

Wheeler Ruthe S.

Helen in the Editor's Chair



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Ruthe S. Wheeler

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CHAPTER I

The Weekly Herald

Thursday!

Press day!

Helen Blair anxiously watched the clock on the wall of the assembly room. Five more minutes and school would be dismissed for the day. How those minutes dragged. She moved her books impatiently.

Finally the dismissal bell sounded. Helen straightened the books in her desk and, with the 162 others in the large assembly of the Rolfe High School, rose and marched down to the cloak room. She was glad that school was over for, to her, Thursday was the big day of the week.

Press day!

What magic lay in those two words.

By supper time the *Rolfe Herald* would be in every home in town and, when families sat down to their evening meal, they would have the paper beside them.

Helen's father, Hugh Blair, was the editor and publisher of the *Herald*. Her brother, Tom, a junior in high school, wrote part of the news and operated the Linotype, while Helen helped in the office every night after school and on Saturdays.

On Thursday her work comprised folding the papers as they came off the clanking press. Her arms ached long before her task was done, but she prided herself on the neatness of the stacks of papers that grew as she worked.

"Aren't you going to stay for the final sophomore debate tryouts?" asked Margaret Stevens. Margaret, daughter of the only doctor in Rolfe, lived across the street from the Blairs.

"Not this afternoon," smiled Helen, "this is press day."

"I'd forgotten," laughed Margaret. "All right, hurry along and get your hands covered with ink."

"Come over after supper and tell me about the tryouts," said Helen.

"I will," promised Margaret as she turned to the classroom where the tryouts were to be held.

The air was warm and Helen, with her spring coat over her arm, hurried from the high school building and started down the long hill that led to the main street.

Rolfe was a pretty midwestern village tucked away among the hills bordering Lake Dubar, a long, narrow body of water that attracted summer visitors from hundreds of miles away.

The main street, built along a valley that opened out on the lake shore, was a broad, graveled street, flanked by a miscellaneous collection of stores and shops. Some of them were of weather-beaten red brick, others were of frame and a few of them, harking back to pioneer days, had false fronts. In the afternoon sun, it presented a quiet, friendly scene.

Helen reached the foot of the school house hill and turned on to the main street. On the right of the street and just two blocks from the lake shore stood the one-story frame structure housing the postoffice and her father's printing plant. The postoffice occupied the front half of the building and the *Herald* office was the rear.

Helen walked down the alleyway between the postoffice and the Temple furniture store. She heard the noise of the press before she reached the office and knew that her father had started the afternoon run.

The *Herald*, an eight page paper, used four pages of ready print and four pages of home print. Each week's supply of paper was shipped from Cranston, where four pages filled with prepared news and pictures, were printed. The other four, carrying local advertisements and news of Rolfe and vicinity were printed on the aged press in the *Herald* office.

Helen hurried up the three steps leading to the editorial office. Its one unwashed window shut out the sunlight, and the office lay in a semi-shadow. Unable to see clearly after the brightness of the sunlight, she did not see her father at his desk when she entered the office.

"Hello, Dad," she called as she took off her tam and sailed it along the counter where it finally came to rest against a stack of freshly printed *Heralds*.

Her father did not answer and Helen was on the point of going on into the composing room when she turned toward him. His head still rested on his arms and he gave no sign of having heard her.

Concerned over his silence, she hurried to his desk.

"Dad, Dad!" she cried. "What's the matter! Answer me!"

Her father's head moved and he looked up at her. His face was pale and there were dark hollows under his eyes.

"I'm all right, Helen," he said, but the usual smile was missing. "Just felt a little faint and came in here to take a few minutes rest. I'll be all right shortly. You go on and help Tom. I'll be with you in a while."

"But if you don't feel well, Dad, you'd better go home and rest," insisted Helen. "You know Tom and I can finish getting out the paper. Now you run along and don't worry about things at the office."

She reached for his hat and coat hanging on a hook at one side of the desk. He remonstrated at the prospect of going home with the work only half done, but Helen was adamant and her father finally gave in.

"Perhaps it will be best," he agreed as he walked slowly toward the door.

Helen watched him descend the steps; then saw him reach the street and turn toward home.

She was startled by the expression she had just seen on her father's face. He had never been particularly robust and now he looked as though something had come upon him which was crushing his mind and body. Illness, worry and apprehension had carved lines in his face that afternoon.

Helen went into the composing room where the Linotype, the rows of type cases, the makeup tables, the job press and the newspaper press were located. At the back end of the room was the large press, moving steadily back and forth as Tom, perched on a high stool, fed sheets of paper into one end. From the other came the freshly printed papers of that week's edition of the *Herald*.

"Shut off the press," called Helen, shouting to make herself heard above the noise of the working machinery.

"What say?" cried Tom.

"Shut it off," his sister replied.

Tom scowled as he reached for the clutch to stop the press. He liked nothing better than running the press and when he had it well under way, usually printed the whole edition without a stop unless the paper became clogged or he had to readjust the ink rollers.

"What's the idea?" he demanded. "I'm trying to get through so I can play some baseball before dark."

"Dad's sick," explained Helen, "and I made him go home. Do you know what's the matter?"

"Gosh, no," said Tom as he climbed down from his stool. "He wasn't feeling very well when I came down from school and said he was going in the office to rest, but I didn't know he felt that badly."

"Well, he did," replied Helen, "and I'm worried about him."

"We always take him more or less for granted. He goes on year after year working in the office, getting enough together to make us all comfortable and hoping that he can send us to college some day. We help him when we can, but he plugs away day after day and I've noticed lately that he hasn't been very perky. Mother has been worried, too. I can tell from the way she acts when Dad comes

home at night. She's always asking him how he feels and urging him to get to bed early. I tell you, Tom, something's wrong with Dad and we've got to find out and help him."

"Let's go get Doctor Stevens right now," said the impetuous Tom, and he reached to shut off the motor of the press.

"Not now," said Helen. "If Dad thought we weren't getting the paper out on time he'd worry all the more. We'll finish the paper and then have Doctor Stevens come over this evening. We can fix it so he'll just drop in for a social call."

"Good idea," said Tom as he climbed back on his stool and threw in the clutch.

The press started its steady clanking and Helen picked up a pile of papers and spread them out on one of the makeup stones. Her father had printed two of the pages of home news during the morning and these sheets were stacked in a pile in one corner. She arranged two piles of papers on the makeup table, one pile which her father had printed and one of papers which were coming off the press as fast as Tom could keep it rolling.

Helen put on a heavy, blue-denim apron to protect her school dress and went to work. With nimble hands she put the sheets of paper together, folded them with a quick motion and slid the completed paper off the table and onto a box placed close by for that purpose.

The press, of unknown vintage, moved slowly and when Helen started at the same time as Tom she could fold the papers as rapidly as they were printed. But that day Tom, who had managed to be excused half an hour early, had too much of a start and when he finished the press run Helen still had several hundred papers to fold.

Tom stopped the press, shut off the motor, raised the ink rollers and then pulled the forms off the press and carried them to the other makeup table. After washing the ink off the type with a gasoline-soaked rag, he gathered an armful of papers Helen had folded and carried them into the editorial office. There he got out the long galleys which held the names of the subscribers. He inked each galley, placed it in the mailing machine, and then fed the papers into the mailer. They came out with the name of a subscriber printed at the top of each paper.

The young Blairs worked silently, hastening to complete their respective tasks so they could hurry home. Tom had forgotten his plans to play baseball and all thought of the outcome of the debate tryouts had left Helen's mind. There was one thought uppermost in their minds. What was the matter with their father?

CHAPTER II

Startling News

The last paper folded, Helen removed the heavy apron and washed her hands at the sink behind the press. When she entered the editorial office Tom was putting the last of the papers through the mailer. They gathered them up, placed them in a large sack and carried them into the postoffice.

"We won't stop to sweep out tonight," said Helen. "Let's lock up and then see Doctor Stevens on our way home. He's usually in his office at this time."

Tom agreed and, after putting away the mailing machine, locked the back door, closed the windows in the shop and announced that he was ready to go.

Helen locked the front door and they walked down main street toward the white, one-story building which housed the office of Doctor Stevens, the town's only physician.

Tom was tall and slender with wavy, brown hair and brown eyes that were always alive with interest. Helen came scarcely above his shoulder, but she was five feet two of concentrated energy. She had left her tam at the office and the afternoon sun touched her blond hair with gold. Her eyes were the same clear blue as her mother's and the rosy hue in her cheeks gave hint of her vitality.

They entered Doctor Stevens' waiting room and found the genial physician reading a medical journal.

"Hello, Helen! How are you Tom?" He boomed in his deep voice.

"We're fine, Doctor Stevens," replied Helen, "but we're worried about Dad."

"Why, what's the matter with your father?" asked the doctor, adjusting his glasses.

"Dad wasn't feeling very well when I came down from school at three-thirty," said Tom, "and when I started the afternoon press run, he went into the office to rest a while. When Helen came in a little after four, Dad looked pretty rocky and she made him go home."

"How did he look when you talked with him?" Doctor Stevens asked Helen.

"Awfully tired and mighty worried," replied Helen. "It was his eyes more than anything else. He's afraid of something and it has worried him until he is positively ill."

"And haven't you any idea what it could be?" asked the doctor.

"I've been thinking about it ever since Dad went home," said Helen, "and I don't know of a single thing that would worry him that much."

"Neither do I," added Tom.

"What we'd like to have you do," went on Helen, "is to drop in after supper. Make it look like a little social visit and it will give you a good excuse to give Dad the once over. We'll be ever so much relieved if you will."

"Of course I will," the doctor assured them. "You're probably worrying about some little thing and the more you think about it, the larger it grows. Possibly a little touch of stomach trouble. What have you been trying to cook, lately?" he asked Helen.

"Couldn't be my cooking," she replied. "I haven't done any for a week and you know that Mother's good cooking would never make anyone ill."

"I'll come over about seven-thirty," promised Doctor Stevens, "and don't you two worry yourselves over this. Your father will be all right in a day or two."

Helen and Tom thanked Doctor Stevens and continued on their way home. They went back past the postoffice and the *Herald* and down toward the lake, whose waters reflected the rays of the setting sun in varied hues.

A block from the lake shore they turned to their right into a tree-shaded street and climbed a gentle hill. Their home stood on a knoll overlooking the lake. It was an old-fashioned house that had started out as a three room cottage. Additions had been made until it rambled away in several

directions. It boasted no definite style of architecture, but had a hominess that few houses possess. From the long, open front porch, there was an unobstructed view down the lake, which stretched away in the distance, its far reaches hidden in the coming twilight. A speed boat, being loaded with the afternoon mail for the summer resorts down the lake, was sputtering at the big pier at the foot of main street. A bundle of *Heralds* was placed on the boat and then it whisked away down the lake, a curving streak of white marking its passage.

Helen found her mother in the kitchen preparing their evening meal.

Mrs. Blair, at forty-five, was a handsome woman. Her hair had decided touches of gray but her face still held the peachbloom of youth and she looked more like an older sister than a mother. She had been a teacher in the high school at Rolfe when Hugh Blair had come to edit the country paper. The teacher and the editor had fallen in love and she had given up teaching and married him.

"How's Dad?" Helen asked.

"He doesn't feel very well," her mother replied and Helen could see lines of worry around her mother's eyes.

"Don't worry, Mother," she counselled. "Dad has been working too hard this year. In two more weeks school will be over and Tom and I can do most of the work on the paper. You two can plan on a fine trip and a real rest this summer."

"I hope so," said Mrs. Blair, "for your father certainly needs a change of some kind."

Helen helped her mother with the preparations for supper, setting the table and carrying the food from the kitchen to the dining room where broad windows opened out on the porch.

Tom, who had been upstairs washing the last of the ink from his hands, entered the kitchen.

"Supper about ready?" he asked. "I'm mighty hungry tonight."

"All ready," smiled his mother. "I'll call your father."

Helen turned on the lights in the dining room and they waited for their father to come from his bedroom. They could hear low voices for several minutes and finally Mrs. Blair returned to the dining room.

"We'll go ahead and eat," she managed to smile. "Your father doesn't feel like supper right now."

Tom started to say something, but Helen shook her head and they sat down and started their evening meal.

Mrs. Blair, usually gay and interested in the activities of the day, had little to say, but Helen talked of school and the activities and plans of the sophomore class.

"We're going to have a picnic down the lake next Monday," she said.

"That's nothing," said Tom, who was president of the junior class. "We're giving the seniors the finest banquet they've ever had."

Whereupon they fell into a heated argument over the merits of the sophomores and juniors, a question which had been debated all year without a definite decision. Sometimes Tom considered himself the victor while on other occasions Helen had the best of the argument.

Supper over, Helen helped her mother clear the table and wash the dishes. It was seven-thirty before they had finished their work in the kitchen and Mrs. Blair was on her way to her husband's room when Doctor Stevens, bag in hand, walked in.

A neighbor for many years, the genial doctor did not stop to knock.

"Haven't been in for weeks," he said, "so thought I'd drop over and chin with Hugh for a while."

"Hugh isn't feeling very well," said Mrs. Blair. "He came home from the office this afternoon and didn't want anything for supper."

"Let me have a look at him," said Doctor Stevens. "Suppose his stomach is out of whack or something like that."

Tom and Helen, standing in the dining room, watched Doctor Stevens and their mother go down the hall to their father's bedroom.

The next half hour was one of the longest in their young lives. Tom tried to read the continued story in the *Herald*, while Helen fussed at first one thing and then another.

The door of their father's room finally opened and Doctor Stevens summoned them.

Neither Tom nor Helen would ever forget the scene in their father's bedroom that night. Their mother, seated at the far side of the bed, looked at them through tear-dimmed eyes.

Their father, reclining on the bed, looked taller than ever, and the lines of pain which Helen had noticed in his face that afternoon had deepened. His hands were moving nervously and his eyes were bright with fever.

"Sit down," said Doctor Stevens as he took a chair beside Hugh Blair's bed.

Tom was about to ask his father how he felt, when Doctor Stevens spoke again.

"We might as well face this thing together," he said. "I'll tell you now that it is going to be something of a fight for all of you, but unless I'm mistaken, the Blairs are all real fighters."

"What's the matter Doctor Stevens?" Helen's voice was low and strained.

"Your father must take a thorough rest," he said. "He will have to go to some southwestern state for a number of months. Perhaps it will only take six months, but it may be longer."

"But I can't be away that long," protested Hugh Blair. "I must think of my family, of the *Herald*."

"Your family must think of you now," said Doctor Stevens firmly. "That's why I wanted to talk this over with Tom and Helen."

"Just what is wrong, Dad?" asked Tom.

Doctor Stevens answered the question.

"Lung trouble," he said quietly. "Your father has spent too many years bent over his desk in that dark cubbyhole of his – too many years without a vacation. Now he's got to give that up and devote a number of months to building up his body again."

Helen felt the blood racing through her body. Her throat went dry and her head ached. She had realized only that afternoon that her father wasn't well but she had not been prepared for Doctor Stevens' announcement.

The doctor was talking again.

"I blame myself partly," he was telling Hugh Blair. "You worked yourself into this almost under my eyes, and I never dreamed what was happening. Too close to you, I guess."

"When do you think Hugh should start for the southwest?" asked Helen's mother.

"Just as soon as we can arrange things," replied Doctor Stevens. "This is Thursday. I'd like to have him on the way by Saturday night. Every day counts."

"That's impossible," protested Hugh Blair, half rising from his bed. "I don't see how I can possibly afford it. Think of the expense of a trip down there, of living there. What about the *Herald*? What about my family?"

A plan had been forming in Helen's mind from the time Doctor Stevens had said her father must go to a different climate.

"Everything will be all right, Dad," she said. "There isn't a reason in the world why you shouldn't go. Tom and I are capable of running the *Herald* and with what you've saved toward our college educations, you can make the trip and stay as long as you want to."

"But I couldn't think of using your college money," protested her father, "even if you and Tom could run the *Herald*."

"Helen's got the right idea," said Doctor Stevens. "Your health must come above everything else right now. I'm sure those youngsters can run the *Herald*. Maybe they'll do an even better job than you," he added with a twinkle in his eyes.

"We can run the paper in fine shape, Dad," said Tom. "If you hired someone from outside to come in and take charge it would eat up all the profits. If Helen and I run the *Herald*, we'll have every cent we make for you and mother."

Mrs. Blair, who had been silent during the discussion, spoke.

“Hugh,” she said, “Tom and Helen are right. I know how you dislike using their college money, but it is right that you should. I am sure that they can manage the *Herald*.”

Thus it was arranged that Tom and Helen were to take charge of the *Herald*. They talked with the superintendent of schools the next day and he agreed to excuse them from half their classes for the remaining weeks of school with the provision that they must pass all of their final examinations.

Friday and Saturday passed all too quickly. Helen busied herself collecting the current accounts and Tom spent part of the time at the office doing job work and the remainder at home helping with the packing.

Saturday noon Tom went to the bank and withdrew the \$1,275 their father had placed in their college account. The only money left was \$112 in the *Herald* account, just enough to take care of running expenses of the paper.

Hugh Blair owned his home and his paper, was proud of his family and his host of friends, but of actual worldly wealth he had little.

Doctor Stevens drove them to the Junction thirty miles away where Hugh Blair was to take the Southwestern limited. There was little conversation during the drive.

The limited was at the junction when they arrived and goodbyes were brief.

Hugh Blair said a few words to his wife, who managed to smile through her tears. Then he turned to Tom and Helen.

“Take good care of the *Herald*,” he told them, as he gave them a goodbye hug.

“We will Dad and you take good care of yourself,” they called as he climbed into the Pullman.

Cries of “boooo-ard,” sounded along the train. The porters swung their footstools up into the vestibules, the whistle sounded two short, sharp blasts, and the limited rolled away from the station.

Tom, Helen and their mother stood on the platform until the train disappeared behind a hill.

When they turned toward home, Tom and Helen faced the biggest responsibility of their young lives. It was up to them to continue the publication of the *Herald*, to supply the money to keep their home going and to build up a reserve which their father could call upon if he was forced to use all the money from their college fund.

CHAPTER III

In the Editor's Chair

Sunday morning found Tom and Helen Blair entering a new era in their lives. While their father sped toward the southwest in quest of renewed health, they planned how they could develop the *Herald*.

Their mother was silent through breakfast and several times they saw her eyes dim with tears.

"Don't worry, Mother," said Helen. "We'll manage all right and Dad is going to pull through in fine shape. Why, he'll be back with us by Christmas time."

"I wish I could be as optimistic as you are, Helen," said Mrs. Blair.

"You'll feel better in a few more hours," said Tom. "It's the suddenness of it all. Now we've got to buckle down and make the *Herald* keep on paying dividends."

Tom and Helen helped their mother clear away the breakfast dishes and then dressed for Sunday school. Mrs. Blair taught a class of ten-to-twelve-year-old girls. Tom and Helen were in the upper classes.

The Methodist church they attended was a red brick structure, the first brick building built in Rolfe, and it was covered with English ivy that threatened even to hide the windows. The morning was warm and restful and they enjoyed the walk from home to church.

The minister was out of town on his vacation and there were no church services. After Sunday school the Blairs walked down to the postoffice. The large mail box which was rented for the *Herald* was filled with papers, circulars and letters.

"We might as well go back to the office and sort this out," said Tom, and Mrs. Blair and Helen agreed.

The office was just as Tom and Helen had left it Thursday night for they had been too busy since then helping with the arrangements for their father's departure to clean it up.

The type was still in the forms, papers were scattered on the floor and dust had gathered on the counter and the desk which had served Hugh Blair for so many years.

"I'll open the windows and the back door," said Tom, "and we'll get some air moving through here. It's pretty stuffy."

Mrs. Blair sat down in the swivel chair in front of her husband's desk and Helen pulled up the only other chair in the office, an uncomfortable straight-backed affair.

"You're editor now," Mrs. Blair told Helen. "You'd better start in by sorting the mail."

"Tom's in charge," replied Helen as her brother returned to the office.

"Let's not argue," said Tom. "We'll have a business meeting right now. Mother, you represent Dad, who is the owner. Now you decide who will be what."

"What will we need?" smiled Mrs. Blair.

"We need a business manager first," said Helen.

"Wrong," interjected Tom. "It's a publisher."

"Then I say let's make it unanimous and elect mother as publisher," said Helen.

"Second the motion," grinned Tom.

"If there are no objections, the motion is declared passed," said Helen. "And now Mother, you're the duly elected publisher of the *Rolfe Herald*."

"I may turn out to be a hard-boiled boss," said Mrs. Blair, but her smile belied her words.

"We're not worrying a whole lot," said Tom. "The next business is selecting a business manager, a mechanical department, an editor, and a reporter. Also a couple of general handymen capable of doing any kind of work on a weekly newspaper."

"That sounds like a big payroll for a paper as small as the *Herald*," protested Mrs. Blair.

"I think you'll be able to get them reasonable," said Tom.

"In which case," added Helen, "you'd better appoint Tom as business manager, mechanical department, and handyman."

"And you might as well name Helen as editor, reporter and first assistant to the handyman," grinned Tom.

"I've filled my positions easier than I expected," smiled Mrs. Blair. "As publisher, I'll stay at home and keep out of your way."

"Mother, we don't want you to do that," exclaimed Helen. "We want you to come down and help us whenever you have time."

"But what could I do?" asked her mother.

"Lots of things. For instance, jot down all of the personal items you know about your friends and about all of the club meetings. That would be a great help to me. Sometimes in the evening maybe you'd even find time to write them up, for Tom and I are going to be frightfully busy between going to school and running the *Herald*."

"I'll tell the town," said Tom. "If you'd handle the society news, Mother, you could make it a great feature. The *Herald* has never paid much attention to the social events in town. Guess Dad was too busy. But I think the women would appreciate having all of their parties written up. I could set up a nice head, 'Society News of Rolfe,' and we'd run a column or so every week on one of the inside pages."

"You're getting me all excited, Tom," said his mother. "Your father said I never would make a newspaper woman but if you and Helen will have a little patience with me, I'd really enjoy writing the social items."

"Have patience with you, Mother?" said Helen. "It's a case of whether you'll have patience with us."

"We're going to have to plan our time carefully," said Tom, "for we'll have to keep up in our school work. I've got it doped out like this. Superintendent Fowler says Helen and I can go half days and as long as we cover all of the class work, receive full credit. The first half of the week is going to be the busiest for me. I'll have to solicit my ads, set them up, do what job work I have time for and set up the stories Helen turns out for the paper. I could get in more time in the afternoon than in the morning so Helen had better plan on taking the mornings on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday away from school."

"It will work out better for her, too," went on Tom. "Many of the big news events happen over the week-end and she'll be on the job Monday morning. I'll have every afternoon and evening for my share of the work and for studying. Then we'll both take Thursday afternoon away from school and get the paper out. And on Friday, Mother, if you'll come down and stay at the office, we'll go to school all day. How does that sound?"

"Seems to me you've thought of everything," agreed Helen. "I like the idea of doing my editorial work in the mornings the first part of the week and I'll be able to do some of it after school hours."

"Then it looks like the *Herald* staff is about ready to start work on the next issue," said Tom. "We have a publisher, a business manager and an editor. What we need now are plenty of ads and lots of news."

"What would you say, Mother, if Tom and I stayed down at the office a while and did some cleaning up?" asked Helen.

"Under the circumstances, I haven't any objections," said their mother. "There isn't any church service this morning and you certainly can put in a few hours work here in the office to good advantage. I'll stay and help you with the dusting and sweeping."

"You run on home and rest," insisted Helen. "Also, don't forget Sunday dinner. We'll be home about two or two-thirty, and we'll be hungry by that time."

Mrs. Blair picked up the Sunday papers and after warning Tom and Helen that dinner would be ready promptly at two-thirty, left them in the office.

“Well, Mr. Business Manager, what are you going to start on?” asked Helen.

“Mr. Editor,” replied Tom, “I’ve got to throw in all the type from last week’s forms. What are you going to do?”

“The office needs a good cleaning,” said Helen. “I’m going to put on my old apron and spend an hour dusting and mopping. You keep out or you’ll track dirt in while I’m doing it.”

Tom took off the coat of his Sunday suit, rolled up his shirt sleeves and donned the ink-smeared apron he wore when working in the composing room. Helen put on the long apron she used when folding papers and they went to work with their enthusiasm at a high pitch. Their task was not new but so much now depended on the success of their efforts that they found added zest in everything they did.

Helen went through the piles of old papers on her father’s desk, throwing many of them into the large cardboard carton which served as a wastebasket. When the desk was finally in order, she turned her attention to the counter. Samples of stationery needed to be placed in order and she completely rearranged the old-fashioned show case with its display of job printing which showed what the *Herald* plant was capable of doing.

With the desk and counter in shape, Helen picked up all of the papers on the floor, pulled the now heavily laden cardboard carton into the composing room, and then secured the mop and a pail of water. The barber shop, located below the postoffice, kept the building supplied with warm water, and Helen soon had a good pail of suds.

Tom stopped his work in the composing room and came in to watch the scrubbing.

“First time that floor has been scrubbed in years,” he said.

“I know it,” said Helen as she swished her mop into the corners. “Dad was running the paper and Mother was too busy bringing us up to come down here and do it for him.”

“He’ll never recognize the old place when he comes back,” said Tom.

“We’ll brighten it up a little,” agreed Helen, as Tom returned to his task of throwing in the type.

Helen had the editorial office thoroughly cleaned by one o’clock and sat down in her father’s swivel chair to rest. Tom called in from the back room.

“You’d better plan your editorial work for the week,” he said. “I want to run the Linotype every afternoon and you’ll have to have copy for me.”

“What do you want first?” said Helen.

“Better get the editorials ready today,” he replied. “They don’t have to be absolutely spot copy. Dad wrote the first column himself and then clipped a column or a column and a half from nearby papers.”

“I’ll get at it right away,” said Helen. “The exchanges for last week are on the desk. After I’ve gone through them I’ll write my own editorials.”

“Better have one about Dad going away,” said Tom and there was a queer catch in his voice.

Helen did not answer for her eyes filled with a strange mist and her throat suddenly felt dry and full.

Their father’s departure for the southwest had left a great void in their home life but Helen knew they would have to make the best of it. She was determined that their efforts on the *Herald* be successful.

Helen turned to the stack of exchanges which were on the desk and opened the editorial page of the first one. She was a rapid reader and she scanned paper after paper in quest of editorials which would interest readers of the *Herald*. When she found one she snipped it out with a handy pair of scissors and pasted it on a sheet of copy paper. Six or seven were needed for the *Herald*’s editorial page and it took her half an hour to get enough. With the clipped editorials pasted and new heads

written on them, Helen turned to the typewriter to write the editorials for the column which her father was accustomed to fill with his own comments on current subjects.

Helen had stacked the copypaper in a neat pile on the desk and she took a sheet and rolled it into the typewriter. She had taken a commercial course the first semester and her mastery of the touch system of typing was to stand her in good stead for her work as editor of the *Herald*.

For several minutes the young editor of the *Herald* sat motionless in front of her typewriter, struggling to find the right words. She knew her father would want only a few simple sentences about his enforced absence from his duties as publisher of the paper.

Then Helen got the idea she wanted and her fingers moved rapidly over the keys. The leading editorial was finished in a short time. It was only one paragraph and Helen took it out of the machine and read it carefully.

“Mr. Hugh Blair, editor and publisher of the *Herald* for the last twenty years, has been compelled, by ill health, to leave his work at Rolfe and go to a drier climate for at least six months. In the meantime, we ask your cooperation and help in our efforts to carry out Mr. Blair’s ideals in the publication of the *Herald*.

Signed,

Mrs. Hugh Blair, Helen and Tom Blair.”

After reading the editorial carefully, Helen called to her brother.

“Come in and see what you think of my lead editorial,” she said.

Tom, his hands grimy with ink from the type he had been throwing into the cases, came into the editorial office.

He whistled in amazement at the change Helen had brought about. The papers were gone from the floor, which had been scrubbed clean, and the desk and counter were neat and orderly.

“Looks like a different office,” he said. “But wait until I have a chance to swing a broom and mop in the composing room. And I’m going to fix some of the makeup tables so they’ll be a little handier.”

Helen handed him the editorial and Tom read it thoughtfully.

“It’s mighty short,” he said, “but it tells the story.”

“Dad wouldn’t want a long sob story,” replied Helen. “Here’s the clipped editorials. You can put them on the hook on your Linotype and I’ll bring the others out as soon as I write them.”

Tom returned to the composing room with the handful of editorial copy Helen had given him and the editor of the *Herald* resumed her duties.

She wrote an editorial on the beauty of Rolfe in the spring and another one on the desirability for a paved road between Rolfe and Gladbrook, the county seat. In advocating the paved road, Helen pointed to the increased tourist traffic which would be drawn to Rolfe as soon as a paved road made Lake Dubar accessible to main highways.

It was nearly two o’clock when she finished her labor at the typewriter. She was tired and hungry. One thing sure, being editor of the *Herald* would be no easy task. Of that she was convinced.

“Let’s go home for dinner,” she called to Tom.

“Suits me,” replied her brother. “I’ve finished throwing in the last page. We’re all ready to start work on the next issue.”

They took off their aprons and while Helen washed her hands, Tom closed the windows and locked the back door. He took his turn at the sink and they locked the front door and started for home.

“What we need now is a good, big story for our first edition,” said Tom.

“We may have it before nightfall if those clouds get to rolling much more,” said Helen.

Tom scanned the sky. The sunshine of the May morning had vanished. Ominous banks of clouds were rolling over the hills which flanked the western valley of Lake Dubar and the lake itself was lashed by white caps, spurred by a gusty wind.

They went down main street, turned off on the side street and climbed the slope to their home. Mrs. Blair was busy putting some heavy pots over flowers she wanted to protect from the wind. "Dinner's all ready," she told them, "and I've asked Margaret Stevens over. She wants to talk with Helen about the sophomore class picnic tomorrow."

"I won't have time to go," said Helen. "We'll be awfully busy working on the next issue."

"You're on the class committee, aren't you?" asked Tom.

"Yes."

"Then you're going to the picnic. We'll have lots to do on the *Herald* but we won't have to give up all of our other activities."

"Tom is right," said Mrs. Blair. "You must plan on going to the picnic."

Margaret Stevens came across the street from her home. Margaret was a decided brunette, a striking contrast to Helen's blondness.

"We'll go in and eat," said Mrs. Blair. "Then we'll come out and watch the storm. There is going to be a lot of wind."

Margaret was jolly and good company and Helen thought her mother wise to have a guest for dinner. It kept them from thinking too much about their father's absence.

There was roast beef and hashed brown potatoes with thick gravy, lettuce salad, pickled beets, bread and butter, large glasses of rich milk and lemon pie.

"I've never tasted a better meal," said Tom between mouthfuls.

"That's because you've been so busy at the office," smiled his mother.

"We were moving right along," agreed Tom. "I got the forms all ready for the next issue and Helen has the editorials done."

"Won't you need a reporter?" asked Margaret.

"We may need one but Helen and Mother are going to try and do all the news writing," said Tom.

"I mean a reporter who would work for nothing. I'd like to help for I've always wanted to write."

"You could be a real help, Margaret," said Helen, "and we'd enjoy having you help us. Keep your ears open for all of the personal items and tell Mother about any parties. She's going to write the society news."

"We're getting quite a staff," smiled Tom. "I'm open for applications of anyone who wants to work in the mechanical department."

"That's not as romantic as gathering and writing news," said Margaret.

"But just as important," insisted Tom.

The room darkened and a particularly heavy gust of wind shook the house. From the west came a low rumbling.

Tom dropped his knife and fork and went to the front porch.

"Come here, Helen!" he cried. "The storm's breaking. You're going to have your first big story right now!"

CHAPTER IV

Through the Storm

Tom's cry brought the others from the dinner table to the screened-in porch which overlooked the lake. He was right. The storm was roaring down out of the hills in the west in all its fury.

The black clouds which had been rolling along the horizon when Tom and Helen had come home were massed in a solid, angry front. Driven by a whistling wind, they were sweeping down on the lake. An ominous fringe of yellow wind clouds dashed on ahead and as they reached the porch they saw the waters of Lake Dubar whiten before the fury of the wind.

"Looks like a twister," shouted Tom.

His mother's face whitened and she anxiously scanned the sky.

Doctor Stevens ran across from his home.

"Better close all your windows and secure the doors," he warned. "We're going to get a lot of wind before the rain comes."

"Tom is afraid of a tornado," said Mrs. Blair.

"The weather is about right," admitted the doctor. "But we won't worry until we see the clouds start to swirl. Then we'll run for the storm cellar under my house."

Helen and Margaret hurried to help Mrs. Blair close the upstairs windows while Tom went around to make sure that the screens were secure. He bolted all doors except the one to the porch and when he returned to join the others, the tempo of the wind was increasing rapidly.

The wind suddenly dropped to a whisper and Doctor Stevens watched the rolling clouds with renewed anxiety. The waters of the lake were calmer and the dust clouds which the wind had driven over the water cleared partially.

"Look!" cried Helen. "There's a motorboat trying to reach one of the boathouses here!"

Through the haze of dust which still hung over the lake they could discern the outline of a boat, laboring to reach the safety of the Rolfe end of the lake.

"It's Jim Preston," said Doctor Stevens. "He goes down to the summer resorts at the far end of the lake every Sunday morning with the mail and papers."

"His boat's got a lot of water in it from the way it is riding," added Tom. "If the storm hits him he'll never make it."

"Jim should have known better than to have taken a chance when he could see this mess of weather brewing," snorted the doctor.

"His wife's sick," put in Mrs. Blair, "and Jim's probably taken an extra risk to get home as soon as possible."

"I know," said Doctor Stevens.

"He's bailing by hand," cried Tom. "That means something has gone wrong with the water pump on the engine."

"Can you see what boat he has?" asked Doctor Stevens.

"It looks like the Flyer," said Helen, who knew the lines of every motorboat on the lake.

"That's the poorest wet weather boat Jim has," said Doctor Stevens. "Every white cap slops over the side. She's fast but a death trap in a storm. Either the Liberty or the Argosy would eat up weather like this."

"Jim's been overhauling the engines in his other boats," said Tom, "and the Flyer is the only thing he has been using this spring."

"Instead of standing here talking, let's get down to the shore," said Helen. "Maybe we can get someone to go out and help him."

Without waiting for the others to reply, Helen started running toward the lake. She heard a cry behind her and turned to see Tom pointing toward the hills in the west.

The wind was whistling again and when she turned to look in the direction her brother pointed, she stopped suddenly. The black storm clouds were massing for the main attack and they were rolling together.

In the seconds that Helen watched, she saw them swirl toward a common center, heard the deafening rise of the wind and trembled as the clouds, now formed in a great funnel, started toward the lake.

“Come back, Helen, come back!” Tom shouted.

Forcing herself to overcome the storm terror which now gripped her, Helen looked out over the boiling waters of the lake.

The wind was whipping into a new frenzy and she could just barely see the Flyer above the white-capped waves. Jim Preston was making a brave effort to reach shore and Helen knew that the little group at her own home were probably the only ones in Rolfe who knew of the boatman’s danger. Seconds counted and ignoring the warning cries from her brother, she hurried on toward the lake.

The noise of the oncoming tornado beat on her ears, but she dared not look toward the west. If she did she knew she would turn and race for the shelter and security of Doctor Stevens’ storm cellar.

The Flyer was rolling dangerously as Jim Preston made for the shore and Helen doubted if the boatman would ever make it.

On and on the sleek craft pushed its way, the waves breaking over its slender, speedy nose and cascading back into the open cockpit in which Jim Preston was bailing furiously. The Flyer was nosing deeper into the waves as it shipped more water. When the ignition wires got wet the motor would stop and Preston’s last chance would be gone.

Helen felt someone grab her arms. It was Tom.

“Come back!” he cried. “The tornado will be on us in another five minutes!”

“We’ve got to help Mr. Preston,” shouted Helen, and she refused to move.

“All right, then I stay too,” yelled Tom, who kept anxious eyes on the approaching tornado.

The Flyer was less than a hundred yards from shore but was settling deeper and deeper into the water.

“It’s almost shallow enough for him to wade ashore,” cried Helen.

“Wind would sweep him off his feet,” replied Tom.

The speedboat was making slow progress, barely staggering along in its battle against the wind and waves.

“He’s going to make it!” shouted Helen.

“I hope so,” said Tom, but his words were lost in the wind.

Fifty yards more and the Flyer would nose into the sandy beach which marked the Rolfe end of the lake.

“Come on, Flyer, come on!” cried Helen.

“The engine’s dying,” said Tom. “Look, the nose is going under that big wave.”

With the motor dead, the Flyer lost way and buried its nose under a giant white-cap.

“He’s jumping out of the boat,” added Helen. “It’s shallow enough so he can wade in if he can keep his feet.”

Ignoring the increasing danger of the tornado, they ran across the sandy beach.

“Join hands,” cried Helen. “We can wade out and pull him the last few feet.”

Realizing that his sister would go on alone if he did not help her, Tom locked his hands in hers and they plunged into the shallow water.

Jim Preston, on the verge of exhaustion, staggered through the waves.

The Flyer, caught between two large rollers, filled with water and disappeared less than ten seconds after it had been abandoned.

The boatman floundered toward them and Tom and Helen found themselves hard-pressed to keep their own feet, for a strong undertow threatened to upset them and sweep them out into the lake.

Preston lunged toward them and they caught him as he fell.

Tom turned momentarily to watch the approach of the tornado.

"Hurry!" he cried. "We'll be able to reach Doctor Stevens' storm cellar if we run."

"I can't run," gasped Preston. "You youngsters get me to shore. Then save yourselves."

"We'll do nothing of the kind," said Helen.

With their encouragement, Preston made a new effort and they made their escape from the dangerous waters of the lake.

Alone, Helen or Tom could have raced up the hill to Doctor Stevens in less than a minute but with an almost helpless man to drag between them, they made slow progress.

"We've got to hurry," warned Tom as the noise of the storm told of its rapid approach.

"Go on, go on! Leave me here!" urged Preston.

But Helen and Tom were deaf to his pleas and they forced him to use the last of his strength in a desperate race up the hill ahead of the tornado.

Doctor Stevens met them half way up the hill and almost carried Preston the rest of the way.

"Across the street and into my storm cellar," he told them.

"Is the tornado going to hit the town?" asked Helen as they hurried across the street.

"Can't tell yet," replied Doctor Stevens.

"There's a common belief that the hills and lake protect us so a tornado will never strike here," said Tom.

"We'll soon know about that," said the doctor grimly.

They got the exhausted boatman to the entrance of the cellar, where Mrs. Blair was anxiously awaiting their return.

"Are you all right, Helen?" she asked.

"A little wet on my lower extremities," replied the young editor of the *Herald*. "I simply had to go, mother."

"Of course you did," said Mrs. Blair. "It was dangerous but I'm proud of you Helen."

Mrs. Stevens brought out blankets and wrapped them around Jim Preston's shoulders while Margaret took candles down into the storm cellar.

The noise of the storm had increased to such an intensity that conversation was almost impossible.

Doctor Stevens maintained his watchful vigil, noting every movement of the tornado.

The sky was so dark that the daylight had faded into dusk although it was only a few minutes after three. The whole western sky was filled with coal-black clouds and out of the center of this ominous mass rushed the lashing tongue which was destroying everything it touched.

On and on came the storm, advancing with a deadly relentlessness. A farm house a little more than a mile away on one of the hills overlooking the lake exploded as though a charge of dynamite had been set off beneath it.

"It's terrible, terrible," sobbed Margaret Stevens, who had come out of the cellar to watch the storm.

"We're going to get hit," Tom warned them.

"I've got to get home," said Jim Preston, struggling out of the blankets which Mrs. Stevens had wrapped around him. "My wife's all alone."

"Stay here, Jim," commanded Doctor Stevens. "You couldn't get more than three or four blocks before the storm strikes and your place is clear across town. Everybody into the cellar," he commanded.

Mrs. Stevens and Helen's mother went first to light the candles. They were followed by Margaret and Helen, then Tom and Jim Preston and finally the doctor, who remained in the doorway on guard.

“What will this do to the *Herald*?” Helen whispered to Tom.

Her brother nudged her hard.

“Don’t let Mother hear you,” he replied. “There is nothing we can do now except hope. The *Herald* building may not be destroyed.”

Helen dropped to the floor and her head bowed in prayer. Their father’s illness had been a blow and to have the *Herald* plant destroyed by a tornado would be almost more than they could bear.

The noise of the tornado was terrific and they felt the earth trembling at the fury of the storm gods.

Helen had seen pictures of towns razed by tornadoes but she had never dreamed that she would be in one herself.

Suddenly the roar of the storm lessened and Doctor Stevens cautiously opened the door of the storm cellar.

“We’re safe!” he cried.

They trooped out of the cellar. The tornado had swung away from Rolfe without striking the town itself and was lashing its way down the center of Lake Dubar.

“It will wear itself out before it reaches the end of the lake,” predicted Jim Preston.

“I don’t believe any houses in town were damaged,” said Doctor Stevens. “A hen house and garage or two may have been unroofed but that will be about all.”

“How about the farmers back in the hills?” asked Helen.

“They must have fared pretty badly if they were in the center of the storm,” said the doctor. “I’m going to get my car and start out that way. Someone may need medical attention.”

“Can I go with you?” asked Helen. “I want to get all the facts about the storm for my story for the *Herald*.”

“Glad to have you,” said the doctor.

“Count me in,” said Margaret Stevens. “I’ve joined Helen’s staff as her first reporter,” she told her father.

“If you want to go down the lake in the morning and see what happened at the far end I’ll be glad to take you,” suggested Jim Preston. “I’m mighty grateful for what you and Tom did for me and I’ll have the Liberty ready to go by morning.”

“What about the Flyer?” asked Tom.

“I’ll have to fish her out of the lake sometime next week,” grinned the boatman. “I’m lucky even to be here, but I am, thanks to you.”

Doctor Stevens backed his sedan out of the garage and Helen started toward the car.

“You can’t go looking like that,” protested her mother. “Your shoes and hose are wet and dirty and your dress looks something like a mop.”

“Can’t help the looks, mother,” smiled Helen. “I’ll have to go as I am. This is my first big news and the story comes first.”

CHAPTER V

Reporting Plus

Clouds which followed the terrific wind unleashed their burden and a gray curtain of rain swept down from the heavens.

“Get your slickers,” Doctor Stevens called to the girls and Helen raced across the street for her coat and a storm hat.

“Better put on those heavy, high-topped boots you use for hiking,” Tom advised Helen when they had reached the shelter of their own home. “You’ll probably be gone the rest of the afternoon and you’ll need the boots.”

Helen nodded her agreement and rummaged through the down stairs closet for the sturdy boots. She dragged them out and untangled the laces. Then she kicked off her oxfords and started to slide her feet into the boots. Her mother stopped her.

“Put on these woolen stockings,” she said. “Those light silk ones will wear through in an hour and your heels will be chafed raw.”

With heavy stockings and boots on, Helen slipped into the slicker which Tom held for her. She put on her old felt hat just as Doctor Stevens’ car honked.

“Bye, Mother,” she cried. “Don’t worry. I’ll be all right with the doctor and Margaret.”

“Get all the news,” cautioned Tom as Helen ran through the storm and climbed into the doctor’s sedan.

Margaret Stevens was also wearing heavy shoes and a slicker while the doctor had put on knee length rubber boots and a heavy ulster.

“We’ll get plenty of rain before we’re back,” he told the girls, “and we’ll have to walk where the roads are impassable.”

They stopped down town and Doctor Stevens ran into his office to see if any calls had been left for him. When he returned his face was grave.

“What’s the matter?” asked Margaret.

“I called the telephone office,” replied her father, “and they said all the phone wires west of the lake were down but that reports were a number of farm houses had been destroyed by the tornado.”

“Then you think someone may have been hurt?” asked Helen.

“I’m afraid so,” admitted Doctor Stevens as he shifted gears and the sedan leaped ahead through the storm. “We’ll have to trust to luck that we’ll reach farms where the worst damage occurred.”

The wind was still of nearly gale force and the blasts of rain which swept the graveled highway rocked the sedan. There was little conversation as they left Rolfe and headed into the hill country which marked the western valley of Lake Dubar.

The road wound through the hills and Doctor Stevens, unable to see more than fifty feet ahead, drove cautiously.

“Keep a close watch on each side,” he told the girls, “and when you see any signs of unusual damage let me know.”

They were nearly three miles from Rolfe when Margaret told her father to stop.

“There’s a lane to our right that is blocked with fallen tree trunks,” she said.

Doctor Stevens peered through the rain. A mail box leered up at them from a twisted post.

“This is Herb Lauer’s place,” he said. “I’ll get out and go up the lane.”

The doctor picked up his medical case and left the motor running so the heat it generated would keep ignition wires dry.

One window was left open to guard against the car filling with gas and the girls followed him into the storm. They picked their way slowly over the fallen trees which choked the lane. When they finally reached the farmyard a desolate scene greeted them.

The tornado, like a playful giant, had picked up the one story frame house and dashed it against the barn. Both buildings had splintered in a thousand pieces and only a huddled mass of wreckage remained. Miraculously, the corn crib had been left almost unharmed and inside the crib they could see someone moving.

Doctor Stevens shouted and a few seconds later there came an answering cry. The girls followed him to the crib and found the family of Herb Lauer sheltered there.

"Anyone hurt?" asked Doctor Stevens.

"Herb's injured his arm," said Mrs. Lauer, who was holding their two young children close to her.

"Think it's broken, Doc," said the farmer.

"Broken is right," said Doctor Stevens as he examined the injury. "I'll fix up a temporary splint and in the morning you can come down and have it redressed."

The doctor worked quickly and when he was ready to put on the splint had Margaret and Helen help him. In twenty minutes the arm had been dressed and put in a sling.

"We'll send help out as soon as we can," said Doctor Stevens as they turned to go.

Helen had used the time to good advantage, making a survey of the damage done to the farm buildings and learning that they were fully protected by insurance. Mrs. Lauer, between attempts to quiet the crying of the children, had given Helen an eye-witness account of the storm and how they had taken refuge in the corn crib just before the house was swirled from its foundations.

Back in the car, the trio continued their relief trip. The rain abated and a little after four o'clock the sun broke through the clouds. Ditches along the road ran bankful with water and streams they crossed tore at the embankments which confined them.

"The worst is over," said Doctor Stevens, "and we can be mighty thankful no one has been killed."

Fifteen minutes later they reached another farm which had felt the effects of the storm. The house had been unroofed but the family had taken refuge in the storm cellar. No one had been injured, except for a few bruises and minor scratches.

At dusk they were fifteen miles west of Rolfe and had failed to find anyone with serious injury.

"We've about reached the limit of the storm area," said Doctor Stevens. "We'll turn now and start back for Rolfe on the Windham road."

Their route back led them over a winding road and before they left the main graveled highway Doctor Stevens put chains on his car. They ploughed into the mud, which sloshed up on the sides of the machine and splattered against the windshield until they had to stop and clean the glass.

Half way back to Rolfe they were stopped by a lantern waving in the road.

Doctor Stevens leaned out the window.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

A farmer stepped out of the night into the rays of the lights of the car.

"We need help," he cried. "The storm destroyed our house and one of my boys was pretty badly hurt. We've got to get him to a doctor."

"I'm Doctor Stevens of Rolfe," said Margaret's father as he picked up his case and opened the door.

"We need you doctor," said the farmer.

Helen and Margaret followed them down the road and into a grassy lane.

Lights were flickering ahead and when they reached a cattle shed they found a wood fire burning. Around the blaze were the members of the farmer's family and at one side of the fire was the blanket-swathed form of a boy of ten or eleven.

“One of the timbers from the house struck him while he was running for the storm cave,” explained the farmer. “He just crumpled up and hasn’t spoken to us since. It’s as though he was asleep.”

Doctor Stevens examined the boy.

“He got a pretty nasty rap on the head,” he said. “What he needs is a good bed, some warm clothes and hot food. We’ll put him in my car and take him back to Rolfe. He’ll be all right in two or three days.”

The doctor looked about him.

“This is the Rigg Jensen place, isn’t it?” he asked.

“I’m Rigg Jensen,” said the farmer. “You fixed me up about ten years ago when my shotgun went off and took off one of my little toes.”

“I remember that,” said Doctor Stevens. “Now, if you’ll help me carry the lad, we’ll get him down to the car.”

“Hadn’t I better go?” asked Mrs. Jensen. “Eddie may be scared if he wakes up and sees only strangers.”

“Good idea,” said Doctor Stevens, as they picked up the boy and started for the car.

Helen went ahead, carrying the lantern and lighting the way for the men. They made the boy comfortable in the back seat and his mother got in beside him.

“Better come along,” Doctor Stevens told the father.

“Not tonight,” was the reply. “Mother is with Eddie and I know he’ll be all right now. I’ve got to take the lantern and see what happened to the livestock and what we’ve got left.”

There was no complaint in his voice, only a matter-of-factness which indicated that the storm could not have been prevented and now that it was all over he was going to make the best of it.

Half an hour later they reached the gravel highway and sped into Rolfe. Doctor Stevens drove directly to his office and several men on the street helped him carry Eddie Jensen inside.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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