

## 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."