

CHAPTER XXIII

THE JOURNALISTS ABDICATE

Mr. Merrick told Thursday Smith, in an apologetic way, how he had hired Fogerty to unravel the mystery of his former life, and how the great detective had gone to work so intelligently and skillfully that, with the aid of a sketch Hetty had once made of the pressman, and which Mr. Merrick sent on, he had been able to identify the man and unearth the disagreeable details of his history.

Thursday was too humble, by this time, and too grateful, besides, to resent Uncle John's interference. He admitted that, after all, it was better he should know the truth.

"I've nothing to bother me now but the future," he said, "and with God's help I mean to keep the name of Thursday Smith clean and free from any reproach."

After the interview he went about his duties as before and Hetty sat down at her desk and took the telegraphic news that came clicking over the wire as if nothing important in her life had occurred. But the girl journalists were all excitement and already were beginning to plan the things they might do to Make Hetty and Thursday happier. Cox and Booth had gone away and Mr. Merrick thanked Fogerty for his skillful service

and gave him a fat check.

"It's a mighty interesting case, sir," declared the detective, "and I'm as glad as any of you that it has ended so comfortably. Whatever Melville might have been--and his record is a little worse than I related it--there's no doubt of Thursday Smith's honesty. He's a mighty fine fellow, and Fate played a proper trick when she blotted out his unscrupulous mind and left him as innocent as an unborn babe. He will do well in his new life, I'm sure, and that girl of his, Hetty Hewitt--I've know of her reckless ways for years--has also redeemed herself and turned out a regular brick! All of which, Mr. Merrick is unusual in real life, more's the pity, and therefore it makes even a cold-blooded detective feel good to witness it."

Mr. Merrick smiled benignantly and Fogerty drove over to the Junction to catch his train.

After luncheon, Patsy, while arranging her galley proofs, inquired of Louise for the local column.

"Hetty said she'd attend to it," was the reply; "but we are all upset to-day and things are at sixes and sevens."

"The column is all prepared, Miss Doyle," announced Hetty.

"Where is it?"

"Thursday has made it ready for the press. It's--illustrated," she confessed. "I'd rather you wouldn't see it until the paper is out, if you can trust me."

"To be sure," said Patsy. "That's one responsibility I'm relieved of, anyhow."

The paper was a bit uneven in appearance next morning, but when Patsy came down to breakfast she found both Uncle John and the major roaring with laughter over Hetty's locals.

The first item stated that "Mrs. Thorne took tea at Sam Cotting's last evening," (the Cottings being notoriously inhospitable) and the picture showed Mrs. Thorne, a sour-faced woman, departing from the store with a package of tea. Then came the announcement that "Eph Hildreth got shot at West's hardware store," and there was a picture of West weighing out a pound of buckshot for his customer. The next item said: "Our distinguished fellow citizen, Marshall Peggy McNutt, was discovered unconscious on his front porch at 3 p.m." The drawing of McNutt was one of the best of the series. It was his habit to "snooze" in an easy chair on his porch every afternoon, and Hetty depicted the little man with both feet--meat and wood--on the rail, his mouth open and eyes shut, while lusty snores were indicated by radiating lines and exclamation points. The Widow Clark's cow occupied the next square, being tethered to a stake while Skim approached the animal with pail and milking-stool.

Below the drawing were the words: "Mr. Skimton Clark, coward." A few other local hits were concluded by a picture of Hon. Ojoy Boglin shaking his fist at Mr. Skeelty, who held a package of money in his grasp labeled "insurance." Below was the simple legend: "O Joy!"

The artist's cleverness became the subject of conversation at the breakfast table, and Arthur remarked:

"You won't be able to hold Hetty in Millville long. Her talent enables her to draw big salaries in New York and it isn't likely she will consent to bury herself in this little town."

"I'm not so sure," said Patsy. "If we can hold Thursday Smith we can hold Hetty, you know."

"We won't need to hold either of them for long," observed Beth; "for in another three weeks or so we must leave here and return to the city, when of course the Millville Daily Tribune must suspend publication."

"I've been thinking of that," said Uncle John.

"So have I," declared Patsy. "For a long time I was puzzled what to do, for I hated dreadfully to kill our dear Tribune after we've made it such a nice paper. Yet I knew very well we couldn't stay here all winter and run it. But last night I had an inspiration. Thursday will marry Hetty, I suppose, and they can both stay here and run the Tribune. They

are doing most of the work now. If Uncle John agrees, we will sell out to them on 'easy terms.'"

"Good gracious, Patsy!" chuckled the major, "wherever can the poor things borrow money to keep going? Do you want to load onto an innocent bride an' groom the necessity of meeting a deficit of a couple of hundred dollars every week?"

Patsy's face fell.

"They have no money, I know," she said, "except what they earn."

"And their wages'll be cut off when they begin hiring themselves," added the major. "No; you can't decently thrust such an incubus on Hetty and Thursday--or on anyone else. You've been willing to pay the piper for the sake of the dance, but no one else would do it."

"Quite true," agreed Arthur. "The days of the Millville Tribune are numbered."

"Let us not settle that question just yet," proposed Mr. Merrick, who had been deep in thought. "I'll consider Patsy's proposition for awhile and then talk with Thursday. The paper belongs to the girls, but the outfit is mine, and I suppose I may do what I please with it when my nieces retire from journalism."

Even the major could not demur at this statement and so the conversation dropped. During the next few days Uncle John visited the printing office several times and looked over the complete little plant with speculative eyes. Then one day he made a trip to Malvern, thirty miles up the railway line from the Junction, where a successful weekly paper had long been published. He interviewed the editor, examined the outfit critically, and after asking numerous questions returned to Millville in excellent spirits.

Then he invited Thursday Smith and Hetty to dine at the farm on Saturday evening, which was the one evening in the week they were free, there being no Sunday morning paper. Thursday had bought a new suit of clothes since he came to the Tribune, and Hetty, after much urging, finally prevailed upon him to accept the invitation. When the young man appeared at the farm he wore his new suit with an air of perfect ease that disguised its cheapness, and it was noticed that he seemed quite at home in the handsome living-room, where the party assembled after dinner.

"I am in search of information, Thursday," said Uncle John in his pleasant way. "Will you permit me to question you a bit?"

"Certainly, sir."

"And you, Hetty?"

"Ask anything you like, sir."

"Thank you. To begin with, what are your future plans? I understand, of course, you are to be married; but--afterward?"

"We haven't considered that as yet, sir," replied Thursday thoughtfully.

"Of course we shall stay with the Tribune as long as you care to employ our services; but--"

"Well?"

"I have been given to understand the young ladies plan to return to New York at the end of September, and in that case of course the paper will suspend."

"My nieces will be obliged to abandon journalism, to be sure," said Mr. Merrick; "but I see no reason why the paper should suspend. How would you and Hetty like to remain in Millville and run it?"

Both Thursday and Hetty smiled, but it was the man who answered;

"We cannot afford such a luxury, sir."

"Would you care to make your future home in Millville?"

"Oh, yes!" exclaimed Hetty. "I love the quaint little town dearly, and the villagers are all my friends. I'm sure Thursday doesn't care to go

back to New York, where--where Harold Melville once lived. But, as he truly says, we couldn't make a living with the Tribune, even if you gave us the use of the plant."

"Let us see about that," said Uncle John. "I will admit, in advance, that a daily paper in such a place is absurd. None of us quite understood that when we established the Tribune. My nieces thought a daily the only satisfactory sort of newspaper, because they were used to such, but it did not take long to convince me--and perhaps them--that in spite of all our efforts the Millville Daily Tribune would never thrive. It is too expensive to pay its own way and requires too much work to be a pleasant plaything. Only unbounded enthusiasm and energy have enabled my clever nieces to avoid being swamped by the monster their ambition created."

"That," said Patsy, with a laugh, "is very clearly and concisely put, my dear Uncle."

"It was never intended to be a permanent thing, anyhow," continued Mr. Merrick; "yet I must express my admiration for the courage and talent my nieces have displayed in forcing a temporary success where failure was the logical conclusion. Shortly, however, they intend to retire gracefully from the field of journalism, leaving me with a model country newspaper plant on my hands. Therefore it is I, Thursday and Hetty, and not my nieces, who have a proposition to place before you."

"While a daily paper is not appropriate in Millville, a weekly paper, distributed throughout Chazy County, would not only be desirable but could be made to pay an excellent yearly profit. Through the enterprise of Joe Wegg, Millville is destined to grow rapidly from this time on, and Chazy County is populous enough to support a good weekly paper, in any event. Therefore, my proposition is this: To turn the plant over to Mr. and Mrs. Thursday Smith, who will change the name to the Millville Weekly Tribune and run it as a permanent institution. Your only expense for labor will be one assistant to set type and do odd jobs, since you are so competent that you can attend to all else yourselves. We will cut out the expensive news service we have heretofore indulged in and dispense with the private telegraph wire. Joe Wegg says he'll furnish you with what power you need free of all charge, because the paper will boost Millville's interests, with which his own interests are identified. Now, then, tell me what you think of my proposal."

Hetty and Thursday had listened attentively and their faces proved they were enthusiastic over the idea. They said at once they would be glad to undertake the proposition.

"However," said Thursday, after a little reflection, "there are two things that might render our acceptance impossible. I suppose you will require rent for the outfit; but for a time, until we get well started, we could not afford to pay as much as you have a right to demand."

"I have settled on my demands," replied Mr. Merrick, "and hope you will

agree to them. You must pay me for the use of the outfit twenty per cent of your net profits, over and above all your operating and living expenses. When this sum has reimbursed me for my investment, the outfit will belong to you."

Thursday Smith looked his amazement.

"That seems hardly business-like, sir," he protested.

"You are right; but this isn't entirely a business deal. You are saving my nieces the humiliation of suspending the paper they established and have labored on so lovingly. Moreover, I regard you and Hetty as friends whom I am glad to put in the way of a modest but--I venture to predict--a successful business career. What is your second objection?"

"I heard Mr. West say the other day that he would soon need the building we occupy to store his farm machinery in."

"True; but I have anticipated that. I have completed plans for the erection of a new building for the newspaper, which will be located on the vacant lot next to the hotel. I purchased the lot a long time ago. The new building, for which the lumber is already ordered, will be a better one than the shed we are now in, and on the second floor I intend to have a cozy suite of rooms where you and Hetty can make a home of your own. Eh? How does that strike you, my children?"

Their faces were full of wonder and delight.

"The new building goes with the outfit, on the same terms," continued Mr. Merrick. "That is I take one-fifth of your net profits for the whole thing."

"But, sir," suggested Thursday, "suppose no profits materialize?"

"Then I have induced you to undertake a poor venture and must suffer the consequences, which to me will be no hardship at all. In that case I will agree to find some better business for you, but I am quite positive you will make a go of the Millville Weekly Tribune."

"I think so, too, Mr. Merrick, or I would not accept your generous offer," replied Smith.

"What do you think, Hetty?"

"The idea pleases me immensely," she declared. "It is a splendid opportunity for us, and will enable us to live here quietly and forget the big outside world. New York has had a bad influence on both you and me, Thursday, and here we can begin a new life of absolute respectability."

"When do you intend to be married?" asked Patsy.

"We have scarcely thought of that, as yet, for until this evening we did not know what the future held in store for us."

"Couldn't you arrange the wedding before we leave?" asked Beth. "It would delight us so much to be present at the ceremony."

"I think we owe the young ladies that much, Thursday," said Hetty, after a brief hesitation.

"Nothing could please me better," he asserted eagerly.

So they canvassed the wedding, and Patsy proposed they transfer the paper to Thursday and Hetty--to become a weekly instead of a daily--in a week's time, and celebrate the wedding immediately after the second issue, so as to give the bridal couple a brief vacation before getting to work again. Neither of them wished to take a wedding trip, and Mr. Merrick promised to rush the work on the new building so they could move into their new rooms in the course of a few weeks.