

## CHAPTER VI

### MR. SKEELTY OF THE MILL

The next morning they drove to town again, passing slowly up the street of the little village to examine each building that might be a possible location for a newspaper office. Here is a map that Patsy drew of Millville, which gives a fair idea of its arrangement:

[Illustration: Village Street]

Counting the dwellings there were exactly twelve buildings, and they all seemed occupied.

When they reached the hardware store, opposite Cotting's, Mr. West, the proprietor, was standing on the broad platform in front of it. In many respects Bob West was the most important citizen of Millville. Tall and gaunt, with great horn spectacles covering a pair of cold gray eyes, he was usually as reserved and silent as his neighbors were confiding and talkative. A widower of long standing, without children or near relatives, he occupied a suite of well-appointed rooms over the hardware store and took his meals at the hotel. Before Mr. Merrick appeared on the scene West had been considered a very wealthy man, as it was known he had many interests outside of his store; but compared with the multi-millionaire old Bob had come to be regarded more modestly,

although still admitted to be the village's "warmest" citizen. He was an authority in the town, too, and a man of real importance.

Mr. Merrick stopped his horse to speak with the hardware man, an old acquaintance.

"West," said he, "my girls are going to start a newspaper in Millville."

The merchant bowed gravely, perhaps to cover the trace of a smile he was unable to repress.

"It's to be a daily paper, you know," continued Mr. Merrick, "and it seems there's a lot of machinery in the outfit. It'll need quite a bit of room, in other words, and we're looking for a place to install it."

West glanced along the street--up one side and down the other--and then shook his head negatively.

"Plenty of land, but no buildings," said he. "You might buy the old mill and turn it into a newspaper office. Caldwell isn't making much of a living and would be glad to sell out."

"It's too dusty and floury," said Patsy. "We'd never get it clean, I'm sure."

"What's in that shed of yours?" asked Uncle John, pointing to a long,

low building' that adjoined the hardware store.

West turned and looked at the shed reflectively.

"That is where I store my stock of farm machinery," he said. "There's very little in there now, for it's a poor season and I didn't lay in much of a supply. In fact, I'm pretty well cleaned out of all surplus stock. But next spring I shall need the place again."

"Good!" cried Mr. Merrick. "That solves our problem. Has it a floor?"

"Yes; an excellent one; but only one small window."

"We can remedy that," declared Uncle John. "Here's the proposition, West: Let us have the shed for six months, at the end of which time we will know whether the Millville Tribune is a success or not. If it is, we'll build a fine new building for it; if it don't seem to prosper, we'll give you back the shed. What do you say?"

West thought it over.

"There is room on the rear platform, for all the farm machinery I now have on hand. All right, Mr. Merrick; I'll move the truck out and give you possession. It won't make a bad newspaper office. But of course you are to fit up the place at your own expense."

"Thank you very much, sir!" exclaimed Uncle John. "I'll set Lon Taft at work at once. Where can he be found?"

"Playing billiards at the hotel, usually. I suppose he is there now."

"Very good; I'll hunt him up. What do you think of our newspaper scheme, West?"

The old merchant hesitated. Then he said slowly:

"Whatever your charming and energetic nieces undertake, sir, will doubtless be well accomplished. The typical country newspaper groans under a load of debt and seldom gets a fair show to succeed; but in this case there will be no lack of money, and--why, that settles the question, I think. Money is the keystone to success."

"Mr. West," said Louise, with dignity, "we are depending chiefly on the literary merit of our newspaper to win recognition."

"Of course; of course!" said he hastily. "Put me down as a subscriber, please, and rely upon my support at all times. It is possible, young ladies--nay, quite probable, I should say--that your originality and genius will yet make Millville famous."

That speech pleased Uncle John, and as the hardware merchant bowed and turned away, Mr. Merrick said in his cheeriest tones: "He's quite right,

my dears, and we're lucky to have found such a fine, roomy place for our establishment. Before we go after the carpenter to fix it up I must telephone to Marvin about the things we still need."

Over the long-distance telephone Mr. Marvin reported that he had bought the required outfit and it was even then being loaded on the freight cars.

"I've arranged for a special engine," he added, "and if all goes well the freight will be on the sidetrack at Chazy Junction on Monday morning. The dealer will send down three men to set up the presses and get everything in running order. But he asks if you have arranged for your workmen. How about it, Mr. Merrick? have you plenty of competent printers and pressmen at Millville?"

"There are none at all," was the reply. "Better inquire how many we will need, Marvin, and send them down here. And, by the way, hire women or girls for every position they are competent to fill. This is going to be a girls' newspaper, so we'll have as few men around as possible."

"I understand, sir."

Uncle John ordered everything he could think of and told his agent to add whatever the supply man thought might be needed. This business being accomplished, he found Lon Taft at the hotel and instructed the carpenter to put rows of windows on both sides of the shed and to build

partitions for an editorial office and a business office at the front.

This was the beginning of a busy period, especially for poor Uncle John, who had many details to attend to personally. The next morning the electricians arrived and began stringing the power cables from the paper mill to the newspaper office. This rendered it necessary for Mr. Merrick to make a trip to Royal, to complete his arrangement with Mr. Skeelty, the manager. He drove over with Arthur Weldon, in the buggy--four miles of hill climbing, over rough cobble-stones, into the pine forest.

Arriving there, the visitors were astonished at the extent of the plant so recently established in this practically unknown district. The great mill, where the wood pulp was made, was a building constructed from pine slabs and cobblestones, material gathered from the clearing in which it stood, but it was quite substantial and roomy. Adjoining the mill was the factory building where the pulp was rolled into print paper.

Surrounding these huge buildings were some sixty small dwellings of the bungalow type, for the use of the workmen, built of rough boards, but neat and uniform in appearance. Almost in the center of this group stood the extensive storehouse from which all necessary supplies were furnished the mill hands, the cost being deducted from their wages. The electric power plant was a building at the edge of Royal Waterfall, the low and persistent roar of which was scarcely drowned by the rumble of machinery. Finally, at the edge of the clearing nearest the mills, stood the business office, and to this place Mr. Merrick and Arthur at once proceeded.

They found the office a busy place. Three or four typewriters were clicking away, operated by sallow-faced girls, and behind a tall desk were two bookkeepers, in one of whom Uncle John recognized--with mild surprise--the tramp he had encountered at Chazy Junction on the morning of his arrival. The young fellow had improved in appearance, having discarded his frayed gray suit for one of plain brown khaki, such as many of the workmen wore, a supply being carried by the company's store. He was clean-shaven and trim, and a gentlemanly bearing had replaced the careless, half defiant attitude of the former hobo. It was evident he remembered meeting Mr. Merrick, for he smiled and returned the "nabob's" nod.

Mr. Skeelty had a private enclosed office in a corner of the room. Being admitted to this sanctum, the visitors found the manager to be a small, puffy individual about forty-five years of age, with shrewd, beadlike black eyes and an insolent assumption of super-importance. Skeelty interrupted his task of running up columns of impressive figures to ask his callers to be seated, and opened the interview with characteristic abruptness.

"You're Merrick, eh? I remember. You want to buy power, and we have it to sell. How much will you contract to take?"

"I don't know just how much we need," answered Uncle John. "We want enough to run a newspaper plant at Millville, and will pay for whatever

we use. I've ordered a meter, as you asked me to do, and my men are now stringing the cables to make the connection."

"Pah! a newspaper. How absurd," said Mr. Skeelty with scornful emphasis. "Your name, Merrick, is not unknown to me. It stands for financial success, I understand; but I'll bet you never made your money doing such fool things as establishing newspapers in graveyards."

Uncle John looked at the man attentively.

"I shall refrain from criticising your conduct of this mill, Mr. Skeelty," he quietly observed, "nor shall I dictate what you may do with your money--provided you succeed in making any."

The manager smiled broadly, as if the retort pleased him.

"Give an' take, sir; that's my motto," he said.

"But you prefer to take?"

"I do," was the cheerful reply. "I'll take your paper, for instance--if it isn't too high priced."

"In case it is, we will present you with a subscription," said Uncle John. "But that reminds me: as a part of our bargain I want you to allow my nieces, or any representative of the Millville Tribune, to take



subscriptions among your workmen."

Mr. Skeelty stared at him a moment. Then he laughed.

"They're mostly foreigners, Mr. Merrick, who haven't yet fully mastered the English language. But," he added, thoughtfully, "a few among them might subscribe, if your country sheet contains any news of interest at all. This is rather a lonely place for my men and they get dissatisfied at times. All workmen seem chronically dissatisfied, and their women constantly urge them to rebellion. Already there are grumbings, and they claim they're buried alive in this forlorn forest. Don't appreciate the advantages of country life, you see, and I've an idea they'll begin to desert, pretty soon. Really, a live newspaper might do them good--especially if you print a little socialistic drivel now and then." Again he devoted a moment to thought, and then continued: "Tell you what I'll do, sir; I'll solicit the subscriptions myself, and deduct the price from the men's wages, as I do the cost of their other supplies. But the Company gets a commission for that, of course."

"It's a penny paper," said Uncle John. "The subscription is only thirty cents a month."

"Delivered?"

"I suppose so."

"Well, I'll pay you twenty cents, and keep the balance for commission. That's fair enough."

"Very well, Mr. Skeelty. We're after subscriptions more than money, just now. Get all you can, at that rate."

After signing a contract for the supply of electrical power, whereby he was outrageously robbed but the supply was guaranteed, Mr. Merrick and Arthur returned to the farm.

"That man," said Louise's young husband, referring to the manager of the paper mill, "is an unmitigated scoundrel, sir."

"I won't deny it," replied Mr. Merrick. "It occurs to me he is hiring those poor workmen at low wages and making a profit on all their living necessities, which he reserves the right of supplying from his own store. No wonder the poor fellows get dissatisfied."