

CHAPTER XX

DEFENDING THE PRESS

In the front room Bob West and the detective were having a busy time. At the first rush they each fired a shot over the heads of the mob, merely to let them know the place was guarded. In the darkness it was impossible for the strikers to tell how many armed men confronted them, so they fell back a little, but formed a cordon around the entire building. From the printing office to the old mill was a distance of only a few hundred feet, and every able-bodied inhabitant of Millville except Peggy McNutt and Sara Cotting--who had discreetly disappeared at the first sign of danger--was assisting Joe Wegg to protect the electric cable he was trying to connect. The men from Royal were scattered all along the line, peering through the dim light to discover a vulnerable point of attack but deterred from interfering by the determination of the stalwart defenders. Mobs are invariably cowardly, and this one, composed of the lowest strata of mixed American and foreign laborers, was no exception to the general rule. However, when word was finally passed along from the mill that the dynamo was running and supplying power to the printing press, a howl of rage went up and a sudden rush was made for the line, the attack concentrating at one point.

The defenders promptly grouped themselves in front of the threatened pole and Seth Davis, the blacksmith, wielding a heavy sledge hammer, did

valiant service, clearing a space around him with little difficulty. Joe Wegg, Arthur Weldon, Cox the detective, Lon Taft, Nick Thome and even little Skim Clark were all in the melee, fighting desperately for time to enable Thursday Smith to work his press, using whatever cudgels they had been able to pick up to keep the assailants from the pole. Slowly, however, they were forced back by superior numbers until finally one of the mill hands clambered up the pole and cut the wire.

"Never mind," said Arthur to Joe, as they retreated fighting toward the printing office; "I think they've had time to run off the edition, provided Smith was ready with the forms."

The mob was by this time in an ugly mood and the nearer Joe and Arthur edged toward the printing office the more numerous their enemies became. The Millville people were getting rather the worst of the scrimmage when out rushed Thursday Smith, swinging a stout iron bar he had taken from the press, and with this terrible weapon he struck out so vigorously that the diversion in their favor enabled the retreating villagers to gain the office, where Booth and Bob West fired several shots that effectually checked the mob.

"Stand back, ye villains!" cried a loud voice, as Major Doyle marched calmly down the road from the mill; "how dare ye interfere with a gentleman?"

One of the leaders confronted him menacingly. The major slapped his face

with the flat of his hand and then kicked the fellow in the shins.

"Didn't I say to get out o' my way?" he roared, and to the surprise of everyone--even the major, perhaps--they fell back and allowed him to walk leisurely into the printing office.

Having succeeded in their primary attempt to cut the wire, and finding the determined band of defenders more dangerous than they had thought, the workmen retreated in the direction of Royal, where there was more to be gained by rioting than in Millville.

When at last the town was clear of them, Arthur, who was considerably battered and bruised but pleased with the triumphant ending of the adventure, drove the girls and the major to the farm. They urged Hetty to accompany them, but she declared she was not a bit nervous and preferred to sleep at the hotel.

"I think the trouble is over for to-night," said West, and all agreed with him. Cox and Booth decided to sleep in the printing office, and after the girls had driven away with their escorts and the villagers had dispersed to their homes, Thursday put on his coat and walked to the hotel with Hetty.

"All that row was about me," he remarked disconsolately.

"But they didn't get you," said Hetty, triumph in her voice.

"No."

He did not mention her bravery, or the loyal support of Beth and Patsy, but after a moment he added: "I'm not worth defending."

"How do you know?" asked Hetty. "It occurs to me, Mr. Smith, that you are as much a stranger to yourself as to us."

"That is true."

"And in emergencies you are not averse to defending others. Of course Miss DeGraf and her cousin wanted the paper printed, at all hazards. I don't blame them for that; but I--"

She hesitated.

"You simply stood by a comrade. Thank you, Hetty."

"Good night, Thursday."

"Will you be able to sleep to-night?"

"I'm going straight to bed. The rumpus has quieted my nerves."

"Good night, then."

In the early morning Mr. Merrick was awakened by a red glare that flooded his bedroom. Going to the window he found the sky at the north full of flame. He threw on his bathrobe and went to the door of Arthur Weldon's room, arousing the young man with a rap on the panels.

"The settlement at Royal is burning," he reported.

Arthur came out, very weary and drowsy, for he had not been asleep long and the strenuous work of the night had tired him.

"Let it burn," he said, glancing through a window at the lurid light of the conflagration. "We couldn't be of any use going over there and, after all, it isn't our affair to relieve Skeelty."

Then he told Uncle John of the riot in the village, for the old gentleman had been sound asleep when the party returned to the farm.

"The blaze is the work of those crazy strikers, I suppose," said Mr. Merrick. "It looks from here as if they had set fire to their own homes, as well as to the paper mills and office and store buildings. It will be fortunate if the forest does not also burn."

"Don't worry, sir," advised Arthur. "We'll discover the extent of the fire by daylight. For my part, I'm going back to bed, and it will be well for you to follow my example."

"Another item for the paper," whispered a soft voice, and there was Patsy beside them at the window.

Mr. Merrick sighed.

"I had no idea so much excitement could possibly happen at Millville," said he. "If this keeps on we'll have to go back to New York for quiet. But let us get to bed, my dear, for to-morrow is likely to be a busy day for us all."