

CHAPTER XXI

THE COMING OF FOGERTY

The homeless mill hands flocked to Chazy Junction next day, from whence a freight train distributed them over other parts of the country. The clearing at Royal Falls was now a heap of charred embers, for every one of the cheap, rough-board buildings had been consumed by the fire.

Skeelty had watched the destruction of his plant with feelings of mingled glee and disgust. He was insured against loss, and his rash workmen, who had turned upon him so unexpectedly, had accidentally settled the strike and their own future by starting the fire during their drunken orgies. There being no longer a mill to employ them they went elsewhere for work, rather glad of the change and regretting nothing. As for the manager, he stood to lose temporary profits but was not wholly displeased by the catastrophe. Transportation of his manufactured products had been so irregular and undefendable that even while he watched the blaze he determined to rebuild his plant nearer the main line of a railway, for many such locations could be found where the pine was as plentiful as here.

At dawn he entered the hotel at Millville with his arms full of books and papers which he had succeeded in saving from the fire, and securing a room went directly to bed. It was afternoon when he awoke and after

obtaining a meal he strolled out into the village and entered the newspaper office.

"Here's an item for your paper," he said to Patsy, who was busy at her desk. "The mills at Royal will never be rebuilt, and Millville has lost the only chance it ever had of becoming a manufacturing center. The whole settlement, which belonged to Boglin and myself, went up in smoke, and I'm willing to let it go at that. I shall collect the insurance, make myself good, and if anything's left over, that fool Boglin is welcome to it. I admit I made a mistake in ever allowing him to induce me to build at Royal. Boglin owned the land and I used his money, so I gave up to him; but I'm through with the honer'ble ass now. Put it all in the paper; it'll make him feel good. You might add that I'm taking the evening train for New York, shaking the dust of your miserable village from my feet for good and all."

"Thank you, sir," said Patsy, brightly; "the Millville people will appreciate their good luck, I'm sure."

Skeelty hung around the town for awhile, sneering at the new electric light plant and insolently railing at any of the natives who would converse with him. Then he hired Nick Thorne to drive him over to Chazy Junction, and that was the last Millville ever saw of him.

During this day Joe Wegg's men succeeded in repairing all the wires which had been tampered with and in making a proper and permanent

connection of the cable to the printing office. That evening the village was again brilliantly lighted and thereafter the big dynamos whirled peacefully and without interruption.

The girls had a busy day, as Uncle John had predicted, for all the exciting incidents of the evening and night before had to be written up and the next day's paper teemed with "news" of a character to interest all its readers. Beth's editorial declared the neighborhood well rid of the paper mill, which had been of little advantage but had caused no end of annoyance because of the rough and mischievous character of the workmen employed. In this statement nearly everyone agreed with her.

Several had been wounded in the riot of the eventful evening, but none seriously injured. The workmen took away their damaged comrades and Lon Taft drove over to Huntingdon and had his head sewed up by the doctor. Other villagers suffered mere bruises, but all who engaged in the fight posed as heroes and even Peggy McNutt, who figured as "not present," told marvelous tales of how he had worsted seven mill hands in a stand-up fight, using only his invincible fists.

The following forenoon the liveryman at the Junction brought to Millville a passenger who had arrived by the morning train--a quiet, boyish-looking man with a shock of brick-red hair and a thin, freckled face. He was driven directly to the Merrick farm, where Uncle John received him cordially, but with surprise, and at once favored the new arrival with a long interview in his private room.

The girls, who had not yet gone to the office, awaited somewhat impatiently the result of this conference, for they already knew the red-headed youth to be the great Fogerty--admitted by even his would-be rivals, the king of New York detectives. Also they knew that Uncle John had employed him some time ago to ferret out the mystery of the identity of Thursday Smith, and the fact of Fogerty's presence indicated he had something to report.

However, when Mr. Merrick came out of the private room his usually cheery countenance wore a troubled expression. Fogerty was invariably placid and inscrutable, so no explanation could be gleaned from his demeanor.

"Ready for town, my dears?" asked Uncle John.

"Yes; the surrey is waiting," answered Louise.

"Then go along, and Fogerty and I will join you at the office presently. I want to confer with the major and Arthur before--before taking any steps to--"

"What's the news, Uncle?" demanded Patsy, impatiently.

"You shall know in good time."

"Who is Thursday Smith?"

"By and by, dear. Don't bother me now. But that reminds me; you are to say nothing to--to--Thursday about Mr. Fogerty's arrival. Treat him--Thursday, you know--just as you have always done, for the present, at least. Whatever we determine on in regard to this man, during our conference, we must not forget that he has acted most gallantly since he came to Millville. We really owe him a debt of gratitude."

With this somewhat incomprehensible statement the girls were forced to content themselves. Feeling quite helpless, they drove to the office and left the men to settle the fate of Thursday Smith.

The "pressman" was now the man-of-all-work about the modest but trim little publishing plant. He attended to whatever job printing came in, made the etchings from Hetty's drawings, cast the stereotypes, made up the forms and operated the press. But aside from this mechanical work Smith took the telegraphic news received by Hetty, edited and condensed it and wrote the black-letter headings over the various items. All this, with a general supervision over the girl compositors, kept the man busy from daybreak to midnight.

In spite of this, the Tribune was essentially a "girls' paper," since Thursday Smith was the only man employed on it--not counting the "dummy" editor, Arthur Weldon, who did nothing but keep the books, and found

this not an arduous task. Hetty, at Miss Briggs' desk, attended the telegraph instrument and long-distance telephone, receiving news over both wires, and still found time to draw her daily cartoons and additional humorous sketches which she "worked in" whenever the mood seized her. The typesetting was done by the Dwyer sisters--a colorless pair but quite reliable--while the reportorial and editorial work was divided between Louise, Beth and Patsy, none of whom shirked a single duty. Indeed, they had come to love this work dearly and were enthusiastic over the Tribune, which they fondly believed was being watched with envious admiration by all the journalistic world.

This belief was not wholly due to egotism. Their "exchanges," both city and country, had shown considerable interest in the "Millville Experiment," as they called it, and only a few days before the leading journal of a good-sized city had commented at length on the "girls' newspaper" and, after indulging in some humorous remarks, concluded quite seriously with the statement that "its evident sincerity, clean contents and typographical neatness render the Millville Daily Tribune worthy a better setting than the somnolent country village whose census is too low to be officially recorded."

"But that's all right," said Patsy, smiling at the praise; "we'd never have dared to start a newspaper anywhere else, because a journal that will do for Millville might not make a hit if it bumped against experienced competition."

"We were woefully ignorant when we began, a few weeks ago," commented Beth, glancing with pride at her latest editorial, which she thought had caught the oracular tone of the big city newspapers.

"And we're not expert journalists, even yet," added Louise, with a sigh. "We've improved, to be sure; but I imagine there is still lots of room for improvement."

"One trouble," said Patsy, "is that every inhabitant of Millville wants to see his or her name in print every day, whether he or she has done anything worthy of publication or not. If the name isn't printed, we've made an enemy; and, if it is, the paper is sure to suffer more or less ridicule."

"That is quite true, my dear," responded Louise, the reporter. "I've said everything, about every one of them, that has ever happened, or threatened to happen, since we started the paper, and it is driving me crazy to discover anything more about these stupid natives that will do to print."

Hetty had overheard this conversation and now looked up with a smile.

"Has your 'local happenings' column been prepared for to-morrow, Mrs. Weldon?" she inquired.

"No; I'm about to start out to unearth some items," replied Louise,

wearily.

"Let me do it for you. I've an hour or so to spare and I won't need to leave my desk," suggested the artist.

"It is my duty, you know, Hetty, and I've no right to evade it."

"Evade it for to-day. Go home and rest. I'll do your column for to-morrow, and after the vacation you can tackle the thrilling situations with better courage."

"Thank you, Hetty. But I won't go home. I'll wait here to see Fogerty."

"Fogerty!" exclaimed the artist, with a start of surprise. "Do you mean the detective?"

"Yes," said Louise, regretting she had inadvertently mentioned the name.

"But what is there now to detect?" asked Hetty suspiciously. "Our troubles seem ended with the burning of the mill and the flitting of Skeelty and his workmen."

Louise hardly knew how to reply; but Patsy, who trusted the queer girl artist, said quite frankly:

"There remains the mystery of Thursday Smith to fathom, you know."

Hetty flushed and an indignant look swept over her face.

"What right has anyone to solve that mystery?" she asked defiantly.

"Isn't that Thursday Smith's own business?"

"Perhaps," returned Patsy, somewhat amused; "but Smith hasn't been able to discover who he is--or was, rather--and seems really anxious to know."

Hetty bent over her desk for a time. Then she looked up and her thin features were white and drawn with anxiety.

"When you discover who Thursday Smith is," said she, "the Millville Tribune will lose its right bower."

"Why?"

"Before his accident, or whatever it was that made him lose his memory, he was an unusual man, a man of exceptional ability. You know that."

"We are all inclined to admit it," answered Patsy. "But what then?"

"Men of ability," declared Hetty slowly, "are of two classes: the very successful, who attain high and honorable positions, or the clever

scoundrels who fasten themselves like leeches on humanity and bleed their victims with heartless unconcern. What will you gain if you unmask the past of Thursday Smith? You uncover a rogue or a man of affairs, and in either case you will lose your pressman. Better leave the curtain drawn, Miss Doyle, and accept Thursday Smith as he is."

There was so much good sense in this reasoning that all three girls were impressed and began to regret that Uncle John had called Fogerty to untangle the skein. But it was now too late for such repentance and, after all, they were curious to discover who their remarkable employee really was.

Even while the awkward silence that had fallen upon the group of girls continued, the door opened to admit Uncle John, Fogerty, Major Doyle and Arthur Weldon. Except for the detective they were stern-faced and uncompromising.