

CHAPTER XV

A CLEVER IDEA

Neither Thursday nor Hetty allowed a word to escape concerning the placing of the bomb in the Tribune office, but the explosion was public knowledge and many were bothering their heads to explain its meaning.

John Merrick, when he heard the news, looked very grave and glanced uneasily into the unconscious faces of his three beloved nieces. A man of much worldly experience, in spite of his simple, ingenuous nature, the little man began carefully piecing together parts of the puzzle. Thursday Smith's defense of the girl journalists, whereby he had severely pounded some of the workmen who had insulted them, had caused the man to be denounced by the colony at Royal. Mr. Skeelty, the manager, had demanded that Smith be discharged by Mr. Merrick, and being refused, had threatened to shut off the power from the newspaper plant. Skeelty dared not carry out this threat, for fear of a lawsuit, but his men, who had urged the matter of Smith's discharge upon their manager, were of the class that seeks revenge at any cost. At this juncture Ojoy Boglin, Skeelty's partner and the owner of all the pine forest around Royal, had become the enemy of the newspaper and was aware of the feeling among the workmen. A word from Boglin, backed by

Skeelty's tacit consent, would induce the men to go to any length in injuring the Millville Tribune and all concerned in its welfare.

Considering these facts, Mr. Merrick shrewdly suspected that the dynamite explosion had been the work of the mill hands, yet why it was harmlessly exploded in a field was a factor that puzzled him exceedingly. He concluded, from what information he possessed, that they had merely intended this as a warning, which if disregarded might be followed by a more serious catastrophe.

The idea that such a danger threatened his nieces made the old gentleman distinctly nervous.

There were ways to evade further molestation from the lawless element at the mill. The Hon. Ojoy could be conciliated; Thursday Smith discharged; or the girls could abandon their journalistic enterprise altogether. Such alternatives were mortifying to consider, but his girls must be protected from harm at any cost.

While he was still considering the problem, the girls and Arthur having driven to the office, as usual, Joe Wegg rode over from Thompson's Crossing on his sorrel mare for a chat with his old friend and benefactor. It was this same young man--still a boy in years--who had once owned the Wegg Farm and disposed of it to Mr. Merrick.

Joe was something of a mechanical genius and, when his father died,

longed to make his way in the great world. But after many vicissitudes and failures he returned to Chazy County to marry Ethel Thompson, his boyhood sweetheart, and to find that one of his father's apparently foolish investments had made him rich.

Ethel was the great-granddaughter of the pioneer settler of Chazy County--Little Bill Thompson--from whom the Little Bill Creek and Little Bill Mountain had been named. It was he who first established the mill at Millville; so, in marrying a descendant of Little Bill Thompson, Joe Wegg had become quite the most important resident of Chazy County, and the young man was popular and well liked by all who knew him.

After the first interchange of greetings Joe questioned Mr. Merrick about the explosion of the night before, and Uncle John frankly stated his suspicions.

"I'm sorry," said Joe, "they ever started that mill at Royal Falls. Most of the workmen are foreigners, and all of them rude and reckless. They have caused our quiet, law-abiding people no end of trouble and anxiety already. It is becoming a habit with them to haunt Millville on Saturday nights, when they are partly intoxicated, and they've even invaded some of the farmhouses and frightened the women and children. I've talked to Bob West about it and he has promised to swear in Lon Taft and Seth Davis as special constables, to preserve order; but he admits we are quite helpless to oppose such a gang of rowdies. I've also been to see Mr. Skeelty, to ask him to keep his men at home, but he answered gruffly

that he had no authority over his employees except during working hours, and not much authority even then."

"Skeelty doesn't seem the right man to handle those fellows," observed Mr. Merrick thoughtfully; "but as he owns the controlling interest in his company, and Boglin is fully as unreasonable, we cannot possibly oust him from control. If the men determined to blow up all Millville with dynamite I'm sure Skeelty would not lift a finger to prevent it."

"No; he's deathly afraid of them, and that's a fact," said Joe.

They sat in silence a while.

"Your report of Skeelty's threat to cut off your electric power," said young Wegg, "reminds me of a plan I've had in mind for some time. I find I've too much time on my hands, Mr. Merrick, and I cannot be thoroughly happy unless I'm occupied. Ethel's farms are let on shares and I'm a drone in the world's busy hive. But we're anchored here at Millville, so I've been wondering what I could do to improve the place and keep myself busy. It has seemed to me that the same rush of water in Little Bill Creek that runs the dynamos at Royal is in evidence--to a lesser extent--at the old milldam. What would you think of my putting in an electric plant at the mill, and lighting both Millville and Huntingdon, as well as all the farmhouses?"

"Not a bad idea, Joe," said Uncle John approvingly.

"Electric lights have a civilizing influence," continued the young man.

"I'm quite sure all the farmers between here and Huntingdon would use them, at a reasonable price. I can also run a line to Hooker's Falls, and one to Chazy Junction. Plenty of poles can be cut from our pine forests and the wires will be the chief expense. I may not make money, at first, but I'll play pretty nearly even and have something to do."

"Do you think you could furnish enough power for our printing office?" asked Mr. Merrick.

"Yes; and a dozen factories, besides. I've an idea the thing may bring factories to Millville."

"Then get at it, Joe, and build it quick. I've a notion we shall have an open rupture with Skeelty before long."

Joe Wegg smiled.

"You're going to accuse me, sir, of asking advice after I've made up my mind," said he; "but the fact is, I have bought the mill of Silas Caldwell already. He's been wanting to dispose of the property for some time."

"Good!" exclaimed Uncle John.

"Also I--I've ordered a dynamo and machinery. It all ought to be here in a few days."

"Better yet!" cried Mr. Merrick. "You've relieved my mind of a great weight, Joe."

"Now about Thursday Smith," said the young man. "Don't you think it would be policy for you to let him go, Mr. Merrick?"

"No."

"He's a clever fellow. I can use him at my lighting plant."

"Thank you, Joe; but that wouldn't help any. As long as he's in Millville he will be an object of vengeance to those anarchistic mill hands. The only way to satisfy them is to drive Smith out of town, and--I'll be hanged if I'll do it! He hasn't done anything wrong, and I'm interested in the fellow's curious history. I've put his case in the hands of a famous New York detective--Fogerty--with instructions to discover who he is, and I can't let a lot of rowdies force me to abandon the man for no reasonable cause."

"Don't blame you, sir," said Joe. "If it wasn't this Thursday Smith, some other would incur the hatred of the Royal workmen, and as they're disposed to terrorize us we may as well fight it out on this line as any other. The whole county will stand by you, sir."

"The only thing I dread is possible danger to my girls."

"Keep 'em away from the office evenings," advised Joe. "During the day they are perfectly safe. If anything happens, it will be at night, and while the newspaper office may some time go flying skyward the girls will run no personal danger whatever."

"Maybe so, Joe. How queer it is that such a condition should exist in Millville--a little forgotten spot in the very heart of civilization and the last place where one might expect excitement of this sort. But I won't be cowed; I won't be driven or bullied by a pack of foreign hounds, I assure you! If Skeelty can't discipline his men, I will."

In furtherance of which assertion, Mr. Merrick went to town and wired a message to the great Fogerty.