

CHAPTER XIX

A MERE MATTER OF REVENGE

Hetty and Thursday continued to work on the paper.

"We'll have everything ready by the time the line is connected," said the artist. "Then it will be but a few moments' work to run off the edition."

Patsy and Beth held candles for them, for the electric lights had been cut off with the power; so, seeing them all busily engaged, Arthur Weldon decided to return to the mill to join the Major. Booth sat in the front office, near the door, and in the darkness Arthur nearly stumbled over him.

"Going away, sir?" asked the man.

"Yes; I'll see if I can be of any assistance at the mill."

"Be careful. Those workmen have been drifting into town in squads, the last few minutes, and most of them are reckless with drink."

"I'll watch out," said Arthur.

In the middle of the road a group of mill hands conversed excitedly in some foreign tongue; but they paid no attention to Weldon as he passed them. Others joined them, presently, and one began a harangue in a loud voice, to which they listened eagerly. Then Bob West slipped across from the hardware store and ran against the detective in the doorway of the printing office.

"Who's this?" he demanded, holding the man in a firm grip.

"Booth, sir."

"Good. I could not recognize you in this darkness. Are you armed?"

"Yes."

"Then you and I will defend this door. Who is inside?"

"The pressman--Thursday Smith--and three of the girls."

"The compositors?"

"No; they've gone to the hotel. Miss Doyle, Miss DeGraf, and--Hetty Hewitt."

West went into the hack room, which was faintly illumined by candles stuck here and there. The girls and Smith were all bending over the

imposing stone, where the forms of the paper were being made up.

"Here," said West, taking a revolver from his pocket and laying it on the table; "I'm afraid there may be an attack on this office in a few minutes, for I understand the language of those strikers and have been listening to them. If any of the mill hands attempt to break into this room don't be afraid to shoot."

"Why should the men wish to attack us, sir?" asked Patsy wonderingly.

"There are several reasons. They're after Smith, for one thing. They've an old grudge against him to settle. Aside from the mere matter of revenge I overheard one of them telling his friends to smash the press and keep the paper from coming out, and Mr. Boglin would pay them well for the job."

Smith carelessly thrust the revolver into his hip pocket.

"The paper will come out if Mr. Wegg gives us the power," he said.

"Can you let me have a revolver, Mr. West?" asked Hetty.

"Could you use it?"

"I think so."

He looked at her a moment and then took a second revolver from his pocket.

"I've robbed my hardware stock," he said with a smile. "But I advise you girls to keep your hands off the thing unless a crisis arises. I don't imagine the gang will get past me and Booth at the entrance, but if any stragglers come your way Smith has authority to drive them back. I'm justice of the peace, and I hereby appoint you all special officers of the law."

He said this lightly, fearing to alarm the girls unnecessarily, and then passed through the doorway and joined Booth at the front.

The telephone rang and Patsy answered it.

"How soon will the forms be ready?" asked Arthur's voice.

"In ten minutes--perhaps five," she answered.

"We'll have the power on in ten minutes more. Tell Smith not to lose an instant's time in running off the edition, for we don't know how long we can keep the line open. The strikers are threatening us, even now."

"All right," called Patsy; "just give us the power for a few minutes, and we'll be through for to-night."

She went back to Thursday and reported.

"There may be a few typographical errors, and I'm afraid it's a bad make-up," he remarked; "but I'll have the thing on the press in five minutes."

With mallet and shooting-stick he tightened the quoins, then lifted the heavy iron frames filled with type and slid them onto the bed of the press. They gave him all the light the flickering candles afforded as he adjusted the machinery, and all were bending over the press when a low, distant growl was heard, rising slowly to a frenzied shout. A revolver popped--another--followed by wild cries from the street.

The girls grew a little pale, but Thursday Smith put his hand on the lever of the press and said:

"All right. The moment they give us the current we're ready to run."

Patsy straightened up with a sigh of relief, then gave a low cry as the screens of the two windows of the pressroom were smashed in and through the openings men began to tumble into the room. At once Hetty confronted them with leveled revolver and the sight caused them to hesitate.

"Out o' the way, you women!" called a burly fellow who wore a green sweater and an oilskin hat; "we don't want to hurt you if we can help. There's the one we're after!" He pointed a finger at Thursday Smith.

"You can't have him," retorted Beth, half shielded behind the militant Hetty. "This is private property, and you're trespassing. Unless you go away at once you will suffer the consequences."

This defense seemed to surprise them, for they fell back a little toward the windows. At that moment, with a low rumble, the press started, moving slowly at first but gradually acquiring speed. The sight aroused the resentment of the invaders.

"Stop that press!" yelled their spokesman excitedly. "Stop it, Smith, or we'll put both you and the machine out of business."

Thursday paid no attention to anything but his press. The huge cylinder of white paper was unrolling, passing under the platen and emerging at the other end as neatly folded copies of the Millville Daily Tribune.

With a roar of rage the big fellow leaped forward, but at the action a shot rang out and he fell headlong almost at the foot of the press.

Beth and Patsy turned their heads an instant to glance at Hetty. The artist's face was white and set; her eyes sparkled brilliantly; she held the still smoking weapon in readiness for another shot.

But the men were awed by the fall of their leader. They watched Beth leap to the platform beside Thursday Smith and draw his revolver from

his pocket, where he had placed it. Hetty's courage had inspired her, and Beth had handled pistols before. The men read the determined eyes fixed upon them; they noted Smith's indifference to their threats. The defenders of the press and pressman were only girls, but they were girls evidently not afraid to shoot.

No advance was made and the tableau was dramatic. Smith watched his press with undivided attention and it clattered away at full speed until the frail building shook with its powerful, steady motion. Then suddenly it began to slow down. The power was off, and the machine came to an abrupt stop.

Thursday stepped from the platform and looked at the index of the counter.

"Four hundred and sixty-three. Twenty-two short, Miss Doyle," he announced.

"That'll do, Thursday."

He came to her side, then, facing the sullen, glowering group of mill hands.

"Boys," said he, "it won't do you any good to interfere with us to-night. The paper for to-morrow morning is already printed, and Ojoy Boglin isn't a big enough man to stop it, now or ever. Better go back

to Royal and settle your troubles with Skeelty, for if you stay here the citizens of Millville are in the mood to shoot you down like dogs."

They stood undecided a moment, but the argument had evidently struck home.

"What's the matter with Harris?" asked one, pointing to the motionless form of the man in the green sweater. "Is he dead?"

"I suppose so," answered Thursday coolly; but he stooped to examine Hetty's victim, rolling him over so that his face was upward. "No; he isn't hurt much, I'm sorry to say. The bullet glanced off his forehead and stunned him, that's all. Take the brute, if you want him, and go."

They obeyed in silence. Several stepped forward and raised the unconscious Harris, bearing him to the window, where they passed him to those without. Then they also retreated through the windows and the room was cleared.

Only then did Hetty and Beth venture to lower their weapons.

"Oh, dear!" cried Patsy, in a low, agitated voice; "I'm so glad you didn't kill him, Hetty."

"I'm not," returned the artist doggedly. "He deserved death, at the least, and by killing him I'd have cheated the gallows."

Then she glanced around at the horrified faces of her friends and burst into tears.