

## CHAPTER X THE EXPLOSION

Day was just beginning to break when a terrible detonation shook all Dorfield. Houses rocked, windows rattled, a sudden wind swept over the town and then a glare that was not a presage of the coming sun lit the sky.

A brief silence succeeded the shock, but immediately thereafter whistles shrieked, fire-bells clanged, a murmur of agitated voices crying aloud was heard on every side, and the people began pouring from the houses into the streets demanding the cause of the alarm.

Colonel Hathaway, still weak and nervous, stood trembling in his bathrobe when Mary Louise came to him.

"It's the airplane factory, Gran'pa Jim," she said. "I can see it from my windows. Something must have exploded and the buildings are on fire."

The airplane works of Dorfield had been one of the city's most unique institutions, but until we entered the World War it was not deemed of prime importance. The government's vast airplane appropriations, however, had resulted in the Dorfield works securing contracts for the manufacture of war machines that straightway raised the enterprise to an important position. The original plant had been duplicated a dozen times, until now, on the big field south of the city, the cluster of buildings required for the construction of aircraft was one of the most imposing manufacturing plants in that part of the State. Skilled government aviators had been sent to Dorfield to inspect every machine turned out. Although backed by local capital, it was, in effect, a government institution because it was now devoted exclusively to government contracts; therefore the explosion and fire filled every loyal heart with a sinister suspicion that an enemy had caused the calamity.

Splendid work on the part of the fire department subdued the flames after but two of the huge shed-like buildings had been destroyed. By noon the fire was controlled; a cordon of special police surrounded the entire plant and in one of the yards a hundred and fifty workmen were corralled under arrest until the federal officers had made an investigation and decided where to place the blame.

Reassuring reports had somewhat quieted Colonel Hathaway and Mary Louise, but although they returned to their rooms, they could not sleep. Aunt Sally, realizing the situation, had an early breakfast prepared, but when she called Josie O'Gorman the girl was not in her room or in the house. She appeared just as the others were finishing their meal and sat down with a sigh of content.

"My, but the coffee smells good!" she exclaimed. "I'm worn out with the excitement."

"Did you go to the fire, Josie?" asked Mary Louise.

"Yes, and got there in time to help drag some of the poor fellows out. Three men in the building where the explosion occurred were killed outright, and two others seriously injured. Fortunately the night shift had just quit work or the casualties would have been much greater."

"It's dreadful, as it is," said Mary Louise with a shudder.

"What was the cause of the explosion!" inquired the colonel.

"Dynamite," replied Josie calmly.

"Then it was not an accident?"

"They don't use dynamite in making airplanes. Twenty-two machines, all complete and packed ready for shipment, were blown to smithereens. A good many others, in course of construction, were ruined. It's a pretty bad mess, I can tell you, but the machines can be replaced, and the lives can't."

"I wonder who did it," said Mary Louise, staring at her friend with frightened eyes.

"The Kaiser," declared Josie. "He must be in fine fettle this morning, since his propaganda of murder and arson has been so successful."

"I--I don't quite understand you," faltered Mary Louise.

"Josie means that this is the work of a direct emissary of the Kaiser," explained the colonel. "We know that among us are objectors and pacifists and those who from political motives are opposing the activities of our President, but these are not dynamiters, nor do they display their disloyalty except through foolish and futile protests. One who resorts to murder and arson in an attempt to block the government's plans, and so retard our victory, is doubtless a hired assassin and in close touch with the German master-spies who are known to be lurking in this country."

"That's the idea, sir," approved Josie, nodding her tousled red head, "and better expressed than any answer of mine could have been."

"Well, then, can't this demon be arrested and punished?" asked Mary Louise.

"That remains to be seen," said Josie. "An investigation is already under way. All the outgoing night shift and some of the incoming day shift have been held under

suspicion, until they can be examined and carefully questioned. I heard your Chief of Police--whom I know and knows me--assert that without doubt the bomb had been placed by one of the workmen. I wonder what makes him think that. Also the police are hunting for everyone seen loitering about the airplane plant during the past twenty-four hours. They'll spend days--perhaps weeks--in investigating, and then the affair will quiet down and be forgotten."

"You fear they will not be able to apprehend the criminal?" from the colonel.

"Not the way the police are going at it. They're virtually informing the criminal that they're hunting for him but don't know where to find him, and that if he isn't careful they'll get him. So he's going to be careful. It is possible, of course, that the fellow has left traces-- clues that will lead to his discovery and arrest. Still, I'm not banking much on that. Such explosions have been occurring for months, in various parts of the country, and the offenders have frequently escaped. The government suspects that German spies are responsible, but an indefinite suspicion is often as far as it gets. Evidence is lacking."

"How about your boasted department of justice, and the secret service?" asked Mary Louise.

"They're as good as the German spy system, and sometimes a bit better. Don't think for a minute that our enemies are not clever," said Josie earnestly.

"Sometimes our agents make a grab; sometimes the German spy remains undiscovered. It's diamond cut diamond--fifty-fifty. But when we get every alien enemy sequestered in zones removed from all factories doing government work, we're going to have less trouble. A lot of these Germans and Austrians are liberty-loving Americans, loyal and true, but we must round up the innocent many, in order to squelch the guilty few."

The following week was one of tense excitement for Dorfield. Federal officers poured into the city to assist in the investigation; the victims were buried with honor and ceremony, wrapped in American flags to show that these "soldiers of industry" had been slain by their country's foe; the courtrooms were filled with eager mobs hoping that evidence would be secured against some one of the many suspects. Gradually, however, the interest decreased, as Josie had predicted it would. A half dozen suspects were held for further examination and the others released. New buildings were being erected at the airplane plant, and although somewhat crippled, the business of manufacturing these necessary engines of war was soon going on much as usual.