

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 wade 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.