before taking any steps to--"

"What's the news, Uncle?" demanded Patsy, impatiently.

"You shall know in good time."

"Who is Thursday Smith?"

"By and by, dear. Don't bother me now. But that reminds me; you are to say nothing to--to--Thursday about Mr. Fogerty's arrival. Treat him--Thursday, you know--just as you have always done, for the present, at least. Whatever we determine on in regard to this man, during our conference, we must not forget that he has acted most gallantly since he came to Millville. We really owe him a debt of gratitude."

With this somewhat incomprehensible statement the girls were forced to content themselves. Feeling quite helpless, they drove to the office and left the men to settle the fate of Thursday Smith.

The "pressman" was now the man-of-all-work about the modest but trim little publishing plant. He attended to whatever job printing came in, made the etchings from Hetty's drawings, cast the stereotypes, made up the forms and operated the press. But aside from this mechanical work Smith took the telegraphic news received by Hetty, edited and condensed it and wrote the black-letter headings over the various items. All this, with a general supervision over the girl compositors, kept the man busy from daybreak to midnight.

In spite of this, the Tribune was essentially a "girls' paper," since Thursday Smith was the only man employed on it--not counting the "dummy" editor, Arthur Weldon, who did nothing but keep the books, and found this not an arduous task. Hetty, at Miss Briggs' desk, attended the telegraph instrument and long-distance telephone, receiving news over both wires, and still found time to draw her daily cartoons and additional humorous sketches which she "worked in" whenever the mood seized her. The typesetting was done by the Dwyer sisters--a colorless pair but quite reliable--while the reportorial and editorial work was divided between Louise, Beth and Patsy, none of whom shirked a single duty. Indeed, they had come to love this work dearly and were enthusiastic over the Tribune, which they fondly believed was being watched with envious admiration by all the journalistic world.

This belief was not wholly due to egotism. Their "exchanges," both city and country, had shown considerable interest in the "Millville Experiment," as they called it, and only a few days before the leading journal of a good-sized city had commented at length on the "girls' newspaper" and, after indulging in some humorous remarks, concluded quite seriously with the statement

that "its evident sincerity, clean contents and typographical neatness render the Millville Daily Tribune worthy a better setting than the somnolent country village whose census is too low to be officially recorded."

"But that's all right," said Patsy, smiling at the praise; "we'd never have dared to start a newspaper anywhere else, because a journal that will do for Millville might not make a hit if it bumped against experienced competition."

"We were woefully ignorant when we began, a few weeks ago," commented Beth, glancing with pride at her latest editorial, which she thought had caught the oracular tone of the big city newspapers.

"And we're not expert journalists, even yet," added Louise, with a sigh. "We've improved, to be sure; but I imagine there is still lots of room for improvement."

"One trouble," said Patsy, "is that every inhabitant of Millville wants to see his or her name in print every day, whether he or she has done anything worthy of publication or not. If the name isn't printed, we've made an enemy; and, if it is, the paper is sure to suffer more or less ridicule."

"That is quite true, my dear," responded Louise, the reporter. "I've said everything, about every one of them, that has ever happened, or threatened to happen, since we started the paper, and it is driving me crazy to discover anything more about these stupid natives that will do to print."

Hetty had overheard this conversation and now looked up with a smile.

"Has your 'local happenings' column been prepared for to-morrow, Mrs. Weldon?" she inquired.

"No; I'm about to start out to unearth some items," replied Louise, wearily.

"Let me do it for you. I've an hour or so to spare and I won't need to leave my desk," suggested the artist.

"It is my duty, you know, Hetty, and I've no right to evade it."

"Evade it for to-day. Go home and rest. I'll do your column for to-morrow, and after the vacation you can tackle the thrilling situations with better courage."

"Thank you, Hetty. But I won't go home. I'll wait here to see Fogerty."

"Fogerty!" exclaimed the artist, with a start of surprise. "Do you mean the detective?"

"Yes," said Louise, regretting she had inadvertently mentioned the name.

"But what is there now to detect?" asked Hetty suspiciously. "Our troubles seem ended with the burning of the mill and the flitting of Skeelty and his workmen."

Louise hardly knew how to reply; but Patsy, who trusted the queer girl artist, said quite frankly:

"There remains the mystery of Thursday Smith to fathom, you know."

Hetty flushed and an indignant look swept over her face.

"What right has anyone to solve that mystery?" she asked defiantly. "Isn't that Thursday Smith's own business?"

"Perhaps," returned Patsy, somewhat amused; "but Smith hasn't been able to discover who he is--or was, rather--and seems really anxious to know."

Hetty bent over her desk for a time. Then she looked up and her thin features were white and drawn with anxiety.

"When you discover who Thursday Smith is," said she, "the Millville Tribune will lose its right bower."

"Why?"

"Before his accident, or whatever it was that made him lose his memory, he was an unusual man, a man of exceptional ability. You know that."

"We are all inclined to admit it," answered Patsy. "But what then?"

"Men of ability," declared Hetty slowly, "are of two classes: the very successful, who attain high and honorable positions, or the clever scoundrels who fasten themselves like leeches on humanity and bleed their victims with heartless unconcern. What will you gain if you unmask the past of Thursday Smith? You uncover a rogue or a man of affairs, and in either case you will lose your pressman. Better leave the curtain drawn, Miss Doyle, and accept Thursday Smith as he is."

There was so much good sense in this reasoning that all three girls were impressed and began to regret that Uncle John had called Fogerty to untangle the skein. But it was now too late for such repentance and, after all, they were curious to discover who their remarkable employee really was.

Even while the awkward silence that had fallen upon the group of girls continued, the door opened to admit Uncle John, Fogerty, Major Doyle and Arthur Weldon. Except for the detective they were stern-faced and uncompromising.

CHAPTER XXII = UNMASKED

Quintus Fogerty was as unlike the typical detective as one could imagine. Small in size, slight and boyish, his years could not readily be determined by the ordinary observer. His face was deeply furrowed and lined, yet a few paces away it seemed the face of a boy of eighteen. His cold gray eyes were persistently staring but conveyed no inkling of his thoughts. His brick-red hair was as unkempt as if it had never known a comb, yet the attire of the great detective was as fastidiously neat as if he had dressed for an important social function. Taken altogether there was something mistrustful and uncanny about Fogerty's looks, and his habit of eternally puffing cigarettes rendered his companionship unpleasant. Yet of the man's professional ability there was no doubt; Mr. Merrick and Arthur Weldon had had occasion to employ him before, with results that justified their faith in him.

The detective greeted the young ladies with polite bows, supplemented by an aimless compliment on the neatness of their office.

"Never would have recognized it as a newspaper sanctum," said he in his thin, piping voice. "No litter, no stale pipes lying about, no cursing and quarreling, no excitement whatever. The editorial room is the index to the workshop; I'll see if the mechanical department is kept as neatly."

He opened the door to the back room, passed through and closed it softly behind him. Mr. Merrick made a dive for the door and followed Fogerty.

"What's the verdict, Arthur?" asked Louise curiously.

"Why, I--I believe the verdict isn't rendered yet," he hastily replied, and followed Mr. Merrick into the pressroom.

"Now, then," cried Patsy, grabbing the major firmly, "you'll not stir a step, sir, until you tell us the news!"

"What news, Patricia?" Inquired the old gentleman blandly.

"Who was Thursday Smith?"

"The identical individual he is now," said the Major.

"Don't prevaricate, sir! Who was he? What did he do? What is his right name?"

"Is it because you are especially interested in this man, my dear, or are ye simply consumed with feminine curiosity?"

"Be good, Daddy! Tell us all about it," said Patsy coaxingly.

"The man Thursday, then, was likely enough the brother of Robinson Crusoe's man Friday."

"Major, you're trifling!"

"Or mayhap an ex-president of the United States, or forby the senator from Oklahoma. Belike he was once minister to Borneo, an' came home in a hurry an' forgot who he was. But John Merrick will be wanting me."

He escaped and opened the door. Then, with his hand on the knob, he turned and added:

"Why don't ye come in, me journalistic investigators, and see the fun for yerselves? I suspect there's an item in store for ye."

Then he went in, and they took the hint and entered the pressroom in a fluttering group. Fogerty stood with his hands in his pockets intently watching the Dwyer girls set type, while at his elbow Mr. Merrick was explaining in a casual voice how many "m's" were required to make a newspaper column. In another part of the long room Arthur Weldon was leaning over a table containing the half-empty forms, as if critically examining them. Smith, arrayed in overalls and jumper, was cleaning and oiling the big press.

"A daily newspaper," said the major, loudly, as he held up a warning finger to the bevy of nieces, behind whom Hetty's pale face appeared, "means a daily grind for all concerned in it. There's no vacation for the paper, no hyphens, no skipping a day or two if it has a bad cold; it's the tyrant that leads its slaves by the nose, metaphorically, and has no conscience. Just as regularly as the world rolls 'round the press rolls out the newspaper, and human life or death makes little difference to either of the revolutionists."

While he spoke the Major led the way across the room to the stereotyping plant, which brought his party to a position near the press. Smith glanced at them and went on with his work. It was not unusual to have the pressroom thus invaded.

Presently Fogerty strolled over, smoking his eternal cigarette, and stood watching the pressman, as if interested in the oiling of the complicated machine. Smith, feeling himself under observation, glanced up again in an unconcerned way, and as he faced the detective Fogerty gave a cleverly assumed start and exclaimed:

"Good God!"

Instantly Thursday Smith straightened up and looked at the man questioningly. Fogerty stretched out his hand and said, as if in wonder:

"Why, Melville, old man, what are you doing here? We wondered what had become of you, all these months. Shake hands, my boy! I'm glad I've found you."

Smith leaned against the press and stared at him with dilated eyes. Everyone in the room was regarding the scene with intense but repressed excitement.

"What's wrong, Harold?" continued Fogerty, as if hurt by the other's hesitation to acknowledge their acquaintance. "You haven't forgotten me, have you? I'm McCormick, you know, and you and I have had many a good time together in the past."

Smith passed his hand across his forehead with a dazed gesture.

"What name did you call me, sir?" he asked.

"Melville; Harold Melville, of East Sixty-sixth street. I'm sure I'm right. There can't be two like you in the world, you know."

Thursday Smith stepped down from the platform and with a staggering gait walked to a stool, on which he weakly sank. He wiped the beads of perspiration from his forehead and looked at Fogerty with a half frightened air.

"And you--are--McCormick?" he faltered.

"Of course."

Smith stared a moment and then shook his head.

"It's no use," he said despairingly; "I can't recall a single memory of either Harold Melville or--or his friend McCormick. Pardon me, sir; I must confess my mind is absolutely blank concerning all my life previous to the last two years. Until this moment I--I could not recall my own name."

"H'm," muttered Fogerty; "you recall it now, don't you?"

"No. You tell me my name is Melville, and you seem to recognize me as a man whom you once knew. I accept your statement in good faith, but I cannot corroborate it from my own knowledge."

"That's queer," retorted Fogerty, his cold eyes fixed upon the man's face.

"Let me explain, please," said Smith, and related his curious experience in practically the same words he had employed when confiding it to Mr. Merrick. "I had hoped," he concluded, "that if ever I met one who knew me formerly, or heard my right name mentioned, my memory would come back to me; but in this I am sorely disappointed. Did you know me well, sir?"

"Pretty well," answered the detective, after a slight hesitation.

"Then tell me something about myself. Tell me who I was."

"Here--in public?" asked Fogerty, with a suggestive glance at the spectators, who had involuntarily crowded nearer.

Smith flushed, but gazed firmly into the faces surrounding him.

"Why not?" he returned. "These young ladies and Mr. Merrick accepted me without knowledge of my antecedents. They are entitled to as full an explanation as--as I am."

"You place me, Melville, in a rather embarrassing position," declared Fogerty. "This is a queer case--the queerest in all my experience. Better let me post you in a private interview."

Smith trembled a bit, from nervousness; but he persisted in his demand.

"These people are entitled to the truth," said he. "Tell us frankly all you know about me, and do not mince words--whatever the truth may be."

"Oh, it's not so bad," announced the detective, with a shrug; "or at least it wouldn't be in New York, among your old aristocratic haunts. But here, in a quiet country town, among these generous and simple-hearted folks who have befriended you, the thing is rather difficult to say."

"Say it!" commanded Smith.

"I will. Many New Yorkers remember the firm of Melville & Ford, the cleverest pair of confidence men who ever undertook to fleece the wealthy lambs of the metropolis."

"Confidence men!" gasped Smith, in a voice of horror.

"Yes, putting it mildly. You were both jolly good fellows and made a host of friends. You were well-groomed, rode in automobiles, frequented good clubs and had a stunning establishment on Sixty-sixth street where you entertained lavishly. You could afford to, for there was where you fleeced your victims. But it wasn't so very bad, as I said. You chose the wealthy sons of the super-rich, who were glad to know such popular men-about-town as Harold Melville and Edgar Ford. When one set of innocents had

been so thoroughly trimmed that they compared notes and began to avoid you, you had only to pick up another bunch of lambs, for New York contains many distinct flocks of the species. As they could afford to lose, none of them ever complained to the police, although the Central Office had an eye on you and knew your methods perfectly.

"Finally you made a mistake--or rather Ford did, for he was not as clever as you were. He brought an imitation millionaire to your house; a fellow who was putting up a brazen front on the smallest sort of a roll. You won his money and he denounced you, getting away with a pack of marked cards for evidence. At this you both took fright and decided on a hasty retreat. Gathering together your plunder--which was a royal sum, I'm convinced--you and Ford jumped into a motor car and--vanished from New York.

"The balance of your history I base on premise. Ford has been located in Chicago, where, with an ample supply of money, he is repeating his New York operations; but Harold Melville has never been heard of until this day. I think the true explanation is easily arrived at. Goaded by cupidity--and perhaps envy of your superior talents--Ford took advantage of the situation and, finding the automobile speeding along a deserted road, knocked you on the head, tumbled you out of the car, and made off with your combined winnings. The blow had the effect--not so uncommon as you think--of destroying your recollection of your past life, and you have for two years been wandering in total ignorance of what caused your affliction."

During this recital Smith sat with his eyes eagerly fixed upon the speaker's face, dwelling upon every word. At the conclusion of the story he dropped his face in his hands a moment, visibly shuddering. Then again he looked up, and after reading the circle of pitying faces confronting him he bravely met Mr. Merrick's eyes.

"Sir," he said in a voice that faltered in spite of his efforts to render it firm, "you now know who I am. When I first came to you I was a mere irresponsible hobo, a wandering tramp who had adopted the name of Thursday Smith because he was ignorant of his own, but who had no cause to be ashamed of his manhood. To-day I am discovered in my true guise. As Harold Melville, the disreputable trickster, I am not fit to remain in your employ--to associate with honest men and women. You will forgive my imposition, I think, because you know how thoroughly ignorant I was of the truth; but I will impose upon you no longer. I am sorry, sir, for I have been happy here; but I will go, thanking you for the kindly generosity that prompted you to accept me as I seemed to be, not as I am."

He rose, his face showing evidence of suffering, and bowed gravely. Hetty Hewitt walked over and stood by his side, laying her hand gently upon his arm.

But Thursday Smith did not know John Merrick very well. The little gentleman had silently listened, observing meanwhile the demeanor of the accused, and now he smiled in his pleasant, whimsical way and caught Smith's hand in both his own.

"Man, man!" he cried, "you're misjudging both me and yourself, I don't know this fellow Melville. You don't know him, either. But I do know Thursday Smith, who has won my confidence and by his manly acts, and I'll stand by him through thick and thin!"

"I am Harold Melville--the gambler--the confidence man."

"You're nothing of the sort, you're just Thursday Smith, and no more responsible for Harold Melville than I am."

"Hooray!" exclaimed Patsy Doyle enthusiastically. "Uncle's right, Thursday. You're our friend, and the mainstay of the Millville Daily Tribune. We shall not allow you to desert us just because you've discovered that your--your--ancestor--wasn't quite respectable."

"That's it, exactly," asserted Beth. "It's like hearing a tale of an ancestor, Thursday, or of some member of your family who lived before you. You cannot be responsible, in any way, for another man's wickedness."

"As I look at it," said Louise reflectively, "you are just two years old, Thursday, and innocent of any wrongdoing before that day you first found yourself."

"There's no use our considering Melville at all," added Uncle John cheerfully. "I'm sorry we ever heard of him, except that in one way it clears up a mystery. Thursday Smith, we like you and trust you. Do not doubt yourself because of this tale. I'll vouch for your fairness and integrity. Forget Melville, who has never really existed so far as any of us are concerned; be yourself, and count on our friendship and regard, which Thursday Smith has fairly won."

Hetty was crying softly, her cheek laid against Thursday's sleeve. The man stood as if turned to stone, but his cheeks were flushed, his eyes sparkling, and his head proudly poised.

Fogerty lighted a fresh cigarette, watching the scene with an imperturbable smile.

Suddenly Smith awoke to life. He half turned, looked wonderingly at Hetty, and then folded her thin form in his arms and pressed a kiss on her forehead.

Fogerty coughed. Uncle John jerked out his handkerchief and blew his nose like a bugle call.

The major's eyes were moist, for the old soldier was sympathetic as a child. But Patsy, a little catch in her voice, impulsively put her arms around the unashamed pair and murmured: "I'm so glad, Hetty! I'm so glad, Thursday! But--dear me--aren't we going to have any paper to-morrow morning?"

That relieved the tension and everybody laughed. Thursday released Hetty and shook Uncle John's hand most gratefully. Then they all wanted to shake hands, and did until it came to Fogerty's turn. But now Smith drew back and looked askance at the detective.

"I do not know you, Mr. McCormick," he said with dignity.

"My name's not McCormick; it's Fogerty," said the other, without malice. "I was simply testing your memory by claiming to be an old friend. Personally I never knew Harold Melville, but I'm mighty glad to make Thursday Smith's acquaintance and will consider it an honor if you'll shake my hand."

Smith was too happy to refuse. He took Fogerty's hand.

CHAPTER XXIII - THE JOURNALISTS ABDICATE

Mr. Merrick told Thursday Smith, in an apologetic way, how he had hired Fogerty to unravel the mystery of his former life, and how the great detective had gone to work so intelligently and skillfully that, with the aid of a sketch Hetty had once made of the pressman, and which Mr. Merrick sent on, he had been able to identify the man and unearth the disagreeable details of his history.

Thursday was too humble, by this time, and too grateful, besides, to resent Uncle John's interference. He admitted that, after all, it was better he should know the truth.

"I've nothing to bother me now but the future," he said, "and with God's help I mean to keep the name of Thursday Smith clean and free from any reproach."

After the interview he went about his duties as before and Hetty sat down at her desk and took the telegraphic news that came clicking over the wire as if nothing important in her life had occurred. But the girl journalists were all excitement and already were beginning to plan the things they might do to make Hetty and Thursday happier. Cox and Booth had gone away and Mr. Merrick thanked Fogerty for his skillful service and gave him a fat check.

"It's a mighty interesting case, sir," declared the detective, "and I'm as glad as any of you that it has ended so comfortably. Whatever Melville might have been--and his record is a little worse than I related it--there's no doubt of Thursday Smith's honesty. He's a mighty fine fellow, and Fate played a proper trick when she blotted out his unscrupulous mind and left him as innocent as an unborn babe. He will do well in his new life, I'm sure, and that girl of his, Hetty Hewitt--I've know of her reckless ways for years--has also redeemed herself and turned out a regular brick! All of which, Mr. Merrick is unusual in real life, more's the pity, and therefore it makes even a cold-blooded detective feel good to witness it."

Mr. Merrick smiled benignantly and Fogerty drove over to the Junction to catch his train.

After luncheon, Patsy, while arranging her galley proofs, inquired of Louise for the local column.

"Hetty said she'd attend to it," was the reply; "but we are all upset to-day and things are at sixes and sevens."

"The column is all prepared, Miss Doyle," announced Hetty.

"Where is it?"

"Thursday has made it ready for the press. It's--illustrated," she confessed. "I'd rather you wouldn't see it until the paper is out, if you can trust me."

"To be sure," said Patsy. "That's one responsibility I'm relieved of, anyhow."

The paper was a bit uneven in appearance next morning, but when Patsy came down to breakfast she found both Uncle John and the major roaring with laughter over Hetty's locals.

The first item stated that "Mrs. Thorne took tea at Sam Cotting's last evening," (the Cottings being notoriously inhospitable) and the picture showed Mrs. Thorne, a sour-faced woman, departing from the store with a package of tea. Then came the announcement that "Eph Hildreth got shot at West's hardware store," and there was a picture of West weighing out a pound of buckshot for his customer. The next item said: "Our distinguished fellow citizen, Marshall Peggy McNutt, was discovered unconscious on his front porch at 3 p.m." The drawing of McNutt was one of the best of the series. It was his habit to "snooze" in an easy chair on his porch every afternoon, and Hetty depicted the little man with both feet--meat and wood--on the rail, his mouth open and eyes shut, while lusty snores were indicated by radiating lines and exclamation points. The Widow Clark's cow occupied the next square, being tethered to a stake while Skim approached the animal with pail and milking-stool. Below the drawing were the words: "Mr. Skimton Clark, cowward." A few other local hits were concluded by a picture of Hon. Ojoy Boglin shaking his fist at Mr. Skeelty, who held a package of money in his grasp labeled "insurance." Below was the simple legend: "O Joy!"

The artist's cleverness became the subject of conversation at the breakfast table, and Arthur remarked:

"You won't be able to hold Hetty in Millville long. Her talent enables her to draw big salaries in New York and it isn't likely she will consent to bury herself in this little town."

"I'm not so sure," said Patsy. "If we can hold Thursday Smith we can hold Hetty, you know."

"We won't need to hold either of them for long," observed Beth; "for in another three weeks or so we must leave here and return to the city, when of course the Millville Daily Tribune must suspend publication."

"I've been thinking of that," said Uncle John.

"So have I," declared Patsy. "For a long time I was puzzled what to do, for I hated dreadfully to kill our dear Tribune after we've made it such a nice paper. Yet I knew very well we couldn't stay here all winter and run it. But last night I had an inspiration. Thursday will marry Hetty, I suppose, and they can both stay here and run the Tribune. They are doing most of the work now. If Uncle John agrees, we will sell out to them on 'easy terms.'"

"Good gracious, Patsy!" chuckled the major, "wherever can the poor things borrow money to keep going? Do you want to load onto an innocent bride an' groom the necessity of meeting a deficit of a couple of hundred dollars every week?"

Patsy's face fell.

"They have no money, I know," she said, "except what they earn."

"And their wages'll be cut off when they begin hiring themselves," added the major. "No; you can't decently thrust such an incubus on Hetty and Thursday--or on anyone else. You've been willing to pay the piper for the sake of the dance, but no one else would do it."

"Quite true," agreed Arthur. "The days of the Millville Tribune are numbered."

"Let us not settle that question just yet," proposed Mr. Merrick, who had been deep in thought. "I'll consider Patsy's proposition for awhile and then talk with Thursday. The paper belongs to the girls, but the outfit is mine, and I suppose I may do what I please with it when my nieces retire from journalism."

Even the major could not demur at this statement and so the conversation dropped. During the next few days Uncle John visited the printing office several times and looked over the complete little plant with speculative eyes. Then one day he made a trip to Malvern, thirty miles up the railway line from the Junction, where a successful weekly paper had long been published. He interviewed the editor, examined the outfit critically, and after asking numerous questions returned to Millville in excellent spirits.

Then he invited Thursday Smith and Hetty to dine at the farm on Saturday evening, which was the one evening in the week they were free, there being no Sunday morning paper. Thursday had bought a new suit of clothes since he came to the Tribune, and Hetty, after much urging, finally prevailed upon him to accept the invitation. When the young man appeared at the farm he wore his new suit with an air of perfect ease that disguised its cheapness, and it was noticed that he seemed quite at home in the handsome living-room, where the party assembled after dinner.

"I am in search of information, Thursday," said Uncle John in his pleasant way. "Will you permit me to question you a bit?"

"Certainly, sir."

"And you, Hetty?"

"Ask anything you like, sir."

"Thank you. To begin with, what are your future plans? I understand, of course, you are to be married; but--afterward?"

"We haven't considered that as yet, sir," replied Thursday thoughtfully. "Of course we shall stay with the Tribune as long as you care to employ our services; but--"

"Well?"

"I have been given to understand the young ladies plan to return to New York at the end of September, and in that case of course the paper will suspend."

"My nieces will be obliged to abandon journalism, to be sure," said Mr. Merrick; "but I see no reason why the paper should suspend. How would you and Hetty like to remain in Millville and run it?"

Both Thursday and Hetty smiled, but it was the man who answered;

"We cannot afford such a luxury, sir."

"Would you care to make your future home in Millville?"

"Oh, yes!" exclaimed Hetty. "I love the quaint little town dearly, and the villagers are all my friends. I'm sure Thursday doesn't care to go back to New York, where--where Harold Melville once lived. But, as he truly says, we couldn't make a living with the Tribune, even if you gave us the use of the plant."

"Let us see about that," said Uncle John. "I will admit, in advance, that a daily paper in such a place is absurd. None of us quite understood that when we established the Tribune. My nieces thought a daily the only satisfactory sort of newspaper, because they were used to such, but it did not take long to convince me--and perhaps them--that in spite of all our efforts the Millville Daily Tribune would never thrive. It is too expensive to pay its own way and requires too much work to be a pleasant plaything. Only unbounded enthusiasm and energy have enabled my clever nieces to avoid being swamped by the monster their ambition created."

"That," said Patsy, with a laugh, "is very clearly and concisely put, my dear Uncle."

"It was never intended to be a permanent thing, anyhow," continued Mr. Merrick; "yet I must express my admiration for the courage and talent my nieces have displayed in forcing a temporary success where failure was the logical conclusion. Shortly, however, they intend to retire gracefully from the field of journalism, leaving me with a model country newspaper plant on my hands. Therefore it is I, Thursday and Hetty, and not my nieces, who have a proposition to place before you.

"While a daily paper is not appropriate in Millville, a weekly paper, distributed throughout Chazy County, would not only be desirable but could be made to pay an excellent yearly profit. Through the enterprise of Joe Wegg, Millville is destined to grow rapidly from this time on, and Chazy County is populous enough to support a good weekly paper, in any event. Therefore, my proposition is this: To turn the plant over to Mr. and Mrs. Thursday Smith, who will change the name to the Millville Weekly Tribune and run it as a permanent institution. Your only expense for labor will be one assistant to set type and do odd jobs, since you are so competent that you can attend to all else yourselves. We will cut out the expensive news service we have heretofore indulged in and dispense with the private telegraph wire. Joe Wegg says he'll furnish you with what power you need free of all charge, because the paper will boost Millville's interests, with which his own interests are identified. Now, then, tell me what you think of my proposal."

Hetty and Thursday had listened attentively and their faces proved they were enthusiastic over the idea. They said at once they would be glad to undertake the proposition.

"However," said Thursday, after a little reflection, "there are two things that might render our acceptance impossible. I suppose you will require rent for the outfit; but for a time, until we get well started, we could not afford to pay as much as you have a right to demand."

"I have settled on my demands," replied Mr. Merrick, "and hope you will agree to them. You must pay me for the use of the outfit twenty per cent of your net profits, over and above all your operating and living expenses. When this sum has reimbursed me for my investment, the outfit will belong to you."

Thursday Smith looked his amazement.

"That seems hardly business-like, sir," he protested.

"You are right; but this isn't entirely a business deal. You are saving my nieces the humiliation of suspending the paper they established and have labored on so lovingly. Moreover, I regard you and Hetty as friends whom I am glad to put in the way of a modest but--I venture to predict--a successful business career. What is your second objection?"

"I heard Mr. West say the other day that he would soon need the building we occupy to store his farm machinery in."

"True; but I have anticipated that. I have completed plans for the erection of a new building for the newspaper, which will be located on the vacant lot next to the hotel. I purchased the lot a long time ago. The new building, for which the lumber is already ordered, will be a better one than the shed we are now in, and on the second floor I intend to have a cozy suite of rooms where you and Hetty can make a home of your own. Eh? How does that strike you, my children?"

Their faces were full of wonder and delight.

"The new building goes with the outfit, on the same terms," continued Mr. Merrick. "That is I take one-fifth of your net profits for the whole thing."

"But, sir," suggested Thursday, "suppose no profits materialize?"

"Then I have induced you to undertake a poor venture and must suffer the consequences, which to me will be no hardship at all. In that case I will agree to find some better business for you, but I am quite positive you will make a go of the Millville Weekly Tribune."

"I think so, too, Mr. Merrick, or I would not accept your generous offer," replied Smith.

"What do you think, Hetty?"

"The idea pleases me immensely," she declared. "It is a splendid opportunity for us, and will enable us to live here quietly and forget the big outside world. New York has had a bad influence on both you and me, Thursday, and here we can begin a new life of absolute respectability."

"When do you intend to be married?" asked Patsy.

"We have scarcely thought of that, as yet, for until this evening we did not know what the future held in store for us."

"Couldn't you arrange the wedding before we leave?" asked Beth. "It would delight us so much to be present at the ceremony."

"I think we owe the young ladies that much, Thursday," said Hetty, after a brief hesitation.

"Nothing could please me better," he asserted eagerly.

So they canvassed the wedding, and Patsy proposed they transfer the paper to Thursday and Hetty--to become a weekly instead of a daily--in a week's time, and celebrate the wedding immediately after the second issue, so as to give the bridal couple a brief vacation before getting to work again. Neither of them wished to take a wedding trip, and Mr. Merrick promised to rush the work on the new building so they could move into their new rooms in the course of a few weeks.

CHAPTER XXIV

A CHEERFUL BLUNDER

"We would like to ask your advice about one thing, sir," said Thursday Smith to Mr. Merrick, a little later that same evening. "Would it be legal for me to marry under the name of Thursday Smith, or must I use my real name--Harold Melville?"

Uncle John could not answer this question, nor could the major or Arthur. Hetty and her fiancé had both decided to cling to the name of Thursday Smith thereafter, and they disliked to be married under any other--especially the detestable one of Harold Melville.

"An act of legislature would render your new name legal, I believe," said Mr. Merrick; "but such an act could not be passed until after the date you have planned to be married."

"But if it was made legal afterward it wouldn't matter greatly," suggested the major.

"I do not think it matters at all," asserted Hetty. "It's the man I'm marrying, not his name. I don't much care what he calls himself."

"Oh, but it must be legal, you know!" exclaimed Patsy. "You don't care now, perhaps, but you might in the future. We cannot be certain, you know, that Thursday is entirely free from his former connection with Harold Melville."

"Quite true," agreed the major.

"Then," said Smith, with evident disappointment, "I must use the hateful name of Melville for the wedding, and afterward abandon it for as long as possible."

The nieces were greatly pleased with Uncle John's arrangement, which relieved them of the newspaper and also furnished Thursday and Hetty, of whom they had grown really fond, with a means of gaining a livelihood.

Millville accepted the new arrangement with little adverse comment, the villagers being quite satisfied with a weekly paper, which would cost them far less than the daily had done. Everyone was pleased to know Thursday Smith had acquired the business, for both he and Hetty had won the cordial friendship of the simple-hearted people and were a little nearer to them than "the nabob's girls" could ever be.

Preparations were speedily pushed forward for the wedding, which the nieces undertook to manage themselves, the prospective bride and groom

being too busy at the newspaper office to devote much attention to the preliminaries of the great event.

The ceremony was to take place at the farmhouse of Mr. Merrick, and every inhabitant of Millville was invited to be present. The minister would drive over from Hooker's Falls, and the ceremony was to be followed by a grand feast, for which delicacies were to be imported from New York.

The girls provided a complete trousseau for Hetty, as their wedding present, while Arthur and the major undertook to furnish the new apartments, which were already under construction. Uncle John's gift was a substantial check that would furnish the newly married couple with modest capital to promote their business or which they could use in case of emergencies.

It was the very day before the wedding that Fogerty gave them so great and agreeable a surprise that Uncle John called it "Fogerty's Wedding Present" ever afterward. In its physical form it was merely a telegram, but in its spiritual and moral aspect it proved the greatest gift Thursday and Hetty were destined to receive. The telegram was dated from New York and read as follows:

"Harold Melville just arrested here for passing a bogus check under an assumed name. Have interviewed him and find he is really Melville, so Thursday Smith must be some one else, and doubtless a more respectable character. Shall I undertake to discover his real identity?"

Uncle John let Thursday and Hetty answer this question, and their reply was a positive "no!"

"The great Fogerty made such a blunder the first time," said Hetty, who was overjoyed at the glorious news, "that he might give poor Thursday another dreadful scare if he tackled the job again. Let the mystery remain unfathomable."

"But, on the contrary, my dear, Fogerty might discover that Thursday was some eminent and good man--as I am firmly convinced is the truth," suggested Mr. Merrick.

"He's that right now," asserted Hetty. "For my part, I prefer to know nothing of his former history, and Thursday says the present situation thoroughly contents him."

"I am more than contented," said Thursday, with a happy smile. "Hetty has cured me of my desire to wander, and no matter what I might have been in the past I am satisfied to remain hereafter a country editor."