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 we're 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 pommeled 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.