

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 gossipy 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."