

CHAPTER XVIII

OPEN WARFARE

Joe Wegg's machinery and dynamos arrived promptly and the electric plant was speedily installed at the old mill. So energetically had the young man supervised his work that poles and wires were all in place as far up the road as Thompson's Crossing and a branch line run to the Wegg Farm, by the time the first test was made.

All Millville celebrated that first night when its streets shone resplendent under the glare of electric lights. There was a public bonfire near the mill, speeches were made, and afterward Mr. Merrick served a free supper to the villagers, in the hall over Sam Cotting's General Store, where the girls assisted in waiting upon the guests, and everybody was happy and as hilarious as the fumes of good coffee could make them.

More speeches were made in the hall, and one of these was by Peggy McNutt, who had painted his wooden foot blue with red stripes in honor of the occasion. He said, according to the report afterward printed in the Tribune:

"Feller Citizens! This 'ere town's bloomin' like a new mown rose. I'll bet anybody anything there ain't another town in Ameriky what's gone

ahead like we hev in the past few months that's jest past. (Applause.)
If I do say it myself, we're the mos'--eh--the mos'--eh--progressioning
community in--in--this community. Our community hes put out a daily
paper what's a credit to--to--our community, especially the poetry;
we've got a paper mill at Royal what makes paper fer New Yoruk; an' now,
to cap the climate, our community hes lighted our community with
'lectric lights fit fer Lundon, New Yoruk, Canada or--or--or--our
community. (Laughter and cries of "Cut out the community, Peggy!") No!
Never, feller citizens, will I cut out a community what's done so much
fer our--our community. If I do say it myself, the eyes of the com--of
the world is upon us, an' I'm proud of the things that's ben did by our
feller citizens, with my full approval, in this 'ere--this
'ere--er--community!" (Cheers and a sandwich, which last offering was
received by Mr. McNutt in his back hair as he turned to descend from the
rostrum.)

Joe Wegg is reported to have said: "Neighbors, this electric plant is no
plaything. It is going to give you all better light, at no more cost to
you than kerosene. But it will do more than that: it will run machinery
of all kinds better than steam will. You've seen electricity running the
newspaper press, and the same current has operated the big paper mills
at Royal. Here in this audience is a gentleman from Connecticut who has
accepted my invitation to look over our village with a view to building
a factory here, using the power I shall hereafter be able to furnish. I
am in correspondence with two other manufacturers, whom I hope to induce
to locate in Millville. (Enthusiastic cheers.) Job Fisher, who used to

live at Malvern, is planning to start a lumber mill, to cut the pine just north of here; so you see we are about to arouse from our long sleep and have a great future before us if we keep wide awake. Another item of news merits your attention. Bartlett has sold sixty acres of his farm to Dr. Adam Matthews, for many years a prominent physician of Boston, who is going to build a good house on the land and become a citizen of Millville. We've always had to go to Huntingdon for a doctor, but now Dr. Matthews has promised to look after the health of the Millville people, although he has retired from city practice. More people will come here from time to time, attracted by our enterprise and the rugged beauty of our county; real estate will become more valuable, trade will prosper and every one of the old inhabitants will find opportunities to make money." (Great applause.)

A general discussion followed concerning the "doin's of Joe Wegg" and the prophecies he had made. Opinion seemed divided as to whether the promised "boom" was desirable for Millville or not. Some of the good villagers were averse to personal activity and feared the new order of things might disturb their comfort; in others a mild ambition had been awakened. But while they feasted at Mr. Merrick's expense and gravely canvassed the situation, the newly installed electric lights suddenly failed. Darkness fell upon the assemblage and there was an awed hush until Sam Cotting lighted the old reliable kerosene lamps.

Joe Wegg was as much astonished as anyone.

"There has been an accident to the machinery," he said to Mr. Merrick.

"I'll run over to the mill and see what has happened."

"I will go with you," said Arthur Weldon, and Major Doyle also decided to accompany the young man.

Uncle John and his three nieces remained in the hall, and Mr. Merrick took occasion to make a little speech in which he explained that a hitch in the working of the electric plant was liable to happen at first, but after a few days the dynamos could be fully depended upon.

He had scarcely finished this explanation when Arthur came running back into the hall in much excitement. He approached Mr. Merrick and said in a low voice:

"The machinery is all right, sir. Some one has cut the wires."

"Cut the wires!"

"Yes. Joe thinks it's the work of the mill hands. The wires are cut in all directions, and several of the men from Royal have been seen loitering around by Cox and Booth, the detectives."

The girls overheard this assertion, and Patsy exclaimed:

"I'm going to the office, to make sure our power hasn't been tampered

with."

The meeting broke up at once and the villagers trooped out to investigate. Mr. Merrick and Arthur walked with the girls to the printing office, where they found Thursday Smith and Hetty working by the light of tallow candles.

"The power is off," said Smith quietly.

"Then the wire from Royal has also been cut," said Patsy. "What shall we do? His paper must come out to-morrow morning, in spite of anything and everything!"

"Do you know who cut the wires?" inquired Thursday.

"We think the mill hands must have done it."

"Not with Skeelty's consent, I'll be bound," said Mr. Merrick. "The manager is too fearful of a damage suit to play any tricks."

"A cut wire may be repaired," suggested the pressman, and even as he spoke Joe Wegg came in, accompanied by the two detectives and the major.

"Cox has interviewed one of the workmen from Royal," said Joe, "and the fellow says there's a strike at the mill and everything is closed down.

Skeelty is barricaded in his office building, wild with fear, for the

men have captured the company's store and helped themselves to the stock of liquors. The man Cox spoke with, who seems to be a well disposed fellow, predicts all kinds of trouble, and perhaps rioting, before this thing is ended."

They listened to this report in amazement.

"I conjecture," said the major, "that the rascally manager has given his men too much leeway. He's encouraged them in mischief until they've taken the bit between their teeth and turned against even their master. I have no personal acquaintance with the villain, but I imagine it serves him right."

"But, dear me!" cried Patsy, wringing her hands; "what'll become of the paper? It's nearly ten o'clock now."

Thursday turned to Joe Wegg.

"Can't we connect our supply wire with your new plant, so as to use your power?" he asked.

"Easily. An hour's work will serve to make the connection. But unless we watch the wire every minute those fellows will cut it again. The town's full of the rascals, and they're not exactly sober, either."

"Watch the wire; that's the idea," said Uncle John. "It's only a short

distance to the mill, and I'm sure the villagers will volunteer for this duty."

"Of course," said Joe. "Major Doyle, will you mount guard over my men at the dynamos, to see they're not interfered with, while I look after the wire?"

"Sure enough; it'll remind me of the old war times," said the major readily.

"Where is Arthur?" asked Louise.

"We left him at the mill."

They left the office at once, Joe to get his line-men at work, and the major to join Weldon in guarding the dynamos. One of the detectives went with Mr. Wegg, but the other, whose name was Booth, remained to guard the printing office. Mr. Merrick now proposed that he take the girls home. Patsy and Beth refused to leave until the emergency was past, when the major and Arthur could drive them to the farm, but Louise was tired and went with Uncle John in his buggy, the surrey being left for the rest of the party to use. Arthur ran over for a moment to say everything was quiet at the mill and he did not think there would be any further trouble, and the report considerably reassured them.