

# SLAVS IN THE FRONT RANK

## A PROBABLE BATTLEFIELD IN CASE OF HOSTILITIES.

### THE MOST DANGEROUS ELEMENT IN THE COAL REGION—THE BRAVE MEN WHO WILL OPPOSE IT.

SHENANDOAH, Penn., Feb. 12.—If the miners' strike culminate in hostilities between the strikers and the authorities this burg will probably be selected as the principal battlefield. It is the chief coal town in the Schuylkill fields, and the most populous community in it with the exception of the county seat, Pottsville. That it is not a city instead of a borough is not the fault of some of its most energetic and progressive residents. Years ago they appealed to the State Legislature for the right to substitute a Mayor for a Burgess, but as the Legislature understood that the change would entail a good deal of expense, and as it did not feel certain that Shenandoah would not meet the fate of a good many other coal towns—a sudden termination of existence owing to a lack of anthracite—it very properly refused to give its consent to the measure. Shenandoah is still in existence, and shows no signs of decay in spite of prophecies made 20 years ago that it had not then more than 10 or 15 years of profitable life ahead of it.

A typical coal town it can hardly be said to be, for there is nothing like it in any of the coal fields. Until the great fire of 1883 it looked as if those who said it had come to stay were mistaken. It looked as if it had been built in a desperate hurry and for temporary purposes, and in many respects bore a striking resemblance to a new-born gold-mining town in Nevada. A brick building was such a rarity that the owner of such a structure was considered too wealthy for the place or too lavish to long remain out of bankruptcy. Prior to the fire of 1883, which cleaned up more than half the town and nearly all of its business establishments, there weren't more than five or six brick buildings in the place. The fire wasn't an unmixed misfortune; it was rather a blessing, though possibly in unpleasant guise. It taught properly owners that it was cheaper in the end to build of brick instead of wood, and it resulted in lowering the rates of fire insurance to an extent that was positively sickening to insurance brokers. It gave the town an appearance of solidity, and, comparatively, raised the prices of real estate to enormous figures. The population, too, increased and is now about 12,000. The first building was erected in 1861 by a party of surveyors, at the head of whom was P. W. Shearer, now one of the richest men in the region and an engineer of some reputation. This little building was gradually enlarged until its proportions were more extensive than handsome. It stood at the intersection of the two principal thoroughfares, and in it originated the fire that changed Shenandoah from a collection of wooden shanties to a very decent and solid looking town.

It has too many wooden shanties yet, however, most of them on the outskirts of the borough, and in the most flimsy and dilapidated of these live the Polish and Hungarian population. Slavs can be found in every coal town now, but the first of the invaders obtained a foothold here. Had they not been accustomed to treatment of the vilest sort they would never have remained here. They were stoned and kicked and starved, but all to no purpose. They had been stoned, kicked, and starved in their native land. They may have believed that such was always to be their lot; their manner indicated as much. They did not move on. They bore all sorts of ill treatment with composure, and if they ever complained it was in private or in language that told nothing to the oppressor. The perseverance and staying quality of the Slav had been underestimated. People wondered how they lived. They did not live in the American sense of the term. In the Slav sense they lived splendidly. Fifty cents a week to a "greenhorn" Pole or Hungarian meant food; 50 cents a day meant comfort. A dollar a day was wealth. They came in tens, in hundreds; they became a part of the place. On the lowest of wages they waxed fat and rich. They clubbed together in all commercial transactions. They hired frame shanties and fitted them up like the steerage of ocean ships. Twenty of them have been known to sleep in one room—in bunks built against the walls. One woman would cook for 20 men. They bought their provisions in large quantities and always of the lowest grade. Fish, green bacon, and bread were their principal articles of diet. Of work they never tired. They would stand in water up to their waists from 7 o'clock in the morning until 5 o'clock in the evening, using pick or shovel, for a dollar or 75 or 50 cents a day. Poor food, miserable lodgings, killing work, exposure, uncleanness, had apparently no effect upon their iron frames. America, in spite of all these shortcomings, was heaven to the Slavs. They said so; they believed so.

Sober they were peaceful, drunk they were wild beasts, and with the strength of wild beasts. They drank, as they lived, in concert. Every wedding was celebrated with a debauch, and it behooved the peaceable citizens to give the Slavs who were in their cups a wide berth. As an instance of their disregard of law might be told an incident that occurred some years ago, but is still fresh in the minds of the participants, nearly all of whom are alive. There was a wedding in the Polish quarter. The Poles then lived in shanties built on the hillside west of Kehley Run Colliery. The back doors of these shanties opened on small wooden platforms. The latter were supported on piles. The distance from the platforms to the ground, a steep declivity, ranged from 10 to 20 feet. A fall from one of these platforms meant a drop and roll down hill of 50 feet or more. The hillside was studded with lumps of "bony" coal, small and huge rocks, stumps of trees, and cavernous holes. On the night of this particular wedding intelligence was brought to the Chief of Police, Paddy O'Neil—it was during the reign of the Irish—that the Poles were murdering each other. O'Neil gathered his men—six men, himself included—and marched to the scene of battle. The police marched in through the front door of the shanty in which the wedding celebration was in full blast. Hostilities were at their height, and men and women were fighting with a vim and ferocity that was simply appalling. The bride and her mother-in-law were engaged in single combat in the centre of the floor. The groom was busily engaged in devouring a competitor for the hand of his wife.

The appearance of the Chief of Police was the signal for a sudden cessation of hostilities. Then both sides joined forces and seemed to await the onset of the police. These tactics were changed by the fighting mother-in-law of the bride. She suddenly grabbed an iron stove lifter and rushed at the Chief. She whacked him over the head with the stove lifter with one hand and with the other stabbed the Chief's revolver. This she fired off, aiming the muzzle at the floor. The report of the 45-calibre Colt's revolver sounded, in the small room, like that of a small cannon. Jumping into the air the old amazon shouted "Good noise, good noise!" Quick as a flash of lightning the Chief was picked up by three or four stalwart Slavs and pitched over the platform. As his officers followed him into the house, one at a time, they were treated in the same way. At the foot of the hill the police picked themselves up just in time to hear the victorious shouts of the wedding party. The Chief ordered his men to remain where they were until he returned with reinforcements. During his absence the wedding party again attacked the tub of "polak." The latter appears to be the national drink of the Slavs in America. It is a corrosive mixture. The first requisite is a washtub, the size of which depends upon the number of those who chip in. Into the tub is poured from a gallon to three gallons of alcohol, of the cheapest kind. Water, molasses, and some spices are added. Then the mass is stirred with a poker or any other utensil that is handy and will answer the purpose and the "polak" is ready. From 10 to 20 drinks of "polak" will transform a peaceful and humble Slav into a raging wild beast, and when they are under the influence of the mixture they are not safe neighbors.

About half of the wedding party was *hors de combat* when the six police, reinforced by as many more special police, once more invaded the shanty. Several Slavs had been beaten into a state of insensibility, while one had been nearly killed. The police drew their revolvers before entering the house. They might have saved themselves the trouble. The Slavs were so much under the influence of "polak" that the sight of the revolvers only incited them to deeds of valor. They threw themselves upon the police, and after a desperate battle, in which the police used their revolver butts and the Slavs used chairs, stove lids, and table legs, the police, one by one, were again thrown over the platform and rolled down the hill. The wedding party was not molested further until the following day, when it was jammed into jail, where it staid until it was set free by a jury who could not be induced to think that the whole affair wasn't a joke of the most humorous kind.

These are the people who will be placed in the van if the strikers and the authorities come in conflict. By "authorities" no reference is made to the municipal officials. The men who do the fighting for the Reading Company and the coal operators generally are the Coal and Iron police; and a splendid body of men they are; big men, physically, armed to the teeth, slow to take offense, but full of grit. When they form in line and bring their Winchester to a "present," there is danger in front. They will stand in such a position for an hour—have done it—and never flinch under a shower of stones or coal and offensive epithets, and never reply by word or deed until the word is given. Then a sheet of flame darts from the muzzles of the rifles and the roar of the guns is drowned in the shrieks of rioters who courted the vengeance that finally overtook them.

There may be no such trouble here or elsewhere in the coal region, but if the trouble does come it is more likely than not to happen here. The collieries here—Kehley Run, Kohinor, West Shenandoah, Turkey Run, Shenandoah City, and Indian Ridge—are among the most productive and valuable in the region, and the Reading Company feels naturally anxious to see them in operation. Trouble was when the Slavs would have been found face to face with the English, Scotch,

Irish, and Pennsylvania Dutch miners, but since the advent of the Knights of Labor the Slavs have become "brothers," and it is possible will be used by the other "brothers," if the strike leaders insist upon preventing men who are anxious to work, and who need work as they need food, from entering the mines.