

CHAPTER XIII

BOB WEST INTERFERES

It was unfortunate that at that time Thursday Smith had gone up the electric line toward Royal, to inspect it. In the office were Patsy, Hetty Hewitt--who was making a drawing--Arthur Weldon, engaged upon his books, and finally, seated in an easy-chair from which he silently watched them work, old Bob West, the hardware man. Louise and Beth had driven over to the Junction to write up an accident, one of the trainmen having caught his hand in a coupling, between two freight cars.

Bob West often dropped into the office, which was next door to his own place of business, but he was a silent man and had little to say on these visits. In his early days he had wandered pretty much over the whole world, and he could relate some interesting personal adventures if he chose. In this retired village West was the one inhabitant distinguished above his fellows for his knowledge of the world. In his rooms over the store, where few were ever invited, he had a fine library of unusual books and a rare collection of curios gathered from foreign lands. It was natural that such a man would be interested in so unique an experiment as the Millville Tribune, and he watched its conduct with curiosity but a constantly growing respect for the three girl journalists. No one ever minded when he came into the office, nodded and sat down. Sometimes he would converse with much freedom; at other times

the old gentleman remained an hour without offering a remark, and went away with a brief parting nod.

It was West who first saw, through the window, the wagonload of men from the Sizer farm come dashing up the street at a gallop. Instinctively, perhaps, he knew trouble was brewing, but he never altered his expression or his attitude, even when the wagon stopped at the printing office and the passengers leaped out.

In marched Bill Sizer at the head of his following, cowhide in hand. Patsy, her face flushing scarlet, stood up and faced the intruders.

"Stand back, girl!" cried Sizer in a fierce tone; "it's that coward editor I'm after," pointing his whip with trembling hand at Arthur. "My sister Molly may be rough, an' hev a rough smile, but I'll be dinged ef I don't skin the man thet prints it in a paper!"

"Good fer you, Bill!" murmured his friends, approvingly.

Arthur leaned back and regarded his accuser in wonder. The big table, littered with papers, was between them.

"Come out o' there, ye measly city chap, an' take yer medicine," roared Bill, swinging his whip. "I'll larn ye to come inter a decent neighborhood an' slander its women. Come outer there!"

West had sat quietly observing the scene. Now he inquired, in composed tones:

"What's the trouble, Bill?"

"Trouble? Trouble, West? Why, this lyin' scoundrel said in his paper thet our Molly had a rough smile. That's the trouble!"

"Did he really say that?" asked West.

"Course he did. Printed it in the paper, for all to read. That's why I've come to cowhide the critter within an inch o' his life!"

"Good fer you, Bill!" cried his friends, encouragingly.

"But--wait a moment!" commanded West, as the maddened, half drunken young farmer was about to leap over the table to grasp his victim; "you're not going at this thing right, Bill Sizer."

"Why ain't I, Bob West?"

"Because," answered West, in calm, even tones, "this insult is too great to be avenged by a mere cowhiding. Nothing but blood will wipe away the dreadful stain on your sister's character."

"Oh, Mr. West!" cried Patsy, horrified by such a statement.

"Eh? Blood?" said Bill, stupefied by the suggestion.

"Of course," returned West. "You mustn't thrash Mr. Weldon; you must kill him."

A delighted chorus of approval came from Sizer's supporters.

"All right, then," said the bully, glaring around, "I--I'll kill the scandler!"

"Hold on!" counselled West, seizing his arm. "This affair must be conducted properly--otherwise the law might cause us trouble. No murder, mind you. You must kill Weldon in a duel."

"A--a what? A duel!" gasped Sizer.

"To be sure. That's the way to be revenged. Hetty," he added, turning to the artist, who alone of the observers had smiled instead of groaned at the old gentleman's startling suggestion, "will you kindly run up to my rooms and get a red leather case that lies under the shell cabinet? Thank you, my dear."

Hetty was off like a flash. During her absence an intense silence pervaded the office, broken only by an occasional hiccough from one of Mr. Sizer's guests. Patsy was paralyzed with horror and had fallen back

into her chair to glare alternately at Bob West and the big bully who threatened her cousin's husband. Arthur was pale and stern as he fixed a reproachful gaze on the hardware merchant. From Miss Briggs' little room could be heard the steady click-click of the telegraph instrument.

But the furious arrival of the Sizer party had aroused every inhabitant of Millville and with one accord they dropped work and rushed to the printing office. By this time the windows were dark with groups of eager faces that peered wonderingly through the screens--the sashes being up--and listened to the conversation within.

While Hetty was gone not a word was spoken, but the artist was absent only a brief time. Presently she reentered and laid the red leather case on the table before Bob West. The hardware man at once opened it, displaying a pair of old-fashioned dueling pistols, with long barrels and pearl handles. There was a small can of powder, some bullets and wadding in the case, and as West took up one of the pistols and proceeded to load it he said in an unconcerned voice:

"I once got these from an officer in Vienna, and they have been used in more than a score of duels, I was told. One of the pistols--I can't tell which it is--has killed a dozen men, so you are going to fight with famous weapons."

Both Arthur and Bill Sizer, as well as the groups at the window, watched the loading of the pistols with fascinated gaze.

"Bob's a queer ol' feller," whispered Peggy McNutt to the blacksmith, who stood beside him. "This dool is just one o' his odd fancies. Much he keers ef they kills each other er not!"

"Mr. West," cried Patsy, suddenly rousing from her apathy, "I'll not allow this shameful thing! A duel is no better than murder, and I'm sure there is a law against it."

"True," returned West, ramming the bullet into the second pistol; "it is quite irregular and--er--illegal, I believe. Perhaps I shall go to jail with whichever of the duelists survives; but you see it is a point of honor with us all. Molly Sizer has seemingly been grossly maligned in your paper, and the editor is responsible. Are you a good shot, Bill?"

"I--I guess so," stammered Sizer.

"That's good. Weldon, I hear, is an expert with the pistol."

Arthur did not contradict this statement, although he was positive he could not hit a barn at twenty yards.

"Now, then, are we ready?" staid West, rising. "Come with me, gentlemen."

"What ye goin' to do, Bob?" asked Sizer, anxiously.

"I'll explain," replied the hardware man, leading the way to the street. Everyone followed him and the crowd at the windows joined the group outside. "Of course you mustn't shoot in the main street, for you might hit some one, or break windows; but back of this row of buildings is a lane that is perfectly clear. You will stand back to back in the center of the block and then, at my word, you will each march to the end of the block and pass around the buildings to the lane. As soon as you come in sight of one another you are privileged to fire, and I suppose Bill Sizer will try to kill you, Mr. Weldon, on the spot, and therefore you will try to kill him first."

"But--look a-here, Bob!" cried Sizer; "it ain't right fer him to take a shot at me. You said fer me to kill him, but ye didn't say nuth'n about his shootin' at me."

"That's all right, Bill," returned West. "You're in the right, and the right ought to win. But you must give the man a chance for his life, you know."

"That weren't in the bargain."

"It is now, by the laws of dueling."

"He--he might shoot me," urged Bill.

"It isn't likely. Although he's a dead shot, you have right on your side, and you must be sure to fire as soon as you get within good range. It won't be considered murder; it will only be a duel, and the law will deal lightly with you."

"That's right, Bill," asserted one of Sizer's friends. "Bob West's a justice o' the peace himself, an' he orter know."

"I do know," declared West gravely.

He placed Arthur Weldon and Bill Sizer back to back in the middle of the street and handed each a pistol.

"Now, then," said he, "you both understand the rules, which I have explained, and the spectators will bear witness that, whatever happens, this affair has been conducted in a regular manner, with no favor shown to either. You are both brave men, and this duel will vindicate your honor. If you are fortunate enough to survive, you will be heroes, and all your differences will be wiped off the slate. But as one or both may fall, we, the citizens of Millville, hereby bid you a solemn and sad farewell."

Impressed by this speech, Sizer's friends began to shake hands with him.

"All ready!" called West. "One--two--three----go!"

At the word the two, back to back, started for the opposite ends of the little street, and at once the crowd made a rush between the buildings to gain the rear, where they might witness the shooting in the lane when the duelists met. Arthur had been thinking seriously during these proceedings and had made up his mind it was in no degree his duty to be bored full of holes by a drunken countryman like Bill Sizer, just because there had been a typographical error in the Millville Tribune. So, when he got to the end of the street, instead of turning into the lane he made for the farm, holding the long dueling pistol gingerly in his hand and trotting at a good pace for home.

Footsteps followed him. In sudden panic he increased his run; but the other was faster. A heavy hand grasped his shoulder and swung him around, while old Bob West, panting for Breath, exclaimed:

"Stop, you fool--stop! The other one is running."

"The other one!" echoed Arthur, wonderingly.

"Of course. Bill Sizer was sure to run; he's a coward, as all bullies are. Quick, Weldon, save the day and your reputation or I'll never stand your friend again."

Arthur understood now. He turned and ran back faster than he had come, swung into the lane where the crowd was cautiously peering from the shelter of the buildings, and waving his pistol in a reckless way that

made Bob West shudder, he cried out:

"Where is he? Where's Sizer? Why don't he show up and be shot, like a man?"

No Sizer appeared. He was even then headed cross-lots for home, leaving his friends to bemoan his cowardice. As for Arthur, the crowd gave him a cheer and condemned his opponent's conduct in no measured terms. They were terribly disappointed by Big Bill's defection, for while not especially bloodthirsty they hated to see the impending tragedy turn out a farce.

In the printing office Patsy was laughing hysterically as her horror dissolved and allowed her to discover the comic phase of the duel. She literally fell on Arthur's neck as he entered, but the next moment pushed him away to face the hardware merchant.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. West," said she with twinkling eyes. "I suspected you of being a cold-blooded ruffian, when you proposed this duel; but I now see that you understand human nature better than the whole caboodle of us put together! Arthur, thank Mr. West for saving you from a flogging."

"I do, indeed!" said Arthur fervently.