

## 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 McMahon 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 jest 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 Coting, 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. Thet'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 Coting 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!"