

FICTION

Kirk Munroe

Derrick Sterling

A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

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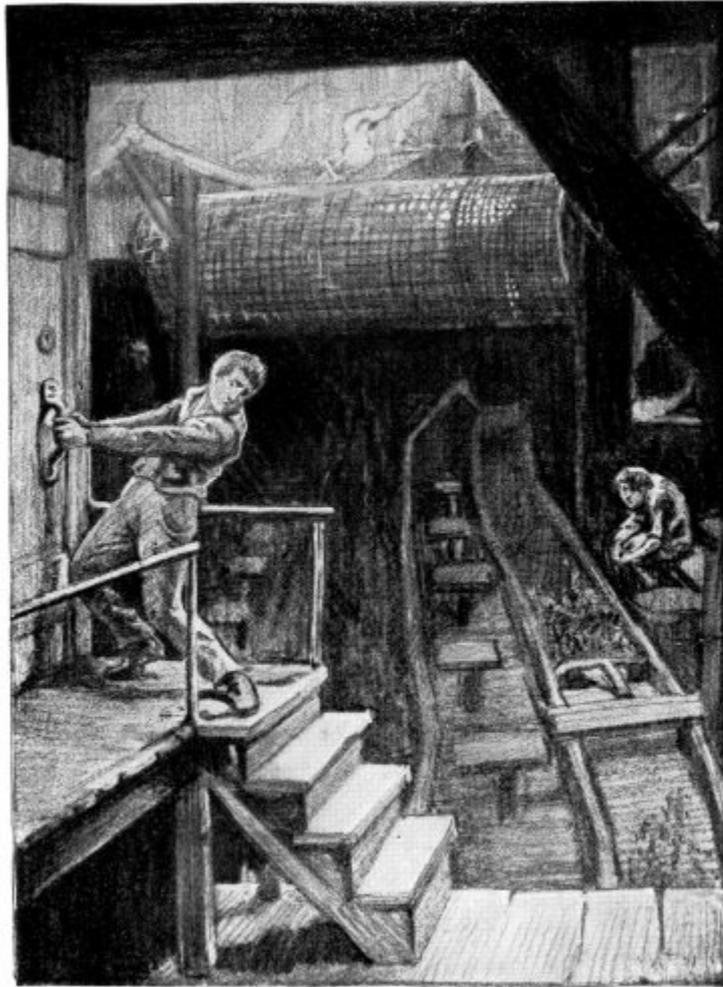
DERRICK STERLING

A STORY OF THE MINES

BY KIRK MUNROE

Author of "THE FLAMINGO FEATHER"

ILLUSTRATED



IN THE BURNING BREAKER.

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DERRICK STERLING: A STORY OF THE MINES

CHAPTER I

IN THE BURNING BREAKER

"Fire! Fire in the breaker! Oh, the boys! the poor boys!" These cries, and many like them--wild, heartrending, and full of fear--were heard on all sides. They served to empty the houses, and the one street of the little mining village of Raven Brook was quickly filled with excited people.

It was late in the afternoon of a hot summer's day, and the white-faced miners of the night shift were just leaving their homes. Some of them, with lunch-pails and water-cans slung over their shoulders by light iron chains, were gathered about the mouth of the slope, prepared to descend into the dark underground depths where they toiled. The wives of the day shift men, some of whom, black as negroes with coal-dust, powder-smoke, and soot, had already been drawn up the long slope, were busy preparing supper. From the mountainous piles of refuse, of "culm," barefooted children, nearly as black as their miner fathers, were tramping homeward with burdens of coal that they had gleaned from the waste. High above the village, sharply outlined against the western sky, towered the huge, black bulk of the breaker.

The clang of its machinery had suddenly ceased, though the shutting-down whistle had not yet sounded. From its many windows poured volumes of smoke, more dense than the clouds of coal-dust with which they were generally filled, and little tongues of red flame were licking its weather-beaten timbers. It was an old breaker that had been in use many years, and within a few days it would have been abandoned for the new one, recently built on the opposite side of the valley. It was still in operation, however, and within its grimy walls a hundred boys had sat beside the noisy coal chutes all through that summer's day, picking out bits of slate and tossing them into the waste-bins. From early morning they had breathed the dust-laden air, and in cramped positions had sorted the shallow streams of coal that constantly flowed down from the crushers and screens above. Most of them were between ten and fourteen years of age, though there were a few who were even younger than ten, and some who were more than sixteen years old.^[1]

Among these breaker boys two were particularly noticeable, although they were just as black and grimy as the others, and were doing exactly the same work. The elder of these, Derrick Sterling, was a manly-looking fellow, whose face, in spite of its coating of coal-dust, expressed energy, determination, and a quicker intelligence than that of any of his young companions. He was the only son of Gilbert Sterling, who had been one of the mining engineers connected with the Raven Brook Colliery. The father had been disabled by an accident in the mines, and after lingering for more than a year, had died a few months before the date of this story, leaving a wife and two children, Derrick and little Helen.

For nearly five years before his father's death Derrick had attended a boarding-school near Philadelphia; but the sad event made a vast difference in his prospects for life, and compelled his return to the colliery village that he called home.

Mr. Sterling had always lived up to his moderate income, and though his salary was continued to the time of his death, the family then found themselves confronted by extreme poverty. They owned their little vine-covered cottage, at one end of the straggling village street, and in this Mrs. Sterling began to take boarders, with the hope of thus supporting her children. Her struggle was a hard one, and when one of the boarders, who was superintendent of the breaker, or "breaker boss," offered Derrick employment in his department, the boy was so anxious to help his mother that he gladly accepted the offer. Nothing else seemed open to him, and anything was better than idleness. So, after winning a reluctant consent from his mother, Derrick began to earn thirty-five cents a day, at that hardest and most monotonous of all forms of youthful labor, picking slate in a coal-breaker.

He had been brought up and educated so differently from any of his companions of the chutes that the life was infinitely harder for him than for them. He hated dirt, and loved to be nice and clean, which nobody could be for a minute in the breaker. He also loved the sunlight, the fields, and the woods; but no sunshine ever penetrated the thick dust-clouds within these walls. In the summer-time it shone fierce and hot on the long sloping roof, just above the boys' heads, until the interior was like an oven, and in winter they were chilled by the cold winds that blew in through the ever-open windows.

Here, and under these conditions, Derrick must work from seven o'clock in the morning until six in the evening. At noon the boys were allowed forty minutes in which to eat the luncheons brought in their little tin pails, and draw a few breaths of fresh air. During the first few weeks of this life there were times when it seemed to Derrick that he could not bear it any longer. More than once, as he sat beside the rattling chute, mechanically sorting the never-ending stream, with hands cut and bruised by the sharp slate, great tears rolled down his grimy cheeks. Over and over again had he been tempted to rush from the breaker, never to return to it; but each time he had seemed to see the patient face of his hard-working mother, or to feel the clinging arms of little Helen about his neck. He would remember how they were

depending on his two dollars a week, and, instead of running away, would turn again to his work with a new energy, determined that, since he was to be a breaker boy, he would be the best in the colliery.

In this he had succeeded so well as to win praise, even from Mr. Guffy, the breaker boss, who usually had nothing but harsh words and blows for the boys who came under his rule. He had also been noticed by the superintendent of the colliery, and promised a place in the mine as soon as a vacancy should occur that he could fill. In the breaker he had been promoted from one seat to another, until for several weeks past he had occupied the very last one on the line of his chute. Here he gave the coal its final inspection before it shot down into the bins, from which it was loaded into cars waiting to carry it to cities hundreds of miles away. Above all, Derrick was now receiving the highest wages paid to breaker boys, and was able to hand his mother three big silver dollars every Saturday night.

The first time he did this seemed to him the proudest moment of his life, for, as she kissed him, his mother said that this sum was sufficient to pay all his expenses, that he was now actually supporting himself, and was therefore as independent as any man in the colliery.

It was a wonderful help to him, during the last few weeks of his breaker boy life, to think over these words and to realize that by his own efforts he had become a self-supporting member of society. It really seemed as though he increased in stature twice as fast after that little talk with his mother. At the same time his clothes appeared to shrink from the responsibility of covering an independent man, instead of the boy for whom they had originally been intended.

Beside Derrick Sterling, that hot summer afternoon, sat Paul Evert, a slender, delicate boy with a fine head set above a deformed body. He did not seem much more than half as large as Derrick, though he was but a few months younger, and his great wistful eyes held a frightened look, as of some animal that is hunted. He too had been compelled by poverty to go into the cruel breaker, and try to win from it a few loaves of bread for the many little hungry mouths at home, which the miner father and feeble mother found it so hard to feed.

For a long time the rude boys of Raven Brook had teased and persecuted "Polly Evert," as they called him, on account of his humped back and withered leg, and for a long time Derrick Sterling had been his staunch friend and protector. While the even-tempered lad used every effort to avoid quarrels on his own behalf, he would spring like a young tiger to rescue Paul Evert from his persecutors. Many a time had he stood at bay before a little mob of sooty-faced village boys, and dared them to touch the crippled lad who crouched trembling behind him.

On this very day, during the noon breathing-spell, he had been compelled to thrash Bill Tooley, the village bully, on Paul's behalf. Bill had been a mule-driver in the mine, but had been discharged from there a few days before, and taken into the breaker. He now sat beside Paul, and during the whole morning had steadily tormented him, in spite of the lad's entreaties to be let alone and Derrick's fierce threats from the other side.

That Derrick had not escaped scot-free from the noon-hour encounter was shown by a deep cut on his upper lip. That Bill Tooley had been much more severely punished was evident from the swollen condition of his face, and from the fact that he now worked in sullen silence, without attempting any further annoyance of the hump-backed lad beside him. Only by occasional glances full of hate cast at both Derrick and Paul did he show the true state of his feelings, and indicate the revengeful nature of his thoughts.

This was Paul's first day in the breaker, where he had been given work by the gruff boss only upon Derrick Sterling's earnest entreaty. Derrick had promised that he would initiate his friend into all the details of the business, and look after him generally. He had his doubts concerning Paul's fitness for the work and the terrible life of a breaker boy, and had begged him not to try it.

Paul's pitiful "What else can I do, Derrick? I have got to earn some money somehow," completely silenced him; for he knew only too well that in a colliery there is but one employment open to a boy who cannot drive a mule or find work in the mine. Therefore he had promised to try and secure a place for his crippled friend, and had finally succeeded.

Paul was struggling bravely to finish this long, weary first day's work in a manner that should reflect credit upon his protector; but the hours seemed to drag into weeks, and each minute he feared he should break down entirely. He tried to hide the cruel slate cuts on his hands, nor let Derrick discover how his back ached, and how he was choked by the coal-dust. He even attempted to smile when Derrick spoke to him, though his ear, unaccustomed to the noise of the machinery and the rushing coal, failed to catch what was said.

While the crippled lad, in company with a hundred other boys, was thus anxiously awaiting the welcome sound of the shutting-down whistle, at the first blast of which the torrents of coal would cease to flow, and they would all rush for the stairway that led out-of-doors, the air gradually became filled with something even more stifling than coal-dust--something that choked them and made their eyes smart. It was the pungent smoke of burning wood; and by the time they fully realized its presence the air was thick with it, and to breathe seemed wellnigh impossible. Then, just as the

boys were beginning to start from their seats, and cast frightened glances at each other, the machinery stopped; and amid the comparative silence that followed they heard the cry of "Fire!" and the voice of the breaker boss shouting, "Clear out of this, you young rascals! Run for your lives! Don't you see the breaker's afire?"

As he spoke a great burst of flame sprang up one of the waste chutes from the boiler-room beneath them, and with a wild rush the hundred boys made towards the one door-way that led to the open air and safety.

Obedying the impulse of the moment, Derrick sprang toward it with the rest. Before he could reach it a faint cry of "Derrick, oh, Derrick, don't leave me!" caused him to turn and begin a desperate struggle against the mass of boys who surged and crushed behind him. Several times he thought he should be borne through the door-way, but he fought with such fury that he finally won his way back out of the crowd and to where Paul was still sitting.

"Come on, Polly," he cried, "we haven't any time to lose."

"I can't, Derrick," was the answer; "my crutch is gone."

Surely enough, the lame boy's crutch, which had been leaned against the wall behind him, had disappeared, and he was helpless.

At first Derrick thought he would carry him, and made the attempt; but his strength was not equal to the task, and he was forced to set his burden down after taking a few steps towards the door.

He called loudly to the last of the boys, who was just disappearing through the door-way, to come and help him. At the call the boy turned his face towards them. It was that of Bill Tooley, and it bore a grin of malicious triumph.

The next instant the great door swung to with a crash that sounded like a knell in the ears of Derrick Sterling, for he knew that it closed with a powerful spring lock, the key of which was in Mr. Guffy's pocket.

The crash of the closing door was followed by a second burst of flame that came rushing and leaping up the chutes, and above its roar the boys heard shrill voices in the village crying, "Fire! Fire in the breaker!"

CHAPTER II

A FEARFUL RIDE

As Derrick and Paul realized that they were left alone in the burning breaker, in which the heat was now intense, and that they were cut off from the stairway by the closed and bolted door, they remained for a moment speechless with despair. Then Derrick flung himself furiously against the heavy door again and again, with a vague hope that he might thus force it to give way. His efforts were of no avail, and he only exhausted his strength; for the massive framework did not even tremble beneath the weight of his body.

Still he could not believe but that somebody would open it for them, and he would not leave the door until tiny flames creeping beneath it warned him that the stairway was on fire and that all chances of escape in that direction were gone. He tried to make himself seen and heard at one of the open windows, but was driven back by the swirling smoke. Then he turned to Paul, who still sat quietly where he had been left. The crippled lad had not uttered a single cry of fear, though the eager flames had approached him so closely that he could feel their hot breath, and knew that in another minute the place where he sat would be surrounded by them.

As Derrick sprang to his side, with the intention of dragging him as far as possible from them, he said,

"The slope, Derrick! If we could only get to the top of the slope, couldn't we somehow escape by it?"

"I never thought of it!" cried Derrick. "We might. We'll try anyhow, for if we stay here another minute we shall be roasted to death."

Stooping, he lifted Paul in his lithe young arms, and with a strength born of despair began to carry him up the long and devious way that led to the very top of the lofty building. He had scarcely taken a dozen steps, and was already staggering beneath his burden, when he stumbled and nearly fell over some object lying on the floor. With an exclamation, he set Paul down and picked it up.

It was the crutch, Paul's own crutch; and it was so far above where they had sat at work that it seemed as though it must have been flung there.

The boys did not pause to consider how the crutch came to be where they found it, but joyfully seizing it, Paul used it so effectively that they quickly gained the top of the building and stood at the upper end of the long slope.

It was a framework of massive timbers supported by high trestle-work, that led from the highest point of the breaker down the hill-side into the valley, where it entered the ground. From there it was continued down into the very lowest depths of the mine. On it were double tracks of iron rails, up which, by means of an immensely long and strong wire cable, the laden coal cars were drawn from the bottom of the mine to the top of the breaker. As a loaded car was drawn up, an empty one, on the opposite track, went down. The angle of the slope was as steep as the sharply pitched roof of a house, and its length, from the bottom of the mine to the top of the breaker, was over half a mile.

This particular slope was provided with a peculiar arrangement by which a car loaded with slate or other refuse, after being drawn up from the mine to a point a short distance above the surface, could be run backward over a vertical switch that was lowered into place behind it. This vertical switch would carry it out on the dump or refuse heap. The top of the dump presented a broad, level surface for half a mile, on which was laid a system of tracks. Over these the waste cars were drawn by mules to the very edge of the dump, where their contents were tipped out and allowed to slide down the hill-side. During working hours a boy was stationed at this switch, whose business it was to set it according to the instructions received from a gong near him. This could be struck either from the bottom of the mine or the top of the breaker, by means of a strong wire leading in both directions from it. One stroke on the gong meant to set the switch for the mine, and two strokes to set it for the dump. A flight of rude steps led up along the side of the slope from the mouth of the mine to the top of the breaker.

Derrick and Paul thought that perhaps they might make their way down this flight of steps and thus escape from the blazing building; but when they reached the end of the slope, and looked down, they saw that this would be impossible. Already the steps were on fire, and the whole slope, as far as they could see, was enveloped in a dense cloud of smoke. Through it shot flaming tongues that were greedily licking the timbers of the tall trestle-work.

If Derrick had been alone he would have made the attempt to rush down the steps, and force his way through the barrier of smoke and flame; but he knew that for his companion this would be impossible, and that even to try it meant certain death.

As he hesitated, and turned this way and that, uncertain of what to attempt, an ominous crash from behind, followed by another and another, warned them that the floors of the building were giving way and letting the heavy machinery fall into the roaring furnace beneath. They knew that the walls must quickly follow, and that with them they too must be dragged down into the raging flames.

Paul, sitting on the floor, buried his face in his hands, shutting his eyes upon the surrounding horrors, and prayed.

Derrick stood up, gazing steadily at the rushing flames, and thought with the rapidity of lightning. Suddenly his eye fell upon an empty coal-car standing on the track at the very edge of the slope, and he cried,

"Here's a chance, Paul! and it's our only one. Get into this car, quick as you can. Hurry! I feel the walls shaking."

As Paul clambered into the car in obedience to his friend's instructions, though without an idea of what was about to happen, Derrick sprang to one side, where a brass handle hung from the wall, and pulled it twice with all his might; then back to the car, where he cast off the hooks by which the great wire cable was attached to it. Again he pulled furiously, twice, at the brass handle.

He had done all that lay in his power, and was now about to make one last, terrible effort to escape. The red flames had crept closer and closer, and were now eagerly reaching out their cruel arms towards the boys from all sides. Beneath them the supports of the building tottered, and in another moment it must fall. Down the slope the shining rails of the track disappeared in an impenetrable cloud of smoke, and Derrick could not see whether his signal to the switch-tender had been obeyed or not.

As Paul crouched on the bottom, at one end of the car, his companion said,

"I'm going to push her over and let her go down the slope, Polly. If the trestle hasn't burned away she'll take us through the fire and smoke quick enough. If there's anybody down there and he's heard the gong and set the switch, we'll go flying off over the dump. I guess I can stop her with the brake before she gets to the edge. It's half a mile, you know. If the switch is open, we'll go like a streak down into the mine and be smashed into a million pieces. It won't be any worse than being burned to death, though. Now good-by, old man, if I don't ever see you alive again. Here goes."

"Good-by, dear Derrick."

Then the crippled lad closed his eyes and held his breath in awful expectation. Derrick placed one shoulder against the car, gave a strong push, and, as he felt it move, sprang on one of the bumpers and seized the brake handle that projected a few inches above its side.

In the mean time the two boys had been missed in the village, and as it became known that they were still within the breaker, the entire population, frenzied with excitement, gathered about the blazing building, making vain efforts to discover their whereabouts, that they might attempt a rescue.

No men on earth are braver in time of danger, or more ready to face it in rescuing imperilled comrades, than the miners of the anthracite collieries. Had they known where to find Derrick and Paul, a score of stalwart fellows would willingly have dashed into the flames after them. As it was, no sign that they were still in existence had been discovered, and the spectators of the fire were forced to stand and watch it in all the bitterness of utter helplessness.

One man indeed ran up the blazing stairway, and with a mighty blow from the pick he carried crashed open the door against which Derrick had so vainly flung himself. Only a great burst of flame leaped forth and drove him backward, with his clothing on fire and the hair burned from his face. He was Paul Evert's father.

Upon receipt of the tidings that her boy was shut up in the burning breaker, without any apparent means of escape, Mrs. Sterling had fallen as though dead, and now lay, happily, unconscious of his awful peril. Little Helen sat by her mother's bedside, too stunned and frightened even to cry.

In Paul's home a crowd of wailing women surrounded Mrs. Evert, whose many children clung sobbing to her skirts.

Suddenly two sharp strokes of a gong rang out, loud and clear, above the roar of the flames and the crash of falling timbers. The crowd of anxious spectators heard the sound, and from them arose a mighty, joyous shout. "They're alive! They're alive! They're at the top of the slope!"

But what could be done? The trestle was already blazing, and the upper end of the slope was hidden from the view of those below by dense volumes of ink-black smoke.

Again the gong rang out, "one, two," and one man of all that throng thought he knew what it meant. Springing to the mine entrance, the old breaker boss threw over the switch bar, and set the vertical switch for the dump.

Then came a crash of falling walls, and out of the accompanying burst of fire and smoke, down along the shining track of the slope, shot a thunder-bolt.

It seemed like a thunder-bolt to the awe-stricken spectators, as it rushed out of the flames, leaving a long trail of smoke behind it. In reality it was a coal-car, bearing in one end a crouching figure and a crutch. At the other end stood Derrick Sterling, bareheaded, with rigid form and strained muscles, and with one hand on the brake handle.

With a frightful velocity the car crossed the vertical switch and shot out over the level surface of the dump. Derrick felt the strength of a young giant as he tugged at that brake handle. The wood smoked from the friction as it ground against the wheel; but it did its duty. On the very edge of the dump, half a mile from the vertical switch, the car stopped, and Derrick sat down beside it, sick and exhausted from the terrible nervous strain of the few minutes just past.

It seemed hours since the machinery had stopped in the breaker and the rush of boys had been made for the door-way; but it was barely ten minutes since the first alarm had been given. From the time he stood face to face with death at the top of the slope, and started that car on its downward rush through the flame and smoke, less than two minutes had passed, but they spanned the space between life and death.

As yet Derrick could not realize that they had escaped nor did he until he felt a pair of arms thrown about his neck and heard Paul's voice saying,

"Derrick, dear Derrick! you have saved my life, and as long as it lasts I shall love you. If ever I have a chance to show it, you shall see how dearly."

Then Derrick stood up and looked about him. A crowd of men and boys were running along the top of the dump towards them. In another minute they had both been placed in the car, and amid the joyous cries and exultant cheers it was being rapidly rolled back towards the village.

When Mrs. Sterling began to recover consciousness she smiled at the boy whom she saw standing beside her, and said, faintly,

"I've had an awful dream, Derrick, and I thank God it was only a dream."

And Derrick said, "Amen, mother."

CHAPTER III

THE MINE BOSS TAKES DERRICK INTO HIS CONFIDENCE

In a mining community serious accidents, and even terrible disasters, are of such frequent occurrence that in Raven Brook the burning of the old breaker soon ceased to furnish a topic of conversation.

It was not until the day after that of the fire that Derrick learned of the presence of mind displayed by the old breaker boss in comprehending his signal on the gong and setting the vertical switch for the dump. As soon as the old man came home that evening, Derrick went to his room prepared to pour out his heartfelt thanks. He had hardly begun when the breaker boss interrupted him with,

"There, that'll do, an' I don't want to hear no more on it. Any fool knows that two gongs means 'dump switch,' an' when one's been in the mines forty year, man an' boy, as I have, he don't take no credit to himself for doing fool's work. When you get older you'll know better'n to mention sich a thing."

"But, Mr. Guffy--"

"That'll do, I tell ye!" roared the irascible old man. "Clear outen here, and go over to Warren Jones's; he wants to see ye. Hold on!" he added, as Derrick was about to leave the room. "On your way stop and tell that hunchback butty^[2] of yourn to be on hand in the new breaker at sharp seven to-morrow morning, if he wants to keep his job. Do ye hear?"

As he went out Derrick smiled to think of the old man's pride, which would not allow him to accept thanks or praise from a boy for performing a creditable action.

At the same time the breaker boss was muttering to himself, "He's a fine lad. If he'd 'a' come to grief through any fault of mine I'd never got over it. 'Twon't do, though, to let him see that I think more of him than of any others of the young scoundrels. Boys allus gets so upperty if they thinks you're a-favorin' of 'em. They must be kep' down! Yes, sir! kep' down, boys must be."

Derrick could not help wondering why he too had not been ordered to report at the new breaker the next morning, but thought it better not to ask any questions. After supper he went over to see Mr. Jones, in obedience to the instructions received from the breaker boss.

Warren Jones, the assistant superintendent, or, as he was generally termed, the "mine boss," of the Raven Brook Colliery, was a pleasant-faced, outspoken young man of about thirty. At present he was acting as superintendent, and the burden of responsibility bore heavily upon him. He had a host of warm friends, but had made some bitter enemies among the miners by his direct honesty of purpose and determination to deal out even-handed justice to all over whom he exercised authority. Although generally good-natured and slow to find fault, he could be quick and stern enough when occasion demanded.

Such was the man who greeted Derrick Sterling cordially that evening, showed him into his library, and made him sit down, saying that he wished to have a little talk with him. He spoke in terms of such praise of Derrick's behavior on the previous day as to bring a blush of pleasure to the boy's cheeks.

"By-the-way, Derrick," he asked, "how did the breaker catch fire?"

"I haven't the least idea, sir," answered Derrick, looking up in surprise.

"Oh, all right," said the other, carelessly. "I didn't know but what you might have heard something said about it."

"No, sir, I haven't; that is, not anything that I thought amounted to anything. I have heard some of the boys talking about 'Mollies,' and saying that they beat the world for floods and fires. What are 'Mollies' anyway, Mr. Jones?"

The mine boss looked at him curiously for a moment before replying,

"If you really don't know, it's time you did, for you're likely to see and hear a great deal of them if you decide to make mining your business in life. All that I know about them is this:

"Many years ago a young woman named Mary, or Mollie Maguire, was murdered in Ireland, and several young fellows belonging to an order called 'Ribbonmen' bound themselves by an oath to avenge her death and kill her murderer. They succeeded so well in this undertaking, and escaped detection so easily, that they proceeded to redress other wrongs, real and fancied. They were joined by other men of their own way of thinking, and finally they became a widely spread and powerful society. In course of time, whenever anybody was mysteriously killed in Ireland, it came to be said that

the Mollie Maguires had done it, and so the name clung to them.

"At last the murderous order was introduced into this region by some Irish miners who wished to get rid of an objectionable overseer, and also to control the labor unions among the miners. It has so spread that now its members are known to exist in every mining community of the anthracite country. It is one of the most cowardly organizations ever formed by men, and one of the most cruel. Its victims are given no warning of the fate in store for them, but are struck down in the dark, or from an ambush, by unseen hands.

"Often the murderer has no previous acquaintance with, or knowledge of, the man whom he kills. He blindly obeys the command of his infernal order, and is thus made a tool to avenge some petty grievance or fancied injury.

"The Mollies have become a plague-spot that threatens the health and life of this region. It is the duty of every honest man and boy who is brought into any sort of contact with them to thwart their evil designs in every possible way."

"Well," said Derrick, drawing a long breath, "I had no idea that there were such wicked men in this country."

"No," he answered the mine boss, "you are but a boy, and have had but little experience in the wickedness of this world; but I know you are brave, and I believe you to be honest and loyal. I am therefore going to trust you, and tell you something that I had no intention of mentioning when I sent for you this evening. It is this:

"I have every reason to believe the Mollies are strong in this colliery, and that they intend to make trouble here. I have lately received several anonymous letters making demands that cannot possibly be granted, and containing vague threats of what will happen in case they are not satisfied. This morning I found this note pinned to my door."

Here Mr. Jones opened a drawer of his desk, and took from it a dirty sheet of paper, which he handed to Derrick. On it was scrawled the following:

"Bosses take Wornin'. New breakers can burn as well as old. Fires cost munny. Better pay it in wage to

"MOLLIE."

As the boy finished reading this strange communication which was at the same time an admission and a threat, he looked up in surprise and began, "Then you think, sir--"

"Yes," interrupted the mine boss. "I not only think, but I feel convinced, that the mischief has begun. Moreover, I am determined that it shall end before it goes any further. I am most anxious to discover who is at the bottom of it, and in this I want you to help me."

"Want *me* to help!" exclaimed Derrick, in astonishment.

"Yes, you," answered Mr. Jones, smiling. "Your very youth and inexperience will render you less likely to be suspected than an older person. I am certain that I can count upon the son of my old friend Gilbert Sterling to perform truly and faithfully any duty which his employers may see fit to intrust him with. Is it not so, Derrick?"

"Yes, sir, it is," cried the boy. "Just tell me what you want me to do, and if I don't succeed it won't be because I haven't tried my best."

"That is just what I expected you to say," remarked the mine boss, quietly. "Now we will lay our first plans. I suppose you have had enough of the breaker, haven't you?"

"Indeed I have, sir."

"Very well. For a change I am going to offer you a job in the mine where I will give you a bumping-mule to drive. Your wages will be five dollars a week."

"A bumping-mule?" queried Derrick, in a tone of perplexity not unmingled with disappointment. From the preceding conversation he had expected to be intrusted with something very different from mule-driving; nor had he any idea what sort of an animal the one in question might be.

This time Mr. Jones not only smiled but laughed outright; for, from the boy's face and tone, he easily understood what was passing in his mind.

"A bumping-mule," he explained, "is the animal that draws the loaded coal-cars from the chambers, or breasts, to where they are made up into trains. These trains are then hauled by a team of mules to the foot of the slope. Then, when the empty cars are brought back, the bumping-mule distributes them to the several places where they are required. I suppose his title comes from his causing the cars to bump together as he makes them up into trains. In attending to

your duties as driver of this most important mule, I can assure you that your time will be fully occupied from the minute you go into the mine until you leave it.

"I suppose," he added, with a humorous twinkle in his eyes, "that our conversation led you to think you were to be appointed 'air boss' of the mine, or placed in charge of a gang at the very least?"

"No, sir," answered Derrick, a little hesitatingly; "I ain't quite such a greeny as that. But I don't see how I can help you very much by just driving a bumping-mule."

"You can help me in two ways: first, by doing your duty so faithfully that I may be able to depend on you at all times; second, while I am in doubt as to whom I may trust, it will be of great assistance to me to know that there is at least one person constantly in the mine who will be true to the interests of his employers, and on the alert to detect any attempt to injure them."

"I hope you don't mean that I am to be a spy in the mine, sir?"

"No, my boy, I do not. I want you to attend strictly to your duties as driver of a bumping-mule. At the same time I want you to consider that your eyes and ears are acting in the place of my eyes and ears. If at any time they see or hear anything which according to your best judgment I ought to know, I hope you will be man enough to tell me of it."

"Well, sir," answered Derrick, "I am glad of a chance to go into the mine and to earn five dollars a week. If you will let me do whatever I think is right about telling you things without making any promises, I will keep my eyes and ears wide open."

"That is all that I want you to do, my boy."

"All right, sir, then I'll do my best; and I hope I sha'n't have anything to tell you except about the bumping-mule."

"So do I hope so with all my heart, Derrick," said the mine boss, gravely; "for I am inclined to think that if you have anything else to tell me it will be something very serious and unpleasant. Now you may take this order for a pair of rubber boots and a miner's cap and lamp over to the store and get the things. Be on hand to go down with the first gang of the morning shift. You will find me in the mine, and I will see that you are properly set to work. Good-night."

"Good-night," answered Derrick, as, with the store order in his hand, and his mind full of conflicting emotions, he left the house.

Several miners of the day shift were in the store when Derrick went to present his order. By questioning him as to what he wanted with mine clothes, they soon learned that he was to begin life underground the next day as driver of a bumping-mule.

"De young bantam'll find it a tougher job than riding empty cars down de slope," sneered one big ugly-looking fellow, whose name was Monk Tooley, and who was Bill Tooley's father.

"I reckon you've laid in a big supply of cuss-words as a stock in trade! Eh, lad?" asked another.

"No, I haven't," said Derrick, flushing hotly. "I don't believe in swearing, and if I can't drive a mule without it I won't drive him at all."

"Then I reckon you'll hunt some other business putty quick," answered the miner with a coarse laugh in which the others joined. "Mules won't work without they hears the peculiar langwidge they's most fond of."

"Well," said Derrick, "we'll see." And leaving the store with his purchases he started homeward. On the way he stopped to deliver Mr. Guffy's message to Paul Evert, and to tell his friend the great news that on the following day he was to begin the life of a miner.

"I wish I was going with you," said Paul.

"I wish you were, Polly," answered Derrick. "Perhaps there will be a chance for you down there before long, and by that time I will have learned all the ropes, and can tell you what's what."

Although Derrick had lived much among collieries, he had never been allowed to go down into a mine. His parents had kept him as much as possible from associating with the rough mine lads of the village. Thus, until he went into the breaker to earn his own living, he had held but slight intercourse with them. His friend Paul, being the son of a miner, knew far more of underground life than he, and often smiled at his ignorance of many of the commonest mine terms.

Derrick was a peculiar boy in one respect. He disliked to ask questions, and would rather spend time and patience in finding out things for himself, if it were possible for him to do so. What he thus learned he never forgot.

He was thoroughly familiar with the surface workings of a colliery, and could explain the construction of the great pumps that kept the mine free from water, the huge, swiftly revolving fan that drew all foul air from it, or any of its other machinery. His father's profession had long seemed to him a most desirable one, and he spent much of his spare time in studying such engineering books as still remained in the house. He loved to pore over his father's tracings and maps of the old workings. With these he had become so well acquainted that he believed he could locate on the surface the exact spots beneath which ran the gangways, headings, and breasts of the abandoned portions of the mine.

By means of these old maps he had also discovered on the mountain side, more than a mile away, the mouth of a drift leading into a vein worked out and abandoned more than twenty years before. This discovery he kept to himself as a precious secret bequeathed to him by his father, though he had not the slightest idea that it would ever be of any practical value to him.

After leaving Paul, Derrick hurried home to tell his mother the great news that he was to work in the mine and earn five dollars a week, and to show her his mine clothes. He was greatly disappointed that instead of rejoicing over his brightening prospects she only gazed at him without speaking, until the tears filled her eyes and rolled down her pale cheeks.

"Why, mother," he said, "aren't you glad? Only think--five dollars a week!"

"Oh, my boy, my boy," she exclaimed, drawing him to her, "I can't let you go down into that horrible place! 'Twas there your father met his death."

"Shall I go back to the breaker, then, mother?"

"No, no; I didn't mean what I said. God has delivered you from one fearful peril, and he can guide you safely through all others. Yes, I am glad, Derrick--glad of any step that you take forward; but oh, my boy, be very careful wherever you go. Remember how precious your life is to me."

Dressed in his new mine clothes, Derrick hurried through breakfast the next morning, and started for the mouth of the slope bright and early.

On his way he met Bill Tooley, who stopped him by calling out, "Look a-here, young feller. They say yer a-going down ter drive my mule."

"Didn't know you had a mule," answered Derrick, pleasantly.

"Well, I did have a mule; an' what's more, I'm going ter have him again. Any feller that goes to driving him before I get back will be sorry he ever done it, that's all. I don't care if he is the bosses' pet, and did take a ride in a hand-car."



CHAPTER IV

INTRODUCING HARRY, THE BUMPING-MULE

As Derrick walked towards the entrance to the mine, he wondered what the bully whom he had just met meant by what he said. He did not then know that Bill Tooley had been discharged from the mine by Mr. Jones for brutal treatment of the mule he had driven, and for general laziness and neglect of his duties.

At the mouth of the "travelling-road," down which the early arrivals were compelled to make their way into the mine, Derrick was greeted by a little group of miners who were lighting their lamps and preparing to descend.

"'Tis bonny to see thee, Derrick lad," called out one of them.

"'Twill be luck to the mine to have such as you in her," said another.

"My lad would ha' been your age an' he'd lived," said a third. "'Twould ha' been a proud day for me to ha' seen him alongside o' thee, lad, lighting his bit lamp, and ready to take up the life of an honest miner."

In the group was Tom Evert, Paul's father, a brawny, muscular man, who was considered one of the best miners in Raven Brook. Taking Derrick a little to one side, he said,

"They tell me, lad, thou'rt to drive Bill Tooley's mule."

"I don't know anything about Bill Tooley's mule," answered Derrick. "I only know that Mr. Jones said I was to drive a bumping-mule, and I intend to do exactly what he tells me."

"Of course, lad, of course; but the bumping-mule he has in mind will be Bill Tooley's, I doubt not, and I'd rather 'twould be another than you had the job. Bill Tooley, with his feyther to back him, is certain to take it out, some way or another, of the lad that steps into his place."

"I'm not afraid of Bill Tooley, as you ought to know, Mr. Evert," said Derrick, somewhat boastfully, as he thought of the thrashing he had so recently given the young man in question.

"Of course not, lad, of course not. I know you can lick him fast enough in fair fight. My poor little Paul can bear ready witness to that, for which I'm under obligations to you. It's not fair fighting I mean; for when it comes to argyfyng with them Tooleys, it's foul play you must look out for; and what the young un lacks in pluck he makes up in infloence."

Derrick was about to ask what he meant, but was interrupted by a movement of the miners towards the entrance. In another moment he found himself rapidly descending the steep steps of the travelling-road, and feeling that the attempt to keep pace with the long-limbed fellows ahead of him must certainly result in his pitching headlong into the unknown depth of blackness.

The travelling-road was a gigantic stairway, leading at a steep angle directly down into the earth. It was high enough for a man to stand upright in without hitting his head against the roof, and it was provided with steps. They were cut or dug out of the rock, earth, or coal down through which the road passed, and were very broad and very high. The front edge of each was formed of a smooth round log. From the roof and sides of the road dripped and trickled little streams of water that made everything in it wet and soggy, and rendered the edges of the steps particularly slippery.

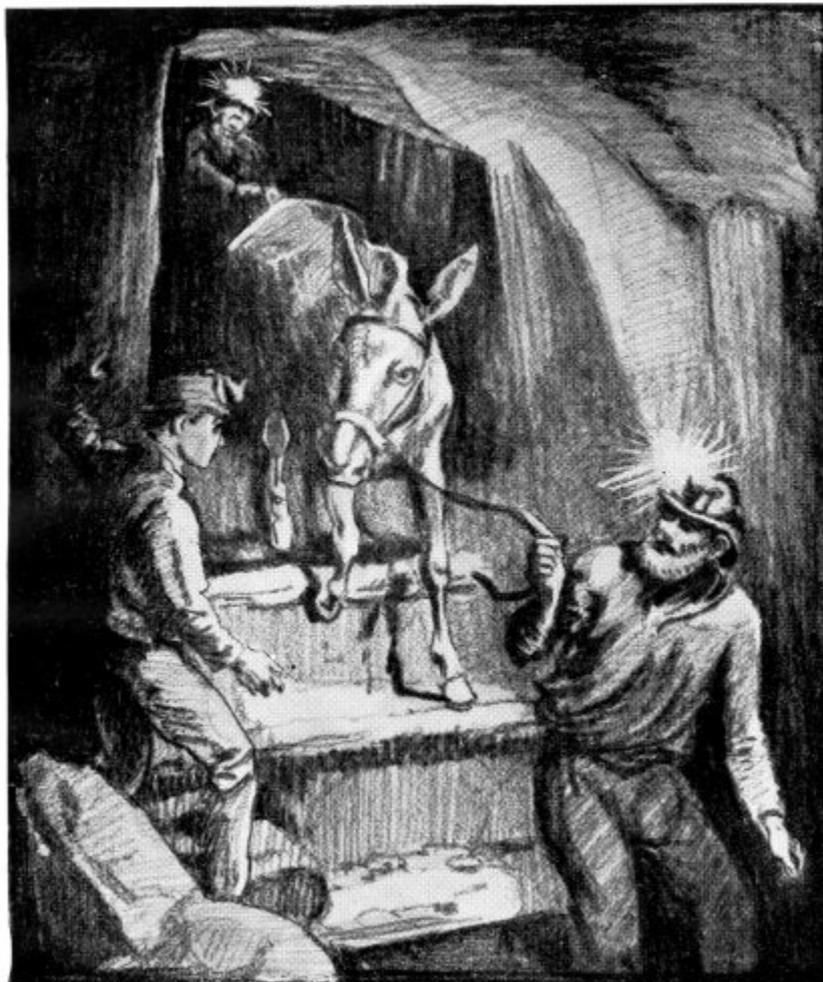
The air in the road was chilly in comparison with that of the warm summer's morning in which the outside world was rejoicing, and Derrick shivered as he first encountered its penetrating dampness. Of course the darkness was intense, but at first it was partially dispelled by the lights of the half-dozen miners in whose company he had entered the road. As they gradually left him behind, their twinkling lights grew fainter and fainter, until at last they vanished entirely, and Derrick found himself stumbling alone down the apparently interminable stairway.

While yet in company with the miners, he had passed through one door made of heavy planks, that completely closed the road, and now he came to another. Through its chinks and cracks there was a rush of air from outside inward that hummed and whistled like a small gale. It took all of Derrick's strength to pull this door open, and it closed behind him with a crash that reverberated in long, hollow echoes down the black depths before him.

Some distance below he was startled by a heavy booming sound from above, which was followed by a tremendous clattering, mingled with shouts and cries. In the first of these sounds he recognized the closing of the door through which he had recently passed, but he could not account for the others.

They were continued, and grew louder and louder as they approached, until at length they were close at hand, and he

saw lights and a confused mass of struggling forms directly above him. Stepping to one side, Derrick flattened himself against the wall to let them pass; but just as the miner who came first reached that point, he tossed the end of a rope into the boy's hands, saying, "Here, lad, lead this mule down the rest of the way, will ye? I'm in a powerful hurry myself."



"HERE, LAD, LEAD THIS MULE DOWN THE REST OF THE WAY, WILL YE?"

In another instant he had gone, leaping with immense strides down the precipitous steps, and Derrick found himself staring into the comical face of a large mule which, with his fore-feet on one step and his hind ones on that above, looked as though he were about to stand on his head.

"Go on, can't yer!" called out an impatient voice from behind the mule. "Do ye think I can hang onto this 'ere blessed tail all day? A mule's no feather-weight, let me tell yer."

Then Derrick realized that another man held the mule by the tail, and was exerting all his strength to prevent him from going down too fast. Accepting the situation, he started ahead, encouraging the mule to follow; but this arrangement did not seem to suit the animal, for he refused to budge a step from where he stood, nor could the man in the rear push him along.

"Here, you!" the man called out to Derrick, "come back here and steer him while I take his head. When he gets started, hang on to his tail with all your might, and hold back all yer can."

So they changed places, and the mule was so greatly pleased at having got his own way that he began to plunge down the stairs with great rapidity. Derrick felt almost as though he were being rushed through space on the tail of a comet, and shuddered to think of the broken limbs and general destruction that must inevitably follow such reckless travelling. The mule, however, seemed to know what he was about as well as the man who led him, and took such good care of himself that Derrick soon plucked up courage, and even began to enjoy the situation.

As he was thinking that they must be somewhere near the centre of the earth, the mule gave an unusually violent plunge forward, and then stopped so suddenly that poor Derrick found himself sprawling on the animal's back, with

both arms clasped tightly about his neck. With this the mule began to caper and shake himself so violently that the boy was forced to loose his hold and fall to the ground, amid roars of laughter from a score of miners who witnessed the scene.

Greatly confused, Derrick scrambled to his feet, gave a reproachful glance at the mule, which was calmly gazing at him with a wondering look in his wide-open eyes, and turned to see in what sort of a place he had been so unceremoniously landed. At the same moment Mr. Jones, dressed in miner's costume, and looking as grimy as any of the others, stepped from the laughing group and said,

"My boy, I congratulate you on being the first person who ever rode into this mine on mule-back, I am glad you found the travelling-road so good. Came on your own mule too. How did you know this was the bumping-mule you were to drive?"

"I didn't know what sort of a mule he was until just as we got here and he bumped me off his back," replied Derrick; "and I begin to think that he knows more about driving than I do."

"Well, you have made a notable beginning," said the mine boss, "and I am sure you two will get along capitally together. Harry Mule, this is Derrick Sterling, who is to be your new driver, and I want you to behave yourself with him." Then to Derrick he said, "Harry has the reputation of being the most knowing, and at the same time the most perverse, mule in the mine. I believe though he only shows bad temper to those who abuse him, and I have selected you to be his driver because I know you will treat him kindly, and give him a chance to recover his lost reputation. If he does not behave himself with you, I shall put him in the tread-mill. Now stand there out of the way for a few minutes, and then I will show you where you are to work."

Derrick did as he was directed, and quickly found himself intensely interested in the strange and busy scene before him. The travelling-road entered the mine in a large chamber close beside the foot of the slope that led upward to the new breaker. From this chamber branched several galleries, or "gangways," in which were laid railway-tracks. Over these, trains of loaded and empty coal-cars drawn by mules were constantly coming and going. By the side of the track in each gangway was a ditch containing a stream of ink-black water, flowing towards a central well in one corner of the chamber, from which it was pumped to the surface. Opposite to where he stood, Derrick saw the black, yawning mouth of another slope, which, as he afterwards learned, led down into still lower depths of the mine. The men around him were handling long bars of railroad iron, which they were loading with a great racket on cars, and despatching to distant gangways in which new tracks were needed. Two large reflector lamps in addition to the miners' lamps made the chamber quite bright, and with all its noise and bustle it seemed to Derrick the most interesting place he had ever been in. He was sorry when the mine boss called and told him to bring along his mule and follow him.

They entered one of the gangways, leading from the central chamber, which the mine boss said was known as Gangway No. 1. He also told Derrick something about his mule, and said that by its last driver, Bill Tooley, the poor animal had been so cruelly abused that he had sent it to the surface for a few days to recover from the effects.

"I guess he has recovered," said Derrick, "judging from the way he brought me into the mine."

They had not gone very far before they came to a closed door on one side of the gangway beyond which the mule absolutely refused to go, in spite of all Derrick's coaxings and commands.

"It is the door of his stable," said the mine boss, who stood quietly looking on, without offering any assistance or advice, waiting to see what the boy would do.

Tying the end of the halter to one of the rails of the track on which they were walking, Derrick started into the stable, where he quickly found what he wanted. Coming out with a handful of oats, he let the mule have a little taste of them; and then, loosening the halter, tried to tempt him forward with them. This plan failed, for Harry declined to yield to temptation, and remained immovable. Then Derrick turned a questioning glance upon the mine boss, who said,

"Never again hitch an animal to a track along which cars are liable to come at any moment. Now, why don't you beat the mule?"

"Oh no, sir!" exclaimed Derrick, in distress. "I don't want to do that."

"Neither do I want you to," laughed the other. "I only asked why you didn't?"

"Because," said Derrick, "I want him to become fond of me, and my mother says the most stubborn animals can be conquered by kindness, while beatings only make them worse."

"Which is as true as gospel," said the mine boss. "Well, the only other thing I can suggest is for you to go into the stable, get the harness that hangs on the peg nearest the door, and put it on him."

Acting upon this hint, Derrick had hardly finished buckling the last strap of the harness when the mule began to move steadily forward of his own accord.

"That's his way," said the mine boss. "In harness he knows that he is expected to work, but without it he thinks he may do as he pleases."

Presently the mule stumbled slightly, and again he stopped and refused to go ahead.

"Do you know what is the matter now, sir?" asked Derrick.

"I think perhaps he wants his lamp lighted," replied the mine boss.

A miner's lamp, attached to a broad piece of leather, hung down in front of the mule from his collar.

The boy lighted this lamp, and immediately the mule began to move on, showing that this was exactly what he had wanted.

"Seems to me he knows almost as much as folks," cried Derrick, highly delighted at this new proof of his mule's intelligence.

"Quite as much as most folks, and more than some," answered his companion, dryly.

During their long walk they passed through several doors which, as Derrick was told, served to regulate the currents of air constantly flowing in and out of the mine, and kept in motion by the great fan at its mouth. Whenever they approached one of these the mine boss called, loudly, "Door," and it was immediately opened by a boy who sat behind it and closed it again as soon as they had passed. Each of these boys had besides his little flaring lamp, such as everybody in the mine carried, a can of oil for refilling it, a lunch-pail and a tin water-bottle, and each of them spent from eight to ten hours at his post without leaving it.

Finally Derrick and the mine boss came to a junction of several galleries, a sort of mine cross-roads, and the former was told that this was to be his headquarters, for here was where the trains were made up, and from here the empty cars were distributed. At the farther end of each of the headings leading from this junction two or more miners were at work drilling, blasting, and picking tons of coal from between its enclosing walls of slate. They were all doing their best to fill the cars which it was Derrick's business to haul to the junction and replace with empty ones. There were also a number of miners at work in breasts, or openings at the sides of the gangways that followed the slant of the coal vein, who expected to be supplied with empty cars and have their loaded ones taken away by Derrick. These breast miners filled their cars very quickly, as the moment they loosened the coal it slid down the slaty incline, above which it had been bedded, to a wooden chute on the edge of the gangway that discharged it directly into them.

As Derrick was told of all this, he realized that he and Harry Mule would have to get around pretty fast to attend to these duties, and supply empty cars as they were needed.

What interested him most in this part of the mine was an alcove hewn from solid rock near the junction, in which was a complete smithy. It had forge, anvil, and bellows, and was presided over by a blacksmith named Job Taskar, as ugly a looking fellow, Derrick thought, as he had ever seen. Here the mules were shod, tools were sharpened, and broken iron-work was repaired. It was a busy place, and its glowing forge, together with the showers of sparks with which Job Taskar's lusty blows almost constantly surrounded the anvil, made it appear particularly cheerful and bright amid the all-pervading darkness. Nearly every man and boy in that section of the mine was obliged to visit the smithy at least once during working hours. Thus it became a great news centre, and offered temptations to many of its visitors to linger long after their business was finished.

After pointing out to Derrick the several places at which his services would be required, the mine boss left him, and the boy found himself fully launched on his new career.

He soon discovered that Harry Mule knew much more of the business than he did, and by allowing him to have his own way, and go where he thought best, Derrick got along with very few mistakes. Among the miners upon whom he had to attend he found brawny Tom Evert, stripped to the waist, lying on his side, and working above his head, but bringing down the coal in glistening showers with each sturdy blow of his pick. When he saw Derrick he paused in his work long enough to exchange a cheery greeting with him and to dash the perspiration from his eyes with the back of his grimy hand; then at it he went again with redoubled energy.

At the end of one of the headings Derrick found another acquaintance in the person of Monk Tooley. He scowled when he saw the new driver, and growled out that he'd better look sharp and see to it he was never kept waiting for cars, or it would be the worse for him.

Twice Derrick started to leave this place, and each time the miner called him back on some trivial pretext. The boy could not see, nor did he suspect, what the man was doing, but as he turned away for the third time, Monk Tooley sprang past him with a shout, and ran down the heading. Derrick did not hear what he said, but turning to look behind him, he saw a flash of fire, and had barely time to throw himself face downward, behind his car, when he was stunned by a tremendous explosion. Directly afterwards he was nearly buried beneath an avalanche of rock and coal.



CHAPTER V

ATTACKED BY ENEMIES, AND LOST IN THE MINE

Although Derrick was terribly frightened by the explosion, and considerably bruised by the shower of rocks and coal that followed it, the car had so protected him that he was not seriously hurt. Had his mule started forward the heavily loaded car must have run over and killed him. Fortunately Harry was too experienced a miner to allow such a trifling thing as a blast to disturb his equanimity, especially as the two false starts already made had placed him at some little distance from it. To be sure, he had shaken his head at the flying bits of coal, and had even kicked out viciously at one large piece that fell near his heels. The iron-shod hoof had shattered the big lump, and sent its fragments flying over Derrick, but in the darkness and confusion the boy thought it was only part of the explosion, and was thankful that matters were no worse.

As Derrick cleared himself from the mass of rubbish that had fallen on him, and staggered to his feet, he was nearly suffocated by the dense clouds of powder-smoke from the blast. He was also in utter darkness, both his lamp and that of Harry Mule having been blown out. In his inexperience he had not thought to provide matches before entering the mine, and now he found himself in a darkness more dense than any he had ever dreamed of, without any means of procuring a light. His heart grew heavy within him as he realized his situation, for he had no idea whether the miner who had played so cruel and dangerous a trick upon him would return or not.

An impatient movement on the part of Harry Mule suggested a plan to him. Casting off the chain by which the mule was attached to the car, and holding the end in his hand, he said, "Go on, Harry, and take me out of this place." At this command the intelligent animal started off towards the junction as unhesitatingly as though surrounded by brightest daylight, and Derrick followed.

They had not gone far before they met Monk Tooley, leisurely returning to the scene of his labors.

"Hello! Mr. Mule-driver," he shouted, "what are you a-doing here in de dark, an' how do yer like mining far as ye've got? Been studying de effect of blarsts, and a-testing of 'em by pussunal experience?"

Derrick felt a great lump rising in his throat, and bitter thoughts and words crowded each other closely in his mind. He knew, however, that the man before him was as greatly his superior in wordy strife as in bodily strength, so he simply said,

"The next time you try to kill me you'd better take some surer means of doing it."

"Kill you! Who says I wanted to kill you?" demanded the miner, fiercely, as he stopped and glared at the boy. "Didn't I holler to ye to run? Didn't I give yer fair warnin' that I was shootin' a blarst? Didn't I? Course I did and yer didn't pay no 'tention to it. Oh no, sonny! 'twon't do. Ye mustn't talk 'bout killin' down in dese workin's, cause 'twon't be 'lowed. Come back now, an' git my wagon. Here's a light for yer, but don't let me hear no more talk 'bout killin', or ye may have a chance to wish yer was dead long before yer really is."

Derrick made no reply to this, but turning Harry Mule about, they went back after the car. He was convinced that this man was his bitter and unscrupulous enemy, and made up his mind that he must be constantly on his guard against him. He did not tell anybody of this startling incident of his first day's experience in the mine for a long time afterwards; as, upon thinking it over, he realized that the peril, which he had so happily escaped might readily be charged to his own carelessness.

At lunch time he let Harry Mule make his own way back to the mine stable for oats and water. He had been told by the mine boss that the knowing animal would not only do this, but would afterwards return to his place of duty when started towards it by one of the stable-boys. While the mule was gone, his young driver went into the blacksmith's shop to eat his own lunch in company with Job Taskar, who had invited him to do so. Job questioned Derrick closely as to his acquaintance among the men and boys of the colliery, and asked particularly in regard to his likings or dislikings of the several overseers.

"I hear thee's a great friend o' t' mine boss," said Job.

"Not at all," answered Derrick. "Mr. Jones was a friend of my father's, but I hardly know him."

"All says thee's boss's favorite."

"I'm sure I don't know why they should. Of course it was good of him to give me a job; but he had to get somebody to drive the mule. It doesn't seem to me that I've got any easier place than anybody else."

Here Derrick put one hand up to his badly aching head, which had been bruised by a flying chunk from Monk Tooley's blast.

Noting the movement, Job asked what was the matter, for although he had heard about the blast from Monk Tooley, he wanted to learn what the boy thought of it.

"I got hit by a falling chunk," replied Derrick, guardedly.

"Humph!" growled Job; "better keep clear o' they chunks. One on 'em might hit ye once too often some time."

Job held no more conversation with the boy, but lighted his pipe, and sat at one side of the forge, scowling and smoking. Derrick also kept silence, as he sat on the opposite side of the forge, rubbing his aching head with a grimy hand.

While they sat thus, several miners dropped in for a smoke and a chat. They all looked curiously at Derrick, but none of them spoke to him. Thus neglected, he felt very unhappy and uncomfortable, and was glad when the jingling of Harry Mule's harness outside gave notice that it was again time to go to work.

The rest of the day passed uneventfully and monotonously, for, with the exception of burly Tom Evert, who gave the lad a cheery word whenever he passed him, nobody spoke to him. Even Harry Mule seemed to realize that his young driver was not having a very pleasant time, and rubbed his nose sympathetically against his shoulder, as much as to say, "I'm sorry for you, and I'll stand by you even if nobody else does."

At last, in some mysterious way, everybody seemed to know all at once, that it was time to quit work, and Harry Mule knew it as quickly as anybody. Before Derrick noticed that the miners had stopped work, this remarkable animal, having just been unhitched from a car, threw up his head, uttered a prolonged and ear-rasping bray, and started off on a brisk trot, with a tremendous clatter and jingling of chains, towards his stable.

The door-boys heard him coming, opened their doors to let him pass, closed them after him, and started on a run for the foot of the slope.

Of course Derrick followed his charge as fast as possible, calling, as he ran, "Whoa, Harry! Whoa! Stop that mule, he's running away!" Neither Harry nor anybody else paid the slightest attention to him, and when he finally reached the stable he found his mule already there, exchanging squeals and kicks with several other bumping-mules that had come in from other parts of the mine.

Then he knew that it was really quitting-time, and went to work, as quickly as his inexperience would allow, to rub Harry down, water and feed him, and make him comfortable for the night. Everybody else who had stable-work to do finished it before he, and when at last he felt at liberty to leave the mine and start towards the upper world and the fresh air he longed so ardently to breathe again, he was alone.

Derrick found his way without difficulty to the large chamber at the foot of the slope. There, as he did not see any cars ready to go up, he turned towards the travelling-road, with the intention of climbing the steep stairway he had descended that morning.

Suddenly there arose cries of "There he is! There he is! Head him off!"

Before the startled lad knew what was about to happen, he was surrounded by a score of sooty-faced boys. Cutting him off from the travelling-road, these boys pushed him, in spite of his opposition and protests, into a far corner of the chamber, where, with his back against the wall, he made a stand and demanded what they wanted of him.

"A treat! a treat!" shouted several.

Then room was made for one who seemed to exercise authority over them, and who, as he stepped forward, Derrick recognized with surprise as Bill Tooley, ex-mule driver, and now breaker boy.

"What are you down here for, and what does all this mean, Bill?" asked Derrick, as calmly as he could.

"It means," answered Bill, putting his disagreeable face very close to Derrick's, "dat yer've got ter pay fer comin' down inter de mine, an' fer takin' my mule, when I told yer not ter; dat's what it means. An' it means dat we're goin' ter initerate yer inter de order of 'Young Sleepers,' what every boy in de mine has got ter belong ter."

Derrick had heard of this order of "Young Sleepers," and knew it to be composed of the very worst young rascals in the coal region. He knew that they were up to all kinds of wickedness, and that most of the petty crimes of the community were charged to them. In an instant he made up his mind that he would rather suffer almost anything than become a member of such a gang.

While these thoughts were passing through his mind the cry of "A treat! a treat!" was again raised, and Bill Tooley again addressed Derrick, saying,

"Ter pay yer way inter de mine, de fellers says yer must set up a kag er beer. Ter pay fer drivin' my mule, I say yer got ter take a lickin', an' after that we'll initerate yer."

Now, both Derrick's father and mother had taught him to abhor liquor in every form; so to the boy's first proposition he promptly answered,

"I haven't got any money, and couldn't afford to buy a keg of beer, even if I wanted to. I don't want to, because I'm a blue ribbon, and wouldn't buy even a glass of beer if I had all the money in the world. I won't join your society either, and I don't see how you can initiate me when I don't choose to become a member. As for a licking, it'll take more than you to give it to me, Bill Tooley!"

With these bold words the young mule-driver made a spring at his chief tormenter, in a desperate effort to break through the surrounding group of boys. In the distance he saw the twinkling lights of some miners, and thought if he could only reach them they would afford him protection.

Derrick's defiant speech for an instant paralyzed his hearers with its very boldness; but as he sprang at Bill Tooley they also made a rush at him with howls of anger. He succeeded in hitting their leader one staggering blow, but was quickly overpowered by numbers and flung to the ground, where the young savages beat and kicked him so cruelly that he thought they were about to kill him.

He tried to scream for help, but could not utter a sound, and the miners who passed on their way to the slope thought the fracas was only a quarrel among some of the boys and paid no attention to it.

At length Bill Tooley ordered the boys to cease from pummelling their victim, and stooping over him, tied a dirty cloth over his eyes; then he gave a whispered order, and several of the boys, lifting the helpless lad by his head and feet, bore him away.

After carrying him what seemed to Derrick an interminable distance, and passing through a number of doors, as he could tell by hearing them loudly opened and closed, his bearers suddenly dropped him on the hard ground. Then Bill Tooley's voice said,

"Yer'll lie dere now till yer make up yer mind ter jine de Young Sleepers. Den yer can come an' let me know, an' I'll attend ter yer initeration. Till then yer'll stay where yer are, if it's a thousand years; fer no one'll come a-nigh yer an' yer can't find de way out."

While Bill was thus talking the other boys quietly slipped away. As he finished he also moved off, so softly that Derrick did not hear the sound of his retreating footsteps. It was not until some minutes had passed that he realized that he had been left, and was alone.

Meantime those who had thus abandoned their victim to the horrors of black solitude, in what to him was an unknown part of the mine, were gathered together at no great distance from him. There they waited to gloat over the cries that they hoped he would utter as soon as he realized that he was abandoned. In this they were disappointed, for though they lingered half an hour not a sound did they hear; then two of the boldest among them decided to take a look at their prisoner. Shielding the single lamp that lighted their steps so that its rays should not be seen at any great distance, they crept cautiously to where they had left him.

He was gone!

This had not been expected, and with an ill-defined feeling of dread they hurried back to the others and made their report.

"Oh, well, let him go!" exclaimed Bill Tooley, brutally. "'Twon't hurt him to spend a while in de gangway. Let's go up to supper, and afterwards come down an' hunt him."

As none of them dared to object to any proposal made by the bully, the whole gang of begrimed and evil-minded young savages hurried to the foot of the slope. Here they tumbled into a car, and in a few minutes were drawn up to the surface, where they scattered towards their respective homes and waiting suppers.

Paul Evert, who ever since work had ceased in the breaker, more than an hour before, had lingered near the mouth of the slope, waiting for the appearance of his friend, ventured to ask one of them if he had seen Derrick.

"Don't know nothing about him," was the reply, as, greatly alarmed to find the lad whom he had helped to persecute

already made an object of inquiry, the Young Sleeper hurried away.

Bill Tooley had overheard Paul's question, and stepping up to him, he said, "Look a-here, young feller, yer ain't got no call as I knows on to be a meddling wid what goes on in de mine and don't concern you. I don't mind tellin' yer, though, that yer butty's doin' overwork, and mebbe won't come up all night. I heerd one of de bosses orderin' him to it."

Although Paul thought this somewhat strange, he knew that the miners frequently stayed down to do overwork, and was much relieved at such a plausible explanation of his friend's non-appearance. On his way home he stopped to tell Mrs. Sterling what he had heard. He found her very anxious, and just about to go out and make inquiries concerning her boy. The information that Paul brought relieved her mind somewhat, and thanking him for it, she turned back into the house with a sigh, and gave little Helen her supper, at the same time setting aside a liberal portion for Derrick when he should come.

Until nearly ten o'clock she waited, frequently going to the door to look and listen; then she could bear the suspense no longer. Throwing a shawl over her head, and bidding Helen remain where she was for a few minutes, the anxious mother started to go to the house of the mine boss to gain certain information of her boy. As she opened her own front door, something that she saw caused her to utter a cry and stand trembling on the threshold.



CHAPTER VI

THE SECRET MEETING--A PLUNGE DOWN AN AIR-SHAFT

What Mrs. Sterling saw was her own son Derrick, who was just about to enter the house. As the light from behind her shone full upon him, he presented a sorry spectacle, and one well calculated to draw forth an exclamation from an anxious mother. Hatless and coatless, his face bruised, swollen, and so covered with blood and coal-dust that its features were almost unrecognizable, he could not well have presented a more striking contrast to the clean, cheerful lad whom she had sent down into the mine with a kiss and a blessing that very morning.

"Why, Derrick!" she exclaimed, the moment she made sure that it was really he. "What has happened to you? has there been an accident? They said you were kept down for overwork. Tell me the worst at once, dear! Are you badly hurt?"

"No, indeed, mother," answered the boy in as cheerful a tone as he could command. "I am not much hurt, only bruised and banged a little by a blast that I carelessly stayed too close to. A little hot water and soap will put me all right again after I've had some supper; but, if you love me, mother, give me something to eat quickly, for I'm most starved."

By this time they were within the house, and as Mrs. Sterling hastened to make ready the supper she had saved for Derrick, he dropped into a chair utterly exhausted. He might well be exhausted, for what he had passed through and suffered since leaving home that morning could not have been borne by a boy of weaker constitution or less strength of will. He was greatly revived by two cups of strong tea and the food set before him. After satisfying his hunger he went to his own room, and took a bath in water as hot as he could bear it, and washed his cuts and bruises with white castile-soap, a piece of which Mrs. Sterling always managed to keep on hand for such emergencies. It was fortunate for her peace of mind that the fond mother did not see the cruel bruises that covered her boy's body from head to foot.

The bath refreshed him so much, and so loosened the joints that were beginning to feel very stiff and painful, that Derrick believed he was able, before going to bed, to perform the one duty still remaining to be done. Mrs. Sterling thought he had gone to bed, and was greatly surprised to see him come from his room fully dressed. When he told her that he must go out again to deliver an important message to the mine boss, she begged him to wait until morning, or at least to let her carry it for him. Assuring her that it was absolutely necessary that he should deliver the message himself that very night, and saying that he would be back within an hour, Derrick kissed his mother and went out.

On the street he met with but one person, a miner hurrying towards the slope, to whom he did not speak, and who he thought did not recognize him.

Mr. Jones had closed his house for the night, and was about to retire, when he was startled by a knock at the outer door. Recent events had rendered him so suspicious and cautious that he stepped to his desk and took from it a revolver, which he held in his hand as he stood near the door, and without opening it, called out,

"Who's there? and what do you want at this time of night?"

As softly as he could, and yet make himself heard, Derrick answered,

"It is I, sir, Derrick Sterling, and I have got something important to tell you."

At this answer a man who had stolen up behind Derrick, unperceived by him in the darkness, slipped away with noiseless but hurried footsteps.

"Is anybody with you?" demanded the mine boss, without opening the door.

"No, sir; I am all alone."

Then the door was cautiously opened, Derrick was bidden to step inside quickly, and it was immediately closed again and bolted. Leading the way into the library, the mine boss said, not unkindly, but somewhat impatiently,

"Well, Sterling, what brings you here at this time of night? working boys should be in bed and asleep before this."

While Derrick is explaining to the mine boss why he is not abed and asleep, and giving his reasons for disturbing him at that late hour, we will return to the mine, and see for ourselves what befell him there, after the events narrated in the last chapter.

The Young Sleepers had left him blindfolded, alone, and in total darkness, lying on the floor of an unfamiliar gangway. The boy's first impulse, when he realized that his persecutors had departed and left him alone, was to tear the bandage from his eyes and fling it far from him. Of course this did not enable him to see anything, but he felt more free now that

the cloth was removed, and was thankful they had not bound his wrists so that he could not have reached it.

His next impulse was to shout for help, but an instant's reflection decided him not to do so. It was not at all probable that anybody except his tormentors would hear him, and they would only rejoice at this evidence of his distress. He knew that all his shoutings would not bring them to him until they were ready to come, and he felt that he had too little strength left to waste it thus uselessly.

He could not bear to remain where he was without at least making an attempt to help himself; so he rose to his feet, and feeling his way very cautiously, began to walk along the gangway. Although he did not know it, he involuntarily turned in the opposite direction from the place where Bill Tooley and his companions were waiting and listening to hear from him.

For some time Derrick expected to reach a door, behind which he should find a boy, or to meet a train of mule-cars, or a miner who would lead him to the foot of the slope. At length, however, when he had walked a long distance, and yet found none of these, his courage began to leave him and a wild terror to take its place.

Suddenly, like a flash, it occurred to him that he had not struck any rails in walking, nor felt any indications of a car-track. Filled with a new dread, he stooped down, and with trembling hands felt every inch of the wet floor from one side of the gangway to the other. There was no sign of a track, and he knew, what he had already suspected, that it had been torn up, and that he was in an abandoned gangway, which another human being might not enter for years.

This revelation of the full horror of his situation was too much for the overstrained nerves of the poor lad. He uttered a loud cry, which was echoed and re-echoed with startling distinctness through the silent, rock-walled gallery, flung himself on the wet floor, and burst into bitter sobbings.

How long he lay there, in a sort of semi-stupor after this first outburst of his despair, he had no means of knowing, but he was finally roused into an attitude of eager attention by what sounded like a distant murmur of voices. He sat up, and then sprang to his feet, rubbing his eyes and staring in a bewildered manner into the darkness of the gangway ahead of him. Did he see a light only a few paces before him? It seemed so. Yet he was not sure, for it was not a direct ray, as from a lamp, but a sort of dim, flickering radiance that appeared to rise from the very floor almost at his feet.

For several minutes Derrick stared at it incredulously, unable to fathom the mystery of its appearance. Was it a light produced by human agency, or was it one of those weird illuminations that sometimes arise from the dampness and foul air of old mines? He stepped towards it to satisfy himself of its true character, and as he did so was confronted by a danger so terrible that, although he had escaped it, his heart almost stopped beating as he realized its full extent.

By the vague light proceeding from it he saw a pit-hole occupying the entire width of the gangway, and apparently of great depth. Around its edge had been built a barrier of logs breast-high. Through age these had so decayed and fallen that, had Derrick continued a few steps further on his way, instead of stopping to indulge his grief, he must have walked into the pit and fallen to the bottom.

The sound of voices that he had heard came up through this opening, and he was just about to call for help, to whoever was down there, when his attention was arrested by one voice louder and harsher than the others. It sounded like that of Job Taskar, the blacksmith, and it said, as though in settlement of some dispute,

"I don't care a rap who does it, or how it is done, Jones must be put out of the way somehow or other."

Another voice, which was hardly audible, asked, "What about the kid?"

To this came answer in a voice which there was no mistaking for other than Monk Tooley's,

"De Young Sleepers is lookin' arter him. Dey're givin' him a big scare. Blinded him, and toted him back and for'ard, going in and out t'old gangway door between whiles to make him think he was a long ways off. Den dey left him just inside t'old gangway, nigh de slope. He thinks he's at de far end of nowhere by dis time. Dey'll soon drive him from de mine."

"If they don't, others will," said Job Taskar's voice. "We don't want no boss's pets spying round this mine. Now, lads, we'll get out of this. Remember, next regular meeting's on the 27th. We'll fix then how all's to be done."

There was a confused murmuring after this, but Derrick could make nothing out of it, and in a few minutes a strong draught of air sucked down the hole over which he hung, and the dim light disappeared. As it did so, the poor lad gave one wild cry for help. It only reached the ears of the last of those below as he was leaving the chamber in which they had held their meeting. To him it sounded so awful and supernatural that he was greatly frightened, and hurried on after the others, leaving the door open behind him, whereby the strong draught down the air-shaft was continued.

For a few minutes Derrick thought he was indeed lost, and gave himself up to despair. Then he gradually recalled the

words of Monk Tooley that referred to himself, and received a gleam of hope from them. If indeed he had been left just inside the door of an old gangway, near the foot of the slope, might he not find his way back to it and escape? He shuddered as he thought of the long walk through the awful darkness, but he was no better off where he was. So, with much thinking and hesitation, he finally started back on the road he had come, carefully feeling his way and making but slow progress.

He thought he should never reach the end; but at last he came to a door, beyond which he heard the sound of human voices, and through the crevices of which air was rushing outward. Cautiously he pulled it open, fearing lest some of his late persecutors might be waiting to seize him. The way was clear, and though he saw several lights in the distance, none was near him. Gently closing the door, he darted towards the travelling-road down which he had come that morning, and entered it without having been observed.

The climb up the gigantic stairway was a tedious one for the weary lad, and called for such frequent rests that it occupied him nearly an hour. When he finally reached the top he had barely strength enough left to drag himself home.

This was the story that Derrick Sterling told the assistant superintendent in the library of the latter's house that night.

Mr. Jones listened to it with the gravest and most earnest attention, only interrupting now and then to ask a question concerning some point that was not made quite clear, or to give utterance to an expression of sympathy as Derrick related some of his sufferings.

The brave lad had not intended to say anything regarding his treatment by the Young Sleepers, but was obliged to do so in answer to questions as to how he happened to be left in the old gangway.

When he had finished, the mine boss grasped him warmly by the hand, and said,

"My boy, by this timely information, so miraculously obtained, you have doubtless given me a chance for my life which I should not otherwise have had. Your adventures have been most thrilling, and your deliverance wonderful. Now go home and to bed; you must not think of going to work again until I give you permission to do so."

Once more Derrick found his mother anxiously awaiting his return. He told her that the mine boss had been very kind to him, and that as he was not going to work the next day she need not waken him in the morning. Then he threw himself, all dressed as he was, upon his bed, and while trying to relate to her some of the events of his first day in the mine, fell into a profound sleep.

Meantime other events, equally thrilling with those just related, were taking place in the mine.

Bill Tooley's brutal disposition was mainly the result of his home training and influences, for he could not remember having had a single gentle or kind word spoken to him in all his stormy life. In spite of it he was troubled with some prickings of conscience, and a sort of pity that evening, as he reflected upon the unhappy condition of the lad whom he had left to wander alone amid the awful blackness of the abandoned gangway. He had not intended to do anything so cruel as this when he first left Derrick where he did. He thought the boy would certainly cry out for help, and after allowing him to suffer thus for a short time he meant to go to him and offer to release him upon condition of his joining the Young Sleepers. This plan had been upset by Derrick's disappearance, and then it was more to assert his authority over his companions than with the idea of inflicting further cruelty upon their victim that he had ordered him to be left for a while. Now he began to feel anxious concerning the fate of the lad, and eager to effect his release.

Feeling thus, as soon as he had finished an uncomfortable supper in his wretched home, filled with quarrelling children, and ruled by a slatternly, shrill-voiced mother, he hurried out to try and induce some of his companions to accompany him down into the mine in a search for Derrick. He had some difficulty in doing this, for the other boys were badly frightened by what had taken place, and dreaded to return into the mine. It was more than an hour after he started out before he had persuaded four of the boldest among them to join him in the proposed search.

As this little party gathered at the mouth of the slope, and prepared to descend in a car that was about to start down with some timbers for props, a timid voice said,

"Can't I go too, Bill? Please let me! I know you are going to look for Derrick. Please, Bill!"

It was Paul Evert, who, with an undefined feeling of dread and fear for the safety of his friend, had hung on the outskirts of various groups of boys in the village street until from their conversations he had learned the whole story. With senses sharpened by anxiety and love, he had discovered that Bill Tooley and his companions were going in search of the missing lad. Now, with his father's mine cap bearing its tiny lamp on his head, he begged to be allowed to go with them.

Bill hesitated for a moment, and then, for fear lest if he refused Paul would spread the story of what he had discovered,

or perhaps, moved by some better feeling, he said, "Yes, pile in if yer want to, dough I don't see what good you can do."

Overjoyed to receive this permission, Paul hastily scrambled into the car just as it began to move, and in a few minutes was landed with the rest at the foot of the slope.

Some time before this Derrick had emerged from the old gangway, and turned into the travelling-road, up which he was now laboriously making his way.

There did not happen to be an overseer at the bottom of the slope just then, and to the one or two men who observed them the presence of boys in the mine at all hours of the day and night was too common to attract comment; so the little party had no difficulty in entering the old gangway without being noticed or questioned.

For some reason which he could not explain Paul had brought with him a new clothes-line, which he now carried, coiled and hung about his neck. Bill Tooley took the lead, and Paul, with the aid of his crutch, hobbled along close after him, while the others walked fearfully in a bunch at some little distance behind.

They had not gone far when Bill stopped and picked up a piece of cloth from the ground.

"Here's what was over his eyes," he said, "an' as it's a bit furdur dan where we left 'im, it shows he's gone furdur in."

The boys gazed at the cloth in awe-struck silence, as though it were something to be dreaded; and, when Bill called out, "Come on, fellers, yer won't never find nothing a-standin' dere like a lot o' balky mules," they followed him even more reluctantly than before.

Lighted by their lamps, they made far more rapid progress than poor Derrick had in the darkness, and soon approached the place where he had discovered the dim, reflected light above the mouth of the old air-shaft. Just here the oil in their leader's lamp began to give out, and its flame to burn with a waning and uncertain light.

All at once a strong draught of air extinguished it entirely. He took a step forward in the darkness towards a log which he had barely seen, and thought might be Derrick Sterling lying down. Then came a terrible cry, and Paul's light showed nothing in front of him save the yawning mouth of the shaft down which Bill Tooley had pitched headlong!



CHAPTER VII

A CRIPPLE'S BRAVE DEED

As Bill Tooley thus met the fate Derrick had so narrowly escaped, and the Young Sleepers who followed him were left without a leader, they were thrown into a sad state of confusion. Two of them started to run back, another threw himself on the floor and burst into loud lamentations, while the fourth stood motionless and silent from fear. Of them all, only Paul Evert, the crippled lad, retained his presence of mind.

As upon all such occasions he who retains full command of his faculties and remains calm at once assumes the position of a leader, so it was now.

In a voice that sounded loud and stern as compared with his ordinary gentle tone, Paul commanded the runaways to stop and return at once. They hesitated a moment and then obeyed him. He ordered the boy who lay upon the floor to cease his outcries and get up. Then the little fellow approached as close to the air-shaft as he dared, and lying down, with his head beyond its edge, he listened. In a moment he was rewarded for his pains, for he heard a faint moan. There came another more distinctly, and he knew that wherever Bill Tooley was he was still alive, and might possibly be saved.

Taking the lamp from his cap, and the coil of line from about his neck, where it seemed to have been placed for this very emergency, he tied the one to an end of the other and gently lowered it into the shaft. Before doing this he ordered two of the boys to hold him tightly by the legs, and thus prevent him from slipping over the edge. Quieted, and with some of their courage restored by his coolness, they did as he directed, and held him with so firm a grip that for many days afterwards his legs bore black and blue imprints of their fingers.

As the little lamp swung downward the draught of air caused it to flare and flicker as though it were about to be extinguished, but it was nearly full of oil, and the wick had just been pricked up, so it continued to burn and throw an uncertain light upon the glistening masses of coal that formed the sides of the shaft. It had not been lowered more than ten feet when its feeble rays disclosed a dark object, apparently suspended in mid-air, in the centre of the shaft. It was Bill Tooley, and Paul saw that by some means his downward plunge had been arrested, and that he was now clinging to an invisible support.

Hastily pulling up the lamp, Paul replaced it on his cap, and doubling his line, made one end of it fast to an old timber prop or support of the gangway roof that stood a short distance from the shaft. Knotting the loose end about his body, and bidding the boys place one of the old logs close to the edge of the shaft and hold it there to prevent the rope from being chafed or cut, the brave little hump-backed lad, who, like most of those in his condition, was unusually strong in his arms, swung himself into the dark hole. Down he slid into the blackness, slowly and cautiously, until he came to the object of his search. It was Bill Tooley's limp body hanging across a stout timber brace, which, extending from side to side of the shaft and firmly bedded in its walls at each end, had been left there by the miners who cut this air-channel.

As Paul's withered leg was of no assistance to him in clinging to the timber, he lashed himself securely to it before attempting to do anything for the boy who had so recently been his enemy and tormentor, and was now dependent upon his efforts for even a chance for life. Bill was not unconscious, though so weak from pain and fright as to be nearly helpless. Under the influence of Paul's cheering words, and after the line had been securely fastened about his body, he was induced to let go his desperate hold of the timber and grasp the rope. Then Paul called out to the boys above to pull up very slowly and carefully, as the least carelessness might result in dashing both Bill and him to the bottom of the shaft.

Bill Tooley was a heavy weight for the frightened boys at the top to manage, and several times, even in the short distance of ten feet, his upward progress was arrested, and Paul feared that they were about to let him slip back. Obeying his instructions, two of the boys walked away with the rope, instead of trying to pull up hand-over-hand, while the other two held the log at the edge in place, and made ready to catch hold of Bill's arm as soon as he should come within reach.

Finally his head appeared above the surface, and he was dragged, screaming with pain, over the edge, and laid groaning on the floor of the gangway. Then the rope was again lowered to the brave little fellow who was clinging in perfect darkness—for his light had at length blown out—to the timber brace in the shaft. He was drawn to the surface much more quickly and easily than Bill Tooley had been; but when he found himself once more in safety, a reaction from the nervous strain of the past half-hour set in. Throwing himself down beside Bill, he began to sob so violently as to greatly astonish the boys, who beheld but could not comprehend this weakness in one whose strong will had but a minute before so completely mastered theirs.

In a few moments Paul recovered his composure sufficiently to ask two of the boys to go to the chamber at the foot of the slope and procure assistance to carry Bill Tooley, who was evidently unable to walk. After a long delay these two returned, in company with several miners, who brought a stretcher such as is often kept in coal mines in readiness for the accidents that are so common to them.

From what the messenger boys had told them, these men knew most of the facts connected with the accident. They were so loud in their praise of Paul for his brave deed that he became greatly confused, though it must be confessed that praise from these great strong men, any one of whom would be proud to have done what he had, sounded very pleasantly to the crippled lad. In order to have a little time to think it all over, he hobbled on ahead of the others, who moved but slowly with their burden.

When he was thus alone with his thoughts, Paul suddenly remembered the object for which he had entered the mine. It had been completely lost sight of in the excitement of the past hour, but now he realized that they had discovered nothing concerning Derrick's fate. He grew faint and cold at the remembrance of the air-shaft. Did his dear friend's body lie at the bottom of it? He trembled as he thought how very possibly this might be the case, and waiting for the men to overtake him, he asked if they knew anything of Derrick Sterling.

"Yes," answered one of them, "I saw him come out of his mother's house as I was passing on my way to the slope, more'n half an hour ago."

"Are you sure?" asked Paul, in great surprise.

"Certainly I am. Why not? was there anything strange in that?"

"Yes, we thought he was lost in the mine, and have been hunting for him."

"Well, you were mistaken, that's all, and you've had your hunt for nothing."

Paul was made very happy by this news, though it greatly puzzled him. The other boys were relieved to hear that Derrick was safe, but greatly alarmed as to what fate was in store for them as a punishment for the injuries they had inflicted upon him. Judging from what they would have done under similar circumstances, they did not doubt that Derrick had already spread the story of his wrongs through the village, together with the names of all those who had persecuted him.

At length the party reached the foot of the slope, and Bill Tooley, with his head resting in Paul Evert's lap, and moaning with pain, was sent in an empty car to the surface. The bully had made himself so unpopular by his cruelty, and by his overbearing ways, that nobody except Paul felt very sorry for him. When it was learned that he had received his injuries in consequence of his persecution of Derrick Sterling, the general verdict was that he was rightly served.

The injured boy was carried to his home, whither Paul accompanied him; but the latter was so frightened by the outcries of Mrs. Tooley when she learned what had happened that he hurried away without entering the house. On his way home he stopped at the Sterlings' to inquire if Derrick were really safe, and was much comforted to learn that he had just come in and gone to bed--"Where you should be yourself, Paul," said Mrs. Sterling, kindly, as she bade him good-night.

As the tired but light-hearted boy hobbled into his own home, his father, who had sat up waiting for him, without knowing where he had been, roughly ordered him to bed, saying it was no time of night for lads like him to be prowling about the street.

The sensitive little fellow went up-stairs without a word, all his light-heartedness dispelled by this harsh reception, and the tears starting to his eyes. His back ached so from his unwonted exertions that even after he got to bed he tossed and tumbled feverishly for several hours before falling into a troubled sleep.

Tom Evert left his house earlier than usual the next morning, and went to the mouth of the slope, where he found a number of his friends assembled. They began to congratulate him, and continued to do so until in great bewilderment he exclaimed,

"What's it for, mates? Is it a joke?"

"For thy son, man."

"For my son? which of 'em?"

"Thy crippled lad, Paul, of course. Is the man daft?"

"No; but I think ye must be, to be running on in such a fashion about a lad that's not only a wellnigh helpless cripple,

but I'm afeared is going bad ways. 'Twas nearer midnight nor sundown before he came in frae t' street last night, and I sent him to bed wi' a flea in his ear."

A perfect roar of laughter greeted this speech.

"Wellnigh helpless, is he?" cried one. "Well, if he's helpless I'd like to know what you'd name helpfu!"

"Going to the bad, is he?"

"Out late o' nights! That's a good one."

"An' yez sint him to bed wid a flea in his ear, an' him just afther doin' the dade should mak' ye the proudest fayther in de place! Did iver I moind de likes of that?"

These and many similar expressions greeted the ear of the astonished miner, and from them he began to comprehend that his son Paul had done something wonderful, and had thereby become a famous character in the village. At length, after much effort, for they would not believe but that he knew the whole story, he learned of his boy's brave deed of the night before. Instead of going down the slope the miner hurried home, where he found Paul, looking very pale and languid, just sitting down to his breakfast.

Picking up the frail boy, and holding him in his strong arms as he used to when he was a baby, the delighted father exclaimed,

"Paul, lad, forgie me this time, and I'll never speak thee rough again. Thee's made me, I think, the proudest man in the state this day. Crippled and all, thee's proved thyself worth a score of straight lads, and to thy fayther thee's worth all the lads in the world. Mither, our Paul's done that any man in t' mine might be proud of, an' he's the talk of the colliery."

Thus was Paul more than repaid for all his suffering of the night before, and as he hobbled to his work in the new breaker that morning he was once more happy and light-hearted.

The evening before, Job Taskar had called Monk Tooley from his house, and as they walked away together he said, in a low but significant tone,

"That Sterling lad's not down in the mine, Monk."

"He must be dere, fer de Sleepers left him where he'd be safe, an' I know he's not come up de slope since."

"He's not there, I tell you; for I just now saw him going into Jones's house, and heard him say he had something important to tell him."

"If yer saw him and heerd him of course he must be up; but I don't see how he did it. If he's told de boss anything it must be a blab on de Sleepers, fer he can't know anything else."

"Whatever it is, he's dangerous to have round, and we must look out for him."

"All right! just leave him to me. I'll have de Sleepers fix him. Dey'll do anything my boy Bill tells 'em; he's got 'em under his thumb."

"Look sharp about it, then."

"Ay, ay, mate, I'll give Bill de word to-night soon as he comes in."

Then the two separated, and Monk Tooley went home, thinking over a plan by which the Young Sleepers, under his son Bill's direction, could effectually drive Derrick Sterling from the mine. As he opened his own door he called out in his loud, rough voice,

"Bill come in yet?"

Stepping into the front room, he stood still in amazement. The wife of a neighbor was holding up a warning finger towards him, and saying, "Sh--h!"

His own wife and two other women were bending over a bed in one corner, and the children, whom he had never before known to be quiet when awake, were standing or sitting silently in various frightened attitudes about the room.

"Who is it?" he asked, hoarsely, with an attempt at a whisper.

"It's Bill," answered one of the women. "He's badly hurted, falling down a shaft in the mine, and is like to die. They say Paul the cripple saved him."

"Bill! my Bill! You're lying!" cried the miner, fiercely. "Bill came out of de mine wid de day shift. I seen him."

Rough and cruel as he was, the man had, hidden somewhere in his being, a deep-seated affection for his son Bill. Although he had never been heard to speak other than harshly to him, Bill was the pride and joy of his hard life. A blow aimed at Bill struck him with redoubled force. His hatred of Derrick Sterling arose from the fact that the lad had thrashed his boy. Now to tell him that his boy Bill was so badly hurt that he was likely to die was like wrenching from him all that he held worth living for.

The women made way for the rough miner as he strode to where his son lay on a heap of soiled bedclothing, tossing and moaning, but unconscious, and in a high fever. One look was enough, and then Monk Tooley left the house, and set forth on a ten-mile walk through the night to fetch the nearest doctor.

By sunrise the doctor had come and gone again, having done what he could. He said the boy would live if he were kept quiet and had careful nursing, but that he was injured in such a way that he might be lame for the rest of his life.

When Monk Tooley went down into the mine that day--for he must now work harder and more steadily than ever to support this added burden--he was a silent, heart-broken man.

It was nearly noon before Derrick Sterling awoke after his first day of bitter experience in the mine. Though he was still sore and lame, hot water and sleep, two of nature's most powerful remedies in cases of his kind, had worked such wonders for him that he felt quite ready to enter the mine again, and face whatever new trials it might have in store for him.

After dinner the mine boss came to see him, and was amazed to find him looking so well and cheerful.

"You seem to come up smiling after every knock down, Derrick," he said. "I shouldn't wonder if you would even be ready to go down into the mine again to-morrow."

"Indeed I think I must, sir," said Derrick, earnestly. "I don't believe any one else can get along with Harry Mule as well as I can."

"Let me see. How many years have you been driving him?" asked Mr. Jones, gravely.

"Only one day, sir," replied Derrick laughing, "but I think he's very fond of me, and I know I am of him."

"All right; if you insist upon it, you shall go down again to-morrow to your bumping-mule. Now I want to talk to you seriously."

The conversation that followed was long and earnest, and it was ended by Mr. Jones saying, just before he left, "I must manage somehow or other to be there on the 27th, and I want you to go with me, for I don't know anybody else whom I dare trust. It only remains for us to discover a way."



CHAPTER VIII

DERRICK STERLING'S SPLENDID REVENGE

The new breaker, in which Paul Evert now worked as a slate-picker, was in general appearance very much like the old one, but its interior arrangement was different, and of such a nature as to make life much easier for those who worked in it. The greatest improvement was the introduction of a set of machines called "jigs." The coal from the mine, after being drawn to the very top of the breaker, first passed between great spiked rollers, or "crushers;" then through a series of "screens," provided with holes of different sizes, that separated it into several grades of egg, stove, nut, pea, buckwheat, etc. From the screens it was led into the jigs. These are perforated iron cylinders set in tubs of water, and fitted with movable iron bottoms placed at a slight angle. A small steam-engine attached to each machine raises and lowers or "jigs" this iron bottom a few inches each way very rapidly. The contents of the cylinders are thus constantly shaken in water, and as the slate is heavier than the coal, most of it settles to the bottom, and is carried off through a waste chute. The wet coal runs out through other chutes placed a little higher than that for slate, and extending down through the length of the breaker to the storage bins at its bottom. Along these chutes in the new breaker, as in the old one, sat rows of boys picking out the bits of slate that had escaped the jigs, and among them was Paul Evert.

When Derrick Sterling entered the new breaker on the afternoon of the day following that which had brought such memorable adventures, he was surprised at the comparative absence of coal-dust. It still rose in clouds from the crushers and screens, but there was none above the chutes. He understood the theory of jigs, but had never seen them at work, and now he was so greatly interested in watching them as almost to forget the errand on which he had come. It was only when Mr. Guffy spoke to him that he thought of it, and handed the breaker boss the note he had come to give him.

"All right," said the boss reading it. "I'm sorry to lose him, for he is a quiet, steady lad, and, could in time be made very useful as a picker. I doubt, though, if his back would hold out long at the work. Yes, you may take him along now if you want to."

Stepping over to where his friend sat, Derrick said, "Come, Paul, you're not to work any more to-day; I want to have a talk with you outside."

When they had left the breaker, Derrick said, "How would you like to go down into the mine, Paul, and be a door-tender, very near where I work, and get twice as much money as you can make in the breaker?"

"Of course I should like it," answered Paul, gravely; "but I don't think they want a cripple like me down there."

"Yes, they do want just exactly such a fellow as you are; they found out last night what you could do in a mine. Mr. Jones says that if you want to you can go down with me to-morrow morning, and begin at once without waiting for the end of the month. You are to go with me to the store this evening for your mine cap, lamp, and boots. See, here's the order for them."

Paul stared at the order for a moment as though he could not believe it was real. Then exclaiming, "Oh goody, Derrick! I'm so glad to get out of that hateful, back-aching breaker;" he gave a funny little twirl of his body around his crutch, which was his way of expressing great joy.

Derrick shared this joy equally with Paul, and to see them one would have supposed they had just come into fortunes at least. To a stranger such rejoicings over an offer of monotonous work down in the blackness of a coal mine would have seemed absurd, but if he had ever been a breaker boy he could have fully sympathized with them.

The two boys were standing beside the check-board, near the mouth of the slope, and after their rejoicings had somewhat subsided Derrick said, "Let's see who's sent up the most to-day."

The check-board was something like the small black-board that hangs behind the teacher's desk in a school-room. It was provided with several rows of pegs, on which hung a number of wooden tags. Each of these tags, or checks, had cut into it the initials or private mark of the miner to whom it belonged. When a miner working in the underground breasts or chambers filled a car with coal and started it on its way to the slope, he hung on it one of his checks. When the same car reached the top of the slope the "check boss" stationed there took the check from it and hung it in its proper place on the check-board. At the end of working-hours the number of checks thus hung up for each miner was counted, and the same number of car-loads of coal credited to him.

Acting on Derrick's suggestion, the boys turned to the check-board, and quickly saw that there were more checks marked M. T. than anything else.

"Why, Monk Tooley has got the most by three loads!" exclaimed Derrick, counting them.

"He must have worked all through lunch-hour, and like a mule at that. I wonder what's got into him?"

"Perhaps he's trying to make up for what Bill won't earn now," suggested Paul, quietly.

"That's so," said Derrick. "I never thought of that, Polly; and I haven't thanked you yet for going down into the mine to look for me last night, or told you what a splendid fellow I think you are."

"Please don't, Derrick," interrupted Paul, with a troubled expression; "you mustn't thank me for anything I tried to do for you. Don't I owe you more than anything I can ever do will pay for? Didn't you bring me out of the burning breaker? and don't I love you more than most anybody on earth?"

"Well, you're a plucky fellow anyway," said Derrick, "and I'd rather have you down in the mine if there was any trouble than half of the men who are there. Let's stop and see how Bill Tooley's getting along on our way home."

"All right," assented Paul; "only if his mother's there I shall be almost afraid to go in."

As the boys walked away from the vicinity of the check-board, a man who had come up the slope but a few minutes before, and had been watching them unobserved, stepped up to it. He was Job Taskar the blacksmith, known to the men who met in the chamber at the bottom of the air-shaft, in the old workings, as Body-master of Raven Brook. The check boss had asked him to stop there a minute, and look out for any cars that might come up, while he stepped inside the breaker.

Casting a hurried glance around to see that no one was looking, Job Taskar slipped three of Monk Tooley's checks from their peg, thrust them into his pocket, altered the chalked figure above the peg, and resumed his place.

When Derrick and Paul reached the Tooleys' house it seemed to them even more noisy than usual. Several women sat gossiping with Mrs. Tooley in the door-way, while a dozen children and several dogs ran screaming or barking and quarrelling in and out of the room where the sick boy lay.

They asked his mother how he was, and what the doctor had said of his condition.

"Ye can go in and see for yourselves how he is," was the reply, "there's naught to hinder. Doctor said he was to be kept perfectly quiet and have nussin', but how he's going to get either with them brats rampaging and howling, and me the only one to look after them, is more than I know."

Accepting this invitation, the boys stepped inside, and picking their way among the children and dogs to the untidy bed on which Bill lay, spoke to him and asked him if there was anything they could do for him.

He was conscious, though very weak and in great pain, and on opening his eyes he whispered, "Water."

For more than an hour he had longed for it, until his parched tongue was ready to cleave to the roof of his mouth, but nobody had come near him, and he could not make himself heard above the noise of the children.

Taking the tin dipper that lay on a chair beside the bed Derrick went out to the hydrant to fill it with the cool mountain water that flowed there.

Paul drew a tattered window-shade so that the hot western sun should not shine full in the sick boy's face, loosened his shirt at the neck, smoothed back the matted hair from his forehead, and with a threatening shake of his crutch, drove a howling dog and several screaming children from the room.

These little attentions soothed the sufferer, and he looked up gratefully and wonderingly at Paul. When Derrick returned with the water he lifted his head, and stretched out his hand eagerly for it. At that moment Mrs. Tooley came bustling to the bedside to see what the boys were doing. Catching sight of the dipper she snatched it from Derrick's hand, crying out that it would kill the boy to give him cold water, "and him ragin' wid a fever." This so frightened the boys that they hurriedly took their departure, and poor Bill cast such a wistful, despairing glance after them as they left the house that their hearts were filled with pity for him.

At the supper-table that evening Derrick asked:

"Does it hurt people who have a fever to give them water, mother?"

"No, dear; I do not think it does. My experience teaches me to give feverish patients all the cooling drinks they want."

Then Derrick told her what he had seen and learned of Bill Tooley's condition that afternoon. He so excited her pity by his description of the dirt, noise, and neglect from which the sick lad was suffering that she finally exclaimed, "Poor

fellow! I wish we had room to take care of him here!"

"Do you, mother, really? I wanted to ask you, but was almost afraid to, if he couldn't come here and have my room till he gets well. You see he's always treated Polly worse than he has me, and yet Polly risked his life for him. It isn't anywhere near so much to do as that, of course; but I'd like to give up my room to him, and nurse him when I was home, if you could look after him a little when I wasn't. I can sleep on the floor close to the bed, and be ready to wait on him nights. You know I always liked the floor better than a bed, anyway, and I believe he'll die if he stays where he is."

They knew each other so well, this mother and son, that a question of this kind was easily settled between them. Though both fully realized what a task they were undertaking, it was decided that if his parents would consent Bill Tooley should be brought to their house to be nursed.

When Monk Tooley came up from the mine that evening and examined the check-board to see how the numbers to his credit compared with the tally he had kept, he became very angry, and accused the check boss of cheating him. The latter said he knew nothing about it. There were the checks to speak for themselves. He had hung each one on the peg as it came up.

"Den dey've been stolen!" exclaimed the angry man, "an' if I catch him as done it, I'll make him smart for it, dat's all."

The check boss tried to show him how perfectly useless it would be for anybody to steal another's checks. "You know yourself it wouldn't do him any good, Tooley," he said. "He couldn't claim anything on 'em, or make any kind of a raise on 'em; besides I've been right here every minute of the day, barrin' a couple when I ran inside the breaker on an errand. Then I left Job Taskar, as honest a man as there is in the colliery, to keep watch, and he said nothing passed while I was gone."

"Well," answered Monk Tooley, "I'm cheated outer three loads, and you know what dat is ter a man what's worked overtime ter make 'em, an' has sickness and doctor's bills at home. But I'll catch de thief yet, an' when I do he'll wish he'd never know'd what a check was."

As he was walking down the street after supper, smoking a pipe and thinking of his sick boy, who seemed to have grown worse since morning, and of his lost checks, Monk Tooley was accosted by Derrick Sterling, who said,

"Good-evening, Mr. Tooley. How's Bill this evening?"

"None de better fer your askin'," was the surly answer, for the man felt very bitter against Derrick, to whom he attributed all his son's trouble.

"I'm sorry to hear that he isn't any better," continued the boy, determined not to be easily rebuffed.

"Well, I'm glad yer sorry, an' wish yer was sorrier."

This did not seem to promise a very pleasant conversation, but Derrick persevered, saying,

"It must be very hard for Mrs. Tooley to keep so many children quiet, and I believe the doctor said Bill must not be troubled by noise, didn't he?"

"Yes, an' if ye'd muzzle yer own mouth de whole place would be quieter."

"My mother wanted me to say to you that if you'd like to send Bill over to our house for a few days, it's so quiet over there that she thought it would do him good, and she'd be very glad to have him," said Derrick, plunging boldly into the business he had undertaken to manage.

"Tell yer mother ter mind her own brats an' leave me ter mind mine, den de road'll be wide enough for de both of us," was the ungracious answer made by the surly miner to this offer, as he turned away and left Derrick standing angry and mortified behind him.

"That comes of trying to do unto others as you would have others do unto you," he muttered to himself. "Seems to me the best way is to do unto others as they do unto you, and then nobody can complain. I declare if I had as ugly a temper as that man has I'd go and drown myself. I don't believe he's got one spark of human feeling in him."

Monk Tooley was not quite so bad as Derrick thought him, but just at that time everything seemed to go wrong with him, and he was like some savage animal suffering from a pain for which it can find no relief. He began to repent of his ugliness to Derrick almost as soon as the latter had left him, saying to himself, "Maybe de lad meant kindly arter all."

Going back to his untidy, noisy home, he entered the house, and standing by his son's bedside gazed curiously at him. The boy was evidently growing worse each minute, as even the unpractised eye of the miner could see. He was tossing

in a high fever, calling constantly for the water which in her ignorance his mother would not give him, nor did he appear to recognize any of those who stood near.

"I fear me his time's come," said one of the neighbor women, several of whom, attracted by curiosity, came and went in and out of the house.

Although the remark was not intended for his ears, Monk Tooley heard it, and apparently it brought him to a sudden determination. Without a word he left the house and walked directly to that of the Sterlings. Entering the open doorway without the ceremony of knocking, which was little practised in that colliery village, he found the family gathered in their tiny sitting-room, Derrick poring intently over a plan of the old workings of the mine, Helen reading, and their mother sewing.

Bowing awkwardly to Mrs. Sterling, he said, "Derrick tells me, missus, dat you're willin' to take my poor lad in and nuss him a bit. His own mither has no knowledge of de trade, an' he's just dyin' over yon. If yer mean it, and will do fer him, yer'll never want for a man to lift a hand fer you and yours as long as Monk Tooley is widin call."

"I do mean it, Mr. Tooley, and if you can only get him here, I'll gladly do what I can for him," said Mrs. Sterling.

"I'll bring him, mum, I'll go fer him now;" and Monk Tooley, with another awkward pull at the brim of his hat, left the house.

In five minutes he was back, accompanied by another miner, and between them they bore a mattress on which lay the sick boy.

He was undressed, bathed, and placed in Derrick's cool, clean bed. Within an hour cooling drinks and outward applications had so reduced the fever and quieted him that he had fallen into a deep sleep.

Within the same time all the village knew, and wondered over the knowledge, that Monk Tooley's sick lad was being cared for in the house of the widow Sterling.

CHAPTER IX

SOCRATES, THE WISE MINE RAT

When Derrick and Paul found themselves descending the slope, together with a carful of miners, the next morning, it seemed to them a long time since they had traversed its black depths. So accustomed do the toilers of the colliery become to exciting incidents that elsewhere would furnish subject for weeks of thought and conversation, that often a single day suffices to divert their attention to something new. So it was with our two boys, in whose minds their recent adventures were already shorn of their terrors, and only thought of as something unpleasant, to be forgotten as quickly as possible. Therefore they did not speak of them as they talked together in low tones, but only of the present and the future.

"I think it's awful good of you and your mother to take Bill Tooley into your own house and nurse him," said Paul.

"Oh no," laughed Derrick, "it isn't so very good. Revenge is what we are after, and that is one way of getting it."

Hearing Bill Tooley's name mentioned between the boys, one of the miners who rode in the car with them had leaned forward to learn what they were saying. At Derrick's last remark this man started back and gazed at him curiously.

"He's got the very stuff in him to make a Mollie of," he thought. "To think he's so sly. He's got the fellow he hates into his own house, pretending that he wants to nurse him, and now he's going to take out his revenge on him. Perhaps he's going to poison him, or fix pins in the bed so they'll stick him. Anyway, I'll have to give Monk the hint of what he's up to." Then, admiringly, and half aloud, he muttered, still looking at Derrick, "The young villain!"

From the foot of the slope Derrick set off for the stable to get Harry Mule, while Paul waited for the making up of a train of empty cars, in which he was to ride to the junction near the blacksmith's shop. There Derrick was to meet him, take him to his post of duty, and tell him about opening and closing the door, and tending the switch of which he was to have charge.

In spite of the fact that he and Derrick had been friends but a single day, Harry Mule appeared to recognize his young driver, and gave him a cordial greeting as he entered the stable. At least he threw up his head and uttered a tremendous bray, which went "Haw! he-haw, he-haw, he-haw!" and sounded so absurdly like a laugh that Derrick laughed from sympathy until the tears ran down his cheeks. The mule gazed at him with a look of wonder in his big eyes, and stood so meek and quiet while his harness was being put on that Derrick thought perhaps his feelings had been hurt. To soothe them he talked to him, and told him that Paul had come down into the mine to work.

As they left the stable, and Derrick stopped to fasten the door, Harry started in the opposite direction from that in which he should have gone, and ran down the gangway, kicking up his heels and braying, as though he were a frisky young colt in a pasture instead of an old bumping-mule down in a coal-mine. Derrick ran after him, and for some time could see the reflection of the collar-lamp, which was swung violently to and fro by the animal's rapid motion. The disappearance of this light in the distance was followed by an angry shouting and a muffled crash.

Derrick was provoked that his mule should have made all this trouble, and was anxious to discover the full extent of the mischief done, but he could not help laughing when he reached the scene of confusion. The first object he saw was Harry himself, standing still and gazing demurely at him with the wondering look which was his most common expression. He was hitched in front of a string of mules which were attached to a train of empty cars, and was evidently prepared to act as their leader. The boy driver of these mules, with many muttered exclamations, was trying to disentangle their harness from the snarl it had got into, and in one of the cars stood Paul Evert, looking somewhat dilapidated and greatly disgusted.

"Hullo, Derrick!" he called out. "Where did that mule come from?"

"Why, that's Harry, my bumping-mule," answered Derrick as he came up laughing.

"Bumping-mule! I should think he was," said Paul. "He made these cars stop so quick that I was almost bumped out of 'em, and the skin's all knocked off my nose. I don't see what he wanted to come bumping along this way for."

"Why, I told him you were coming," said Derrick, "and I suppose he wanted to welcome you to the mine."

"Well, I'm sorry you told him, and--"

Just then the driver shouted "Gee up!" and Harry Mule, anxious to do his duty in his new position, started ahead so briskly as to pull the other three mules promptly into line and give a violent jerk to the cars. Losing his balance with this

unexpected motion, Paul sat suddenly down in the bottom of the car he was in, and there he wisely decided to remain.

When they reached the junction, Derrick asked Paul to wait for him until he and Harry Mule had distributed the empty cars to their several destinations. Attracted by its cheerful light, Paul stepped inside the blacksmith's shop, where Job Taskar, who was hammering away as busily as usual, glanced up as he entered, but paid no further attention to him. A minute later the smith, who had just begun his day's work, and still wore his coat, pulled it off and flung it to one side. Something dropped from one of its pockets unnoticed by him as he did so, and Paul was on the point of calling his attention to it. He did not, however, because the smith's helper, a slim, dreary-looking young man, to whom nobody ever paid much attention, also noticed the falling object, and picked it up without being seen by Job. Gazing at it curiously for a moment, he restored it, as Paul thought, to the pocket from which it had fallen. In reality, he slipped it into a pocket of his own coat which lay under that of his boss.

Derrick now came back, and with him Paul went to the door that he was to tend. Just inside of it, on a platform laid above the ditch of black, rapidly flowing water, stood a rude arm-chair made out of rough boards. Above it hung a board full of holes into which several pegs were thrust. Derrick told Paul that with these pegs he must keep tally of the number of loaded cars that passed this station, and that he must always be ready to answer promptly the call of "Door." Within reach from the chair was a lever by means of which the switch was moved. Paul was told that after each door call there would come another explaining on which track the approaching cars were to go, and that he must listen carefully for it and set the switch accordingly. After showing him the large oil-can from which he might refill his lamp, Derrick bade him good-by and returned to his own work.

This morning passed much more pleasantly to the young mule-driver than the first one had. Not only did Tom Evert greet him cordially, and thank him for what he had done for Paul, but Monk Tooley gave him a gruff "Mornin', lad," and most of the other men spoke pleasantly to him, as though to atone in a measure for his previous suffering. Above all, he occasionally had to pass Paul's station, and the mere sight of his faithful friend leaning on his crutch and holding open the door was a source of joy.

As Paul had much spare time on his hands, he occupied it in becoming acquainted with his surroundings, and was especially interested in the curious markings on the black slate walls of the gangway near his door. Many of these were in the form of exquisite ferns, others of curious leaves such as he had never seen, quaint patterns like the scales and bones of queer fishes, or the ripples of water on a smooth beach. In one place he found tiny tracks, as though a small bird had run quickly across it, and had stamped the imprint of its feet on the hard surface.

It was Paul's first lesson in geology, and it gave him his first idea that this hard slate, and the veins of coal enclosed between its solid walls, might have had a previous existence in another form. He pondered upon the length of time that must have passed since those ferns grew, and since that running bird made those footprints, and finally concluded to ask Derrick if he knew.

At noon, after Harry Mule had been sent jingling to his stable, Derrick rejoined his friend, and they ate lunch together. As they talked of the strange markings on the walls, and Derrick confessed that he knew no more concerning their age than Paul, the latter suddenly paused, and with a slight gesture directed attention to something in the roadway.

Looking in the direction indicated, Derrick saw, sitting bolt-upright on its hind-legs, and gazing steadily at them, an immense rat. He was quite gray, and evidently very old; nor did he seem to be in the least bit afraid of them.

"Doesn't he look wise?" whispered Paul.

"As wise as Socrates," answered Derrick.

Not having had Derrick's education, Paul did not know who Socrates was, but the name pleased him, and he said it over softly to himself--"Socrates, Soc, Socrates. That's what I'm going to call him, Derrick--'Socrates.' I've seen him round here two or three times this morning, and every time he's sat up just like that, and looked as if he knew all that I was thinking about. I believe he could tell how old the ferns are."

"I don't believe they're as old as he is," replied Derrick, laughing.

The rat did not seem to like this, for at Derrick's laughter he gave a little squeak and darted away, disappearing beneath the door.

Within five minutes Paul pointed again, and there sat the rat in precisely the same position as before.

"Perhaps this is what he wants," said Paul, throwing a bit of bread towards the rat. Approaching it cautiously, the beast first smelled of it, and then seizing it in his mouth again darted beneath the door. Several times did he thus come for food, but he always carried it away without stopping to eat even a crumb.

"He must have a large and hungry family," said Derrick.

"Or else it isn't his dinner-hour yet, and he is waiting for the proper time to eat," laughed Paul.

Always after this Socrates the rat was a regular attendant upon the boys at lunch-time, and he never failed to receive a share of whatever they had to eat. Often at other times, when no sound save the steady gurgle of the black water beneath him broke the tomb-like silence of the gangway, Paul would see the little beady eyes flashing here and there in the dim lamplight, and would feel a sense of companionship very comforting to his loneliness. At such times Paul would talk to the rat about the queer pictures on the walls, and ask him questions concerning them. For hours he talked thus to his wise-looking companion, until he began to believe that the rat understood him, and could really answer if he chose.

Sometimes when he was asked a question he could not answer, he would reply, "I don't know, but I'll speak to Socrates about it"; and at the first opportunity he would explain the whole difficulty to his gray-whiskered friend. Frequently, by thus thinking and talking the matter over, he would arrive at some conclusion, more or less correct, and this he would report as "What Socrates thinks."

At noon that day Monk Tooley, as usual, ate his lunch and smoked his pipe with Job Taskar in the blacksmith's shop; but he was very quiet, and not inclined to be talkative as was his habit. When he left, the blacksmith's helper slipped out after him, and saying, "Ere's summut I think belongs to you, Mr. Tooley," handed him three bits of wood, on each of which was deeply scored M. T.

"My lost checks!" exclaimed the miner. "Where'd yer get 'em, Boodle?"

"They dropped out hof Taskar's pocket when 'e flung hoff 'is coat this mornin', and hi picked 'em hup unbeknownst to 'im."

"So he's de one as stole 'em, is he?" began the miner in a passion. Then, changing his tone, he added, "But never mind, Boodle; of course he only took 'em for de joke, and we'll say no more about it. Yer needn't mention havin' found 'em."

"Hall right, Mr. Tooley, hit shall be has you says," replied the helper, meekly, though he was really greatly disappointed at this turn of affairs. He disliked as much as he feared his boss, and had hoped that this little incident might lead to a quarrel between him and the miner whose lost property he had just restored.

Monk Tooley went back to his work muttering to himself, "All dis means summut; but we'll just lie low a bit, and mebbe Body-master an me'll have a score ter settle yet."

The Young Sleepers had been so badly demoralized by the incidents following their attempt to extract a treat from Derrick, and especially by the mishap of their leader, that they had not the courage to repeat the experiment. Derrick and Paul therefore left the mine that evening without being molested. They took pains, however, not to be very far behind two brawny pillars of strength in the shape of Tom Evert and Monk Tooley when they reached the foot of the slope.

Before going home Monk Tooley walked with Derrick to the Widow Sterling's, to inquire after his boy, and was much pleased to learn that he was getting along nicely.

"It lightens my heart ter hear yer say dat, missus," he said to Mrs. Sterling, "an' it's not one woman in ten thousand would do what yer doin' fer my poor lad."

"Derrick proposed it," said Mrs. Sterling, with a mother's anxiety that her son should receive all the credit due him. "Without his help I'm afraid I should not have been able to invite Bill to come here."

"He's a fine lad, missus," replied the miner, "an' if de time ever comes dat I can serve you or him, my name's not Monk Tooley if I don't jump at de chance."

After sitting a while with Bill, and doing what lay in his power to make him comfortable, Derrick again got out his father's plans of the old workings of the mine, and pored over them intently. Finally he exclaimed, "It's all right; I am sure of it!"

"What are you so sure of, my son?" asked his mother, looking up from her work.

"Something I have been trying to find out for Mr. Jones, mother, but he does not want a word said about it; so I must keep the secret to myself, at any rate until after I have seen him."

"Seems to me that you and Mr. Jones have a great many secrets together. You really are becoming quite an important young man, Derrick."

Although Derrick only smiled in reply, he thought to himself that his mother was about right, and hoped others would take the same view of his importance that she did.

Selecting some tracing-paper from among the things left by his father, the boy made a tracing from the plan he had been studying. He followed all the lines of the original carefully, except in one place where the plan was so indistinct that he could not tell exactly where they were intended to go. Being in a hurry, and feeling confident that they should be continued in a certain direction, he drew them so without verifying his conclusions.

When he had finished he left the house, and went directly to that of the mine boss, taking the tracings he had just made with him.



CHAPTER X

IN THE OLD WORKINGS--MISLED BY AN ALTERED LINE

Mr. Jones was expecting Derrick that evening, and was waiting somewhat impatiently for him. When the boy at last arrived he was taken into the library, where, as soon as the door was closed, the mine boss asked:

"Well, Derrick, have you heard anything more about the meeting?"

"Not a word, sir."

"To-morrow is the 27th, you know."

"Yes, sir, I know it is."

"And my fate, and perhaps yours too, may be decided within twenty-four hours from now."

At this Derrick started; he had not realized that he was in any particular danger.

"Do you think, sir, they would pay any attention to a boy like me?" he asked.

"I certainly do," replied the mine boss. "They would pay attention to anybody or anything that stood in their way, or seemed likely to interfere with their plans. I am afraid, from what Job Taskar said the other day, that they consider your presence in the mine as dangerous to them. I am sorry that my liking for you, and efforts to promote your interests, should have placed you in such an unpleasant position. If you like I will try and get you a place as errand boy in the main office of the company, where you will be in no danger."

"Oh, no, sir!" exclaimed Derrick. "Please don't think of such a thing. I'd rather take my chances with the Mollies in the mine than go into an office. There I should never be anything but a clerk; while here I may some day become an engineer, as my father was. Don't you think I may, sir?"

"Yes," answered the other, smiling at the boy's earnestness, "I think any boy of ordinary intelligence and blessed with good health can in time occupy any position he chooses, if he directs his whole energy in that direction, and makes up his mind that no obstacle shall turn him from it."

"I have made a beginning, sir," said Derrick, much encouraged by these words from one who was so greatly his superior in age, knowledge, and position, and whose opinion he valued so highly.

"Have you?" asked the mine boss, with a kindly interest. "In what way?"

"I am studying my father's books, and trying to work out problems from some old plans I found among his papers. One of them is a plan of the very oldest workings of this mine, and I have brought a tracing of a part of it to show you."

"Very good," said Mr. Jones, glancing at the tracing carelessly. "I have no doubt that in time you will become a famous engineer."

Although this was spoken kindly enough, it was evident that the speaker's thoughts were far away, probably trying to devise some means for being present at the approaching meeting in the mine.

Noting this, Derrick said, "I did not bring the tracing just to show what sort of work I could do, sir, but because I think it will lead us to where we can hear what they say at that meeting."

Instantly the mine boss exhibited a new interest. "Explain it," he said.

Then Derrick told him of the old drift-mouth he had discovered, and said he felt confident that if they followed the gangway leading in from it they would reach the top of the old air-shaft into which Bill Tooley had fallen, and up which had come the voices of the Mollies at their previous meeting.

"If we could get there by this back way it would be capital!" exclaimed the mine boss. "In that case my presence in the mine would be unknown and unsuspected; whereas, if we should go in as you did, from the other end of the old gangway, we could hardly escape discovery. If that route proves practicable a great load is lifted from my mind; for, somehow or other, I must find out what these Mollies are up to. You are of course sure of the correctness of the plans?"

"My father drew them," answered Derrick.

"I was not questioning your father's accuracy; I only wanted to know if this tracing was an exact copy of the original."

"Yes, sir, it is," answered Derrick, though with a slight hesitation in his voice as he thought of the one place he had not been quite sure of. This was where the plan had been somewhat blotted and blurred, so that he could not see whether or not two lines joined each other. Having made up his mind that they ought to be joined, he had thus drawn them on his tracing. It was such a small thing that he did not consider it worth mentioning. Thus, without meaning to make a false statement, he said that his tracing was an exact copy of the original, and by so doing prepared the way for the serious consequence that followed.

Derrick was a fine, manly fellow, and was possessed of noble traits of character, but like many another boy he was inclined to be conceited, and to imagine that he knew as much if not a little more than his elders. Nor was he backward in parading his knowledge, or even of allowing it to appear greater than it really was.

In the present instance he was proud of the confidence reposed in him by the mine boss, and of the skill with which he had prepared the plan of operations they were now discussing. It really seemed to him that he was about to become the leader in a very difficult enterprise in which the other was to be a follower.

The mine boss, with a quick penetration of human character, gained by years of study and experience, suspected something of this weakness on Derrick's part, but did not consider that either the proper time or opportunity had yet come for warning him against it.

So Derrick's plan was discussed in all its details, and before they separated that night it was adopted.

In order that the mistake made by Derrick in his slight alteration of the plan of the old workings, as shown in his tracing, may be understood, a few words of explanation are necessary.

The old drift-mouth, that he had discovered almost hidden beneath a tangle of vines and bushes, was on a mountain side above a deep valley. Farther down was the mouth of a second drift, which he had not discovered, and knew nothing of. On the opposite side of the mountain was another valley, the bottom of which was on about the same level as the higher of these drifts. The old workings ran from them through the mountain, and under this valley in which the present colliery was located.

When the gangway from the upper of the two drifts had been opened as far as the valley, the vein that it followed took a sudden dip. The gangway was in consequence changed into a slope, which finally led into the workings beneath. Some time after they had been abandoned a great "break" or cave-in of the ground above there had occurred at the edge of the valley, and by it an opening was made into the lower set of workings. It was on the opposite side of the valley from this break that the new workings were now being pushed; and somewhere between it and them was the old air-shaft and the chamber that the Mollies had selected as their place of secret meeting.

Now Derrick had got hold of a plan of the lower set of these old workings which he knew nothing of, and thought it was a plan of the upper set, which in reality only extended to the edge of the valley. He knew that the upper drift-mouth was on about the same level as the top of the old air-shaft, and thought he had a plan showing that the two were connected. He reasoned that by entering the old gangway at the break, and following it under the valley, they would not only save distance, but would be conducted directly to the top of the air-shaft which they wished to reach. By the joining of those two lines at the blurred place on the plan it was made to conform so perfectly to this theory that he felt satisfied his conclusions were correct, and consequently made his confident statements to Mr. Jones.

The latter had been connected with the Raven Brook Colliery but a few months, and knew nothing of its old and abandoned workings, not yet having found time to study their plans or explore them. He did know, however, that Mr. Sterling had been one of the company's most trusted engineers, and that Derrick had long been interested in poring over and tracing his father's plans of these very workings. When, therefore, he had carefully examined the tracing that the boy had made, and now assured him was an exact copy of the original plan, and found that it showed a system of galleries by which the top of the air-shaft might be gained from the break, he had no hesitation in saying that they would make the attempt to reach it from that direction. Had he sent for the original plan he would have quickly discovered Derrick's error. He thought of doing this, but did not, for fear of wounding the lad's feelings by appearing to mistrust him.

It was arranged between them that Mr. Jones should leave the village on the afternoon of the 27th, as though bound on some distant expedition, and have it understood that he might possibly be absent all night. An hour before sundown he was to be at the break, prepared to explore the old gangway to which it gave entrance. Here Derrick was to meet him, after having left the mine an hour earlier than usual, gone home for supper, and told his mother that he should be out late on some business for the mine boss.

This plan was successfully followed, without suspicion being aroused, and the young mine boss met his boy companion at the appointed time and place. They both had safety-lamps, and each carried a small can of oil, for they did not know how long they might have to remain in the mine.

In the break they found a rickety ladder that had been placed there for the use of the village children, who were accustomed to come here with baskets, and in a small way mine coal for home use from the sides of the old gangway. Descending this, they lighted their lamps at the bottom, and entering the black opening began to follow the path marked out on Derrick's tracing.

For some distance the way was comparatively smooth, and they made rapid progress. Then they began to encounter various obstacles. Here a mass of rock had fallen from the roof, and they must clamber over it. In another place a quantity of waste material had so dammed a ditch that for nearly a quarter of a mile the gangway was flooded with cold, black water, through which they had to wade. It was above their knees, and, filling their rubber boots, made them so heavy as to greatly impede their progress. In several places where the old timber props had rotted out, such masses of rubbish choked the gangway that they were compelled to crawl on their hands and knees for long distances through the low spaces that were still left. Once they were on the point of turning back, but animated by the importance of their errand they kept on, cheering each other with the thought that they would not be obliged to come back this same way in order to leave the mine.

During the earlier portion of the journey, as they encountered these obstacles, the mine boss urged, almost commanded, Derrick to go back and leave him to continue the undertaking alone. In spite of some faults the lad was no coward, and he begged so earnestly to be allowed to keep on that the other consented, on condition that no greater danger presented itself.

At length they had overcome so many difficulties that the road behind them fairly bristled with dangers, and the young man felt it would be an act of cruelty to send the boy back to encounter them alone.

Now and then, as they crawled over piles of fallen debris, and there was but little space between them and the roof, the flames within their safety-lamps burned faint and blue, and they breathed with great difficulty. The mine boss knew they were passing through spaces filled with the deadly "fire-damp," and he urged Derrick to make all possible haste towards more open places where they could keep below its influence.

They passed through a door in a fair state of preservation, but fairly covered with the pure white fungus growth of glistening frost-like sprays, which in the mine are called "water crystals." Everywhere were the signs of long neglect and decay, and unenlivened by the cheering sounds of human toil the place was weird and awful. The very drippings from the roof fell with an uncanny splash that struck a chill into Derrick's heart. Long before they reached the end of their journey he regretted having planned and proposed it; but he bravely kept his fears and regrets to himself, and plodded sturdily on behind his companion. As for the latter, his thoughts were also of a most dismal character. He realized even more fully than Derrick the dangerous position in which they had placed themselves, and felt that his experience should have warned him against such an undertaking.

Meantime those who were to meet in the old chamber at the bottom of the air-shaft were already gathered together, and were earnestly discussing the affairs of their order. Job Taskar, as presiding officer, made a long speech. In it he denounced the mine boss for discharging several of their members, and refusing to take them back, though petitioned to do so by a large number of those who remained at work. He also charged him with placing a spy in the mine in the person of Derrick Sterling, and of having removed the son of one of their most prominent members to make room for him. At this point he looked steadily at Monk Tooley.

"Don't yer say nothin' agin Derrick Sterling," growled that miner, "fer I won't hear ter it. He's doin' fer my lad this minute what dere isn't anoder man in de meetin' er in Raven Brook Colliery, nor I don't believe in de State, would ha' done in his place."

"Do yer know what he's doing it for?" interrupted another member, springing to his feet. "No, yer don't, an' yer can't make a guess at it; but I can tell yer. It's for revenge, an' nothing else. I heerd him say it his own self to Paul the cripple, coming down the slope, only yesterday morning. 'I'm taking out my revenge on him,' says he; them's his very words."

"All right," replied Monk Tooley, "if yer heerd him say it, den he's doin' it fer revenge, and it's de biggest kind of revenge I ever knowed of a man or a boy ter take out on anoder. Do yer know dat he's give up his own bed ter my Bill, an' dat he sets up nights awaitin' on him an' a-nussin' of him? No, yer don't know nothin' about it, an' I don't want ter hear anoder word from yer agin him. I'm his friend, I am."

An awkward silence followed this announcement, for the members thought that perhaps if Monk Tooley were Derrick Sterling's friend, he might also be a friend of the mine boss, whom they had almost decided should be put out of the

way.

The silence was finally broken by Job Taskar, who asked sarcastically if Monk Tooley knew who stole his three checks from the check-board two days before.

"Yes, I do," answered the miner, promptly.

"Then you know it was this same sneaking boss's pet, Derrick Sterling."

"No, I don't."

"I tell you I saw him do it!" cried Job, in a rage. "Him and the hunchback went up to the board together, and when the boss stepped away, so they thought nobody wasn't looking, the pet slipped 'em into his pocket. I saw it with my own eyes."

"An' I tell yer yer lie!" shouted Monk Tooley. "Here's de checks, an' dey come outen yer own pocket, yer black-hearted old scoundrel!"

At these astounding words Job Taskar sprang towards Monk Tooley with clinched fists, as though to strike him, and all present watched for the encounter in breathless suspense.

Just then the door behind them was pushed open, and standing on its threshold they saw the mine boss and Derrick Sterling.



CHAPTER XI

A FATAL EXPLOSION OF FIRE-DAMP

At this startling apparition of the last two persons in the world whom they would have expected to see in that place, the assembled miners remained for some moments motionless with astonishment. Having stationed a trusty sentinel at the end of the gangway nearest the new workings, who was to give them instant warning of the approach of any outsider, they imagined themselves perfectly safe from interruption. They had not considered the possibility of an approach from the rear through the abandoned workings, for they were generally believed to be impassable owing to deadly gases and the quantity of material that had fallen in them. Thus the unannounced appearance of the very persons whose fate they had just been discussing seemed almost supernatural, and a feeling of dread pervaded the assembly.

On the other hand, Mr. Jones and his companion were equally, if not more greatly, dismayed. Having approached the door during a momentary silence among the miners, they had not been warned by any sound of what they should find beyond it. Thinking that they were upon an upper level, and separated from their enemies by many feet of solid rock, they suddenly found themselves in their very midst.

At the first view of what was disclosed by the opening door, Derrick uttered a little frightened cry, and involuntarily drew back as though about to run away. It was only a momentary impulse. In an instant his courage returned, the hot blood surged into his face, and stepping boldly forward he stood beside the mine boss, determined to share whatever fate was in store for him.

Among the Mollies the first to recover from his stupefaction was Job Taskar, who crying "Here they are, lads! Now we've got 'em!" made a spring at the mine boss, with clinched fist still uplifted, as it had been to strike Monk Tooley.

The black muzzle of a revolver promptly presented to his face by the steady hand of the young man caused him to stagger back with a snarl of baffled rage. Taking a couple of steps forward, which motion Derrick followed, and standing in full view of all the Mollies, with the revolver still held in his hand where it could be plainly seen, the mine boss said:

"My men, I want you to excuse this interruption to your meeting, and listen to me for a few minutes. I think I know why you are thus assembled in secret. It is to decide upon some means of getting rid of me and of my young friend Derrick Sterling. You have been taught by this man that we are your enemies, and are working against your interests. Let me give you a few facts that will serve to show who are your real enemies, and who are your true friends.

"Job Taskar is, I believe, your Body-master and leader. He had told you that this lad is a spy, sent into the mine to discover your secrets and work against you. He hates Derrick Sterling. Why?

"A few years ago Job Taskar was blacksmith to a distant colliery in another district. This lad's father was engineer in the same mine. Taskar was paid by the men for sharpening their tools, so much for each one. They were compelled to go to him by the rules of the colliery. He so destroyed the temper of the drills and other tools brought to him as to make them require sharpening much oftener than they would if he had done his work honestly. He was thus stealing much of the miners' hard-earned wages. Mr. Sterling found this out, procured Taskar's discharge from the works, and had an honest man put in his place. When the same gentleman found the same dishonest blacksmith working in this mine he warned him that if he caught him at any of his old tricks he would have him discharged from here. Now Taskar hates that engineer's son, and wants to have him put out of the way. Do you wonder at it?

"He wants me removed for a much more simple reason. It is that he would like to be mine boss in my place. This would so increase his influence in your society that he might in time be made a county delegate, and live without further labor upon money extorted from hard-working miners."

At this point the members glanced uneasily at each other. They were amazed at the knowledge showed by the mine boss of their affairs.

"Now, my men, a few more words and I am through," continued the speaker. "In regard to those of your number whom I discharged, and refused to take back, although petitioned to do so, you know who they are, and I needn't mention names. I will only say that they were detected in an attempt to injure the pumps and destroy the fans. Had they succeeded the colliery would have been closed, and all hands thrown out of work for an indefinite length of time. You would have been in danger from fire-damp and water. Probably some lives would have been lost. They were unscrupulous men, and had they succeeded in their villainy you would have been the greatest sufferers.

"As for you, sir," he said, sternly, turning to Job Taskar, "I have long had my eye on you, and have come to the conclusion that this mine and all employed in it would be better off if you should leave it. I therefore take this opportunity to discharge you from this company's service. If after to-night you ever enter this mine again it will be at your peril."

The man was too thoroughly cowed by the boldness of this proceeding to utter a word, and when the young mine boss, saying "Come, Derrick," and "Good-evening, men," suddenly stepped outside the door and closed it, he stood for an instant motionless. Then with a howl of "Stop 'em! Don't let 'em escape!" he tore open the door and sprang into the gangway beyond. It was silent and dark, not even a glimmer of light betraying the presence or existence of those who had but that moment left the chamber.

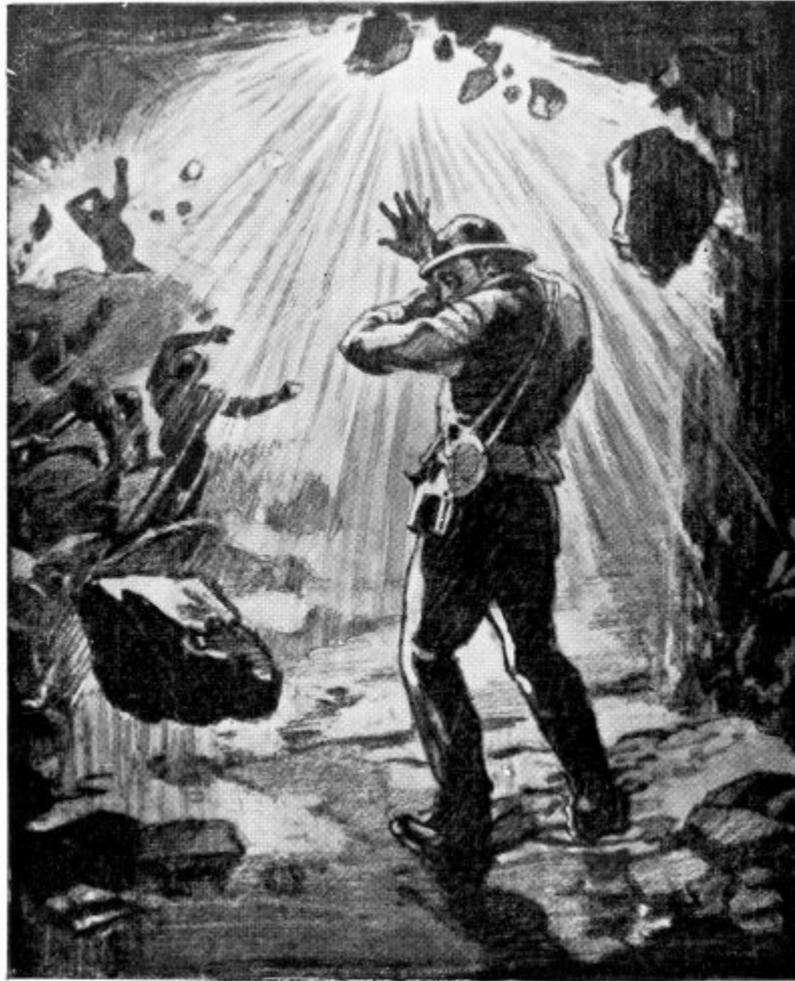
For a brief space the man stood bewildered, and then began to run towards the door that opened into the new workings. Several of the miners followed him until they came to where their sentinel stood. He, watchful and on the alert, as he had been ever since they left him there, was greatly surprised at their haste and the impatient demands made of him as to why he had allowed two persons to pass. Of course he stoutly denied having done so, and declared he had seen no living being since taking his station at that place.

"Then they're back in the old workings, lads, and we'll have 'em yet," cried Job Taskar. "They can't get out, for the gangway's choked beyond. They must have been hid yonder near the place of meeting since lunch-time, waiting for us, and they're hid now, waiting till we leave, so's they can sneak out. But they can't fool us any more, an' we'll get 'em this time."

With this the man, fuming with rage and disappointed hate, turned and retraced his steps up the gangway, followed by four of his companions. The rest of the Mollies, feeling that no more business would be transacted that evening, and having no inclination to join in the human hunt, dispersed to different parts of the new workings, or went up the slopes to the surface. Monk Tooley stayed behind, not for the purpose of joining in the pursuit of the mine boss and his companion, but with a vague idea of protecting Derrick from harm in case they should be caught.

Led by Job Taskar, the four Mollies eagerly and carefully explored every foot of the gangway, and even climbed up into several worked-out breasts at its side, thinking the fugitives might be hidden in them.

After surmounting several minor obstacles, they finally came to one that was much more serious. It was a mass of fallen debris that filled the gangway to within a couple of feet of its roof, and extended for a long distance. Thinking that perhaps it completely choked the passage a few yards farther on, and that he might now find those whom he sought in hiding, like foxes run to earth, Taskar eagerly scrambled up over the loose rocks and chunks of coal, reaching the top while his followers were still at some distance behind.



SUDDENLY THERE CAME A BLINDING FLASH, A ROAR AS OF A CANNON

Suddenly there came a blinding flash, a roar as of a cannon discharged in that confined space, a furious rush of air that extinguished every light and shrouded the gangway in a profound darkness, and the rattling crash of falling rocks and broken timbers. The Mollies who followed Job were hurled, stunned and bleeding, to the floor of the gangway. Even Monk Tooley, who was at a considerable distance behind them, was thrown violently against one of the side walls. As for Job Taskar, he lay dead on the heap of debris over which he had been climbing when the uncovered flame of his lamp ignited the terrible fire-damp that hung close under the roof. He was burned almost beyond recognition, and the clothes were torn from his body. Among the fragments of these afterwards picked up was found a portion of a letter which read:

*"It will be impossible to obtain the position until
position must be supported by a number of votes wh
when you become mine boss.*

"You know as well as anybody that a county delega

When the battered and bruised miners had recovered their senses, relighted their lamps, and ascertained the fate of their leader, they were content to drag themselves out from the gangway without pursuing any further the search in which they had been engaged. Fortunately for them the quantity of gas exploded had been small, else they might have been instantly killed, or the gangway so shattered as to completely bar their way of escape, and hold them buried alive between its black walls. As it was, it brought down a great mass of debris on top of that already fallen, and so choked the passage beyond where Job Taskar's body lay that it was effectually closed.

Although Derrick and the mine boss were far in advance of their pursuers, and had already passed most of the obstacles to their rapid progress, they were very sensible of the shock of the explosion when it occurred. The rush of air that immediately followed was strong enough to extinguish their safety-lamps, and cause them to stagger, but it did them no injury.

When these two had so suddenly stepped from the presence of the Mollies, and slammed the door in their faces, they had instantly extinguished their lamps, and started on a run back through the gangway by which they had come. Of course, in the utter darkness, they could not run fast nor far, but they were well beyond the circle of light from Job Taskar's lamp when he sprang out after them, and that was all they wanted. When they saw the little cluster of flickering lights borne by the Mollies disappear in the opposite direction from that they were taking, they felt greatly relieved, and a few minutes later ventured to relight their own lamps and continue their retreat.

"Looks as if we'd got to go out the way we came in, after all, doesn't it, sir?" said Derrick, who was the first to speak.

"It does rather look that way," answered the mine boss, "but I'd rather risk it, under the circumstances, than face those fellows just now. They have had a chance to recover from their surprise at our appearance, and some of them are as mad as hornets to think they let us go. A moment's hesitation when we opened that door and found ourselves among them would probably have cost us our lives. Our very boldness was all that saved us. A danger boldly faced is robbed of half its terrors.

"By-the-way, Derrick, our coming on those fellows as we did was a most remarkable thing. I thought your tracing was leading us to the top of the air-shaft instead of to the chamber at its bottom. We must be on a lower level than we thought. How do you account for it? Can you have made a mistake in regard to the plans?"

Derrick's heart sank within him as he remembered the weak spot in his tracing; but he answered, "I don't think so, sir; though it does look as if something was wrong."

Here conversation was interrupted by the difficulties of the road, for they had reached the mass of fallen debris that blocked Job Taskar's way a little later.

As they crawled on hands and knees over the obstruction, the mine boss said, hoarsely, and with great difficulty, "Hurry, boy! there's gas enough here to kill us if we breathe it many minutes. If we had naked lights instead of safeties we'd be blown into eternity."

After they had safely passed this danger he said, "I hope with all my heart that those fellows won't come that way looking for us; there's sure to be an explosion if they do. I don't believe they will, though," he added, after a moment's reflection; "they're too old hands to expose themselves needlessly to the fire-damp."

They had again waded through the icy water, which the mine boss said he must have drawn off before it increased so as to be dangerous, and were well along towards the opening into the break, when the muffled sound of the explosion reached their ears.

"There's trouble back there!" exclaimed Mr. Jones, as he relighted their lamps, which the rush of air had extinguished, "and I'm afraid that somebody has got hurt. You go on out, Derrick, and I'll go back and see. No, I won't, either. I can get there as quickly, and do more good, by going round outside and down the slope. Come, let us run."

In a few minutes they had reached the bottom of the break, climbed the rickety ladder, and once more they stood in safety beneath the starlit sky of the outer world.

"Eight o'clock," said Mr. Jones, looking at his watch. "We've been in there three hours, Derrick, and seen some pretty lively times. What I can't understand, though, is how we got in on that lower level. Never mind now; we must run, for I'm anxious about that explosion."

The news of the disaster in the mine had already reached the surface, but nobody knew exactly how or where it had taken place. A crowd of people, including many women and children, was rapidly gathering about the mouth of the slope, anxious to learn tidings of those dear to them who were down in the mine with the night shift.

The voice of the mine boss calling out that the explosion had occurred in an abandoned gangway, and that nobody who was in the new workings was hurt, gave the first intimation of his presence among them. His words carried comfort to the hearts of many who heard them, but filled with dismay the minds of those who had seen him but a short time before at the underground meeting. They had thought he must surely be still in the mine, and could in no way account for his presence, for they knew positively that he had not come up by the slope or the travelling-road.

While the mine boss was speaking, Derrick felt a hand on his shoulder, and turning, he saw Paul Evert, who exclaimed, joyfully, "Oh, Derrick, I'm so glad! I was afraid you were down in the mine, and I was going to help hunt for you."

"No, Polly, I'm all right, as you can see; but I wish you'd run home and tell mother I am--will you?"

Paul went willingly to do this, and Derrick prepared to follow the mine boss once more into the underground depths, to render what assistance he could.

They were about to step into an empty car and start down the slope, when the signal was given from below to pull up a loaded car, and they waited to see what it might contain. As it came slowly to the surface, and within the light of their lamps, they saw in it Monk Tooley and four other miners, who, battered and bruised, had evidently suffered from the explosion.

When the first of these was helped carefully from the car, and his glance fell upon the mine boss, with Derrick Sterling standing beside him, a look of fear came into his face, he uttered a loud cry, staggered back, and would have fallen had not Monk Tooley caught him.



CHAPTER XII

THE MINE BOSS IN A DILEMMA

The companions of the Mollie who exhibited such consternation at the sight of the mine boss were almost as frightened as he to see those for whom they had been so recently searching through the old workings, and who they thought must surely have been killed by the explosion, standing before them. They shrunk back as the young man stepped towards them; but reassured by his cheery words, they allowed him to help them from the car, and were almost ready to believe that it was not he, but some other who had confronted them so boldly at the meeting. He could not have been kinder to them if they had been his dear friends; and from that hour they ranked among his firmest supporters and adherents in the colliery.

Derrick caught hold of Monk Tooley, and insisted upon taking him, as he said, to see Bill, and show him that he was all right. In reality he wanted to give the man a chance to rest, and recover somewhat from his recent trying experience, before meeting with his wife and children.

Bill Tooley, under kind care, amid quiet and pleasant surroundings, and aided by his own strong constitution, was in a fair way to recover his health and strength. The fever had left him, and he was able to sit up for a few minutes at a time. The only serious trouble seemed to be with his right leg. It gave him great pain, and was threatened with a permanent lameness. He already seemed a different boy from what he had been, and would hardly be recognized for the bully of a short time before. He gave way to occasional outbursts of impatient anger, but these were always quieted by the gentle presence and soothing words of either Mrs. Sterling or little Helen; and in his rough way he would express sorrow for them by saying, "Don't yer mind me, mum; I don' mean nothin'; only dis ere blessed leg gits de best of me sometimes." Or to Helen, "Don't yer be afeared, sissy; I know I talks awful ugly; but I ain't. It's only de pain of de leg breakin' out in bad words."

The meeting between father and son that night, when Derrick persuaded Monk Tooley to go home with him, was curious to witness. Bill was as fond of his father, in his way, as the latter was of him, and had been very anxious when he knew he was in the mine at the time of the explosion. Both were much affected when Monk stepped to his son's bedside; but they had no words to express their feelings. The father said,

"Well, lad, how goes it?"

Bill answered, "Middlin', feyther. I heerd yer got blowed up."

"Well, yer see I didn't. Job Taskar's killed, though."

"Better him nor anoder."

"Yes. Yer want ter be gittin' outen dis, son. Times is hard, an' idlin's expensive."

"All right, feyther; I'll soon be in de breaker agin."

This was all; but the two were assured of each other's safety and well-being, and for them that was enough.

Monk Tooley accepted a cup of tea from Mrs. Sterling, and departed with a very warm feeling in his heart towards those who were doing so much for his boy.

His wife and the neighbor women, who as usual were gathered in her house, were loud in their exclamations of pleasure and wonder at seeing him safe home again from "the blowing up of the mine," but he gruffly bade them "be quiet, and not be making all that gabble about a trifle."

The mine boss took an early opportunity to examine the plans of the old workings, and soon discovered the slight difference between them and Derrick's tracing that they had followed in their recent expedition. Summoning the boy, he pointed it out, and asked him whether he had made a mistake in copying the plan, or had purposely made the alteration that had led to such serious consequences.

Derrick confessed that he had added a little to one line of the plan, because he thought the line was intended to go that way, and when he drew it so it seemed to make everything come out all right.

"Well," said Mr. Jones, "the result shows that instead of making everything come out all right, you made it come all wrong. Now, Derrick, I want this to be a lesson that you will remember all your life. By making that one little bit of a change in a single line you placed yourself and me in great peril. In consequence of the situation to which it led one man has lost his life, and several others came very near doing so. You thought you knew better than your father who

drew that plan, and in your ignorance undertook to improve upon his work.

"I won't say that good may not come out of all this, for I believe that with the loss of their leader the society of Mollies is broken up, in this colliery at least, for some time to come, but that does not make your fault any the less.

"Remember, my boy," he added, somewhat more gently, as he saw great tears rolling down the lad's cheeks, "that the little things of this life lead to and make up its great events, and it is only by paying the closest attention to them that we can ever hope to achieve good results."

This was all that was ever said to Derrick upon this subject, but it was enough, and he will never forget it. When he left the presence of the mine boss he was overwhelmed with shame, and was angry to think that what he considered so trifling a thing as to be unworthy of mention should be treated so seriously. For an hour he walked alone through the woods back of the village, and gave himself up to bitter thoughts. Gradually he began to realize that every word the mine boss had said was true, and to see what he had done in its proper light. He thought of all the kindness Mr. Jones had shown him, and the confidence reposed in him. Finally he broke out with, "I have been a conceited fool, and now I know it. If I ever catch Derrick Sterling getting into a scrape of this kind again for want of paying attention to little things, or by thinking he knows more than anybody else, he'll hear from me, that's all."

This was only a vague threat, but it meant a great deal, and from that day to this neither of these failings has been noticed in the young miner, even by those most intimately acquainted with him.

Nearly two weeks after this, upon returning home one evening from his day's work in the mine, Derrick found a message from Mr. Jones awaiting him. It asked him to call that evening, as the mine boss wished to see and consult him upon business of importance.

Mrs. Sterling was greatly pleased at this, for it showed that her boy still enjoyed the confidence of the man who had it in his power to do so much for him, and that his favor was not withdrawn in consequence of the recent affair of the tracing. Derrick had told his mother the whole story, without making any effort to shield himself from blame; and though she had trembled at the resulting consequences of his fault, and the knowledge of how much worse they might have been, she had rejoiced at the manner in which he accepted its lesson. She had only feared that Mr. Jones, upon whom so much depended, would never trust her boy again, or take him into his confidence as he had done.

Derrick was made equally happy by the message; for since the day on which the mine boss had pointed out the weak spot in his character, and delivered his little lecture on the wickedness of neglecting details, he had held no conversation with him. He made haste to finish his supper, wondering all the while, with his mother and Bill Tooley, who was now able to sit at the table with them, what the business could be.

"There's some ladies over there," said little Helen; "they came to-day, and I saw them."

"Where?" asked Derrick.

"At Mr. Jones's."

Now as the young mine boss was a bachelor, and lived alone, with the exception of an old negro servant, this was startling information, and her hearers thought Helen must have made some mistake. However, on the chance that she might be right, Derrick was more particular than usual in getting rid of every particle of grime and coal-dust, and dressed himself in his best clothes. These, though much worn, nearly outgrown, and even mended in several places, were scrupulously neat, and made him appear the young gentleman he really was.

Although Derrick had been away to boarding-school, and was very differently brought up from the other boys of the village, he was not at all accustomed to society, especially that of ladies, and he felt extremely diffident at the prospect of meeting these strangers, if indeed Helen's report were true.

As he approached the house of the mine boss he saw that it was more brilliantly lighted than usual, and just as he reached the door a shadow, apparently that of a young girl, moved across one of the white window-shades.

Instead of ringing the bell the boy walked rapidly on, with a quickly beating heart, for some distance past the house.

"Supposing it should be a girl," he thought to himself, "I should never dare say anything to her, and she'd find it out in a minute; then she'd make fun of me. I wish I knew whether I was going to see them, or see Mr. Jones alone. I hope he won't make me go in and be introduced."

Undoubtedly Derrick was bashful, and while he had apparently been brave in the burning breaker, and in various trying situations, was only a coward after all.

Again he approached the house, and again he walked hurriedly past it. As he turned and walked towards it for the third time somebody came rapidly from the opposite direction, and stopped at the very door he was afraid to enter. They reached it at the same moment, and the somebody recognizing him, said heartily, "Ah, Derrick, is that you? I'm glad I got back in time. I was unexpectedly detained by business, and feared you might get here before me. Walk in."

There was no help for it now. Wishing with all his heart that he were safely at home, or down in the mine, or anywhere but where he was, and trembling with nervousness, Derrick found himself a moment later inside the house, and--alone with Mr. Jones in the library.

"Sit down, Derrick," said the latter, as he stood in front of the fireplace. "I have sent for you to ask you to help me out of a sort of a scrape."

So he was not to be asked to meet strange ladies or girls after all, and his fears were groundless. What a goose he had been! Why should he be afraid of a girl anyhow? she wouldn't bite him. These and other similar thoughts flashed through Derrick's mind as he tried to listen to Mr. Jones, and to overcome a feeling of disappointment that in spite of his efforts presently filled his mind.

"It is this," continued the mine boss. "For some time past my only sister, Mrs. Halford, who lives in Philadelphia, has been threatening to bring her daughter Nellie on a trip through the Lehigh Valley into the coal region to see me, and be taken down into a mine. They arrived unexpectedly this afternoon, and have got to return home the day after to-morrow; so to-morrow is the only opportunity they will have for visiting the mine. Of course I had made arrangements to take them around, and show them everything there is to be seen; but now I find I can't do it. Two hours ago I received a telegram telling me that an important case, in which I am the principal witness, is to be tried in Mauch Chunk to-morrow, and I must be there without fail. Now I want you to take my place, act as guide to the ladies, and show them all the sights of interest about the colliery, both above-ground and in the mine. Will you do this for me?"

Derrick hesitated, blushed, stammered, turned first hot and then cold, until Mr. Jones, who was watching him with an air of surprise and amusement, laughed outright.

"What is the matter?" he asked at length. "Ain't I offering you a pleasanter job than that of driving a bumping-mule all day?"

"No, sir--I mean yes, sir; of course I will, sir," said Derrick, finally recovering his voice. "Only don't you think one of the older men--"

"Oh, nonsense! You're old enough, and know the colliery well enough. I don't want them taken through the old workings," added Mr. Jones, with a twinkle in his eyes.

"If you did, sir, I believe I could guide them as well as anybody!" exclaimed Derrick, with all his self-possession restored, together with a touch of his old self-conceit.

"I haven't a doubt of it," answered the other. "Now, if it's all settled that you are to act as their escort to-morrow, step into the parlor and let me introduce you to the ladies."

With this he threw open the door connecting the two rooms, and said, "Sister, this is Derrick Sterling, of whom I have spoken to you so often, and who will act as your guide in my place to-morrow. Derrick, this is my sister, Mrs. Halford, and my niece, Miss Nellie."

Poor Derrick felt very much as he had done when, with the same companion, he had been unexpectedly ushered into the meeting of the Mollie Maguires, and, as on that occasion, his impulse was to run away. Before he had a chance to do anything so foolish, a motherly-looking woman, evidently older than Mr. Jones, but bearing a strong resemblance to him, stepped forward, and taking the boy by the hand, said, "I am very glad to meet you, Derrick, for my brother has told me what a brave fellow you are, and that he feels perfectly safe in trusting us to your guidance to-morrow."

Then Miss Nellie, a pretty girl of about his own age, whose eyes twinkled with mischief, held out her hand, and said, "I think you must be a regular hero, Mr. Sterling, for I'm sure you've been through as much as most of the book heroes I've read about."

Blushing furiously at this, and coloring a still deeper scarlet from the knowledge that he was blushing, and that they were all looking at him, Derrick barely touched the tips of the little fingers held out to him. Then thinking that this perhaps seemed rude, he made another attempt to grasp the offered hand more heartily, but it was so quickly withdrawn that this time he did not touch it at all, whereupon everybody laughed good-naturedly.

Instead of further embarrassing the boy, this laugh had the effect of setting him at his ease, and in another minute he was chatting as pleasantly with Miss Nellie and her mother as though they had been old friends.

Before he left them it was arranged that, early in the morning, he should show the ladies all that was to be seen above-ground, and that they should spend the heat of the day in the cool depths of the mine.

The boy had much to tell his mother, little Helen, and Bill Tooley, who were sitting up waiting for him, when he arrived home; but, after all, he left them to wonder over the age of Miss Halford, whom he only casually mentioned as Mr. Jones's niece.

CHAPTER XIII

LADIES IN THE MINE--HARRY MULE'S SAD MISHAP

When Derrick awoke the next morning, at an unusually early hour, it was with the impression that some great pleasure was in store for him. Before breakfast he went down into the mine to give Harry Mule's sleek coat an extra rub, and to arrange for another boy and mule to take their places that day.

At eight o'clock he presented himself at the door of Mr. Jones's house, dressed in clean blue blouse and overalls, but wearing his smoke-blackened cap and the heavy boots that are so necessary in the wet underground passages of a mine. The mine boss had already gone to Mauch Chunk, and Miss Nellie was watching behind some half-closed shutters for the appearance of their young guide.

"Here he is, mamma!" she exclaimed, as she finally caught sight of Derrick. "How funnily he is dressed! but what a becoming suit it is! it makes him look so much more manly. Why don't he ring the bell, I wonder? He's standing staring at the door as though he expected it to open of itself. Ahem! *ahem!*"

This sound, coming faintly to Derrick's ear, seemed to banish his hesitation, for the next instant the bell was rung furiously. The truth is he had been seized with another diffident fit, and had it not been broad daylight he would probably have walked back and forth in front of the door several times before screwing up his courage to the bell-ringing point.

The door was opened before the bell had stopped jingling, and an anxious voice inquired, "Is it fire?" Then Miss Nellie, apparently seeing the visitor for the first time, exclaimed, with charming simplicity,

"Oh no! Excuse me. I see it's only you, Mr. Sterling. How stupid of me! Won't you walk in? I thought perhaps it was something serious."

"Only I, and I wish it was somebody else," thought bashful Derrick, as, in obedience to this invitation, he stepped inside the door. Leaving him standing there, Miss Mischief ran up-stairs to tell her mother, in so loud a tone that he could plainly hear her, that Mr. Sterling had come for them, and was evidently in an awful hurry.

"I'm in for a perfectly horrid time," said poor Derrick to himself. "I can see plain enough that she means to make fun of me all day."

Mrs. Halford's kind greeting and ready tact made the boy feel more at ease, and before they reached the new breaker--the first place to which he carried them--he felt that perhaps he might not be going to have such a very unpleasant day after all.

Both Mrs. Halford and Miss Nellie were greatly interested in watching the machinery of the breaker and the quick work of the slate-picker boys; but in spite of the jigs and the wet chutes the coal-dust was so thick that they did not feel able to remain there more than a few minutes.

As they came out Mrs. Halford said, "Poor little fellows! What a terribly hard life they must lead!"

"Yes, Mamma, it's awful," said Miss Nellie. "And don't they look just like little negro minstrels? I don't see, though, how they ever tell the slate from the coal. It all looks exactly alike to me."

"The slate isn't so black as the coal," explained Derrick, "and doesn't have the same shine."

They walked out over the great dump, and the ladies were amazed at its extent.

"Why, it seems as if every bit of slate, and coal too, ever dug in the mine must be piled up here!" exclaimed Miss Nellie.

"Oh no," said Derrick, "only about half the product of the mine is waste, and only part of that comes up here. A great quantity is dumped into the old breasts down in the workings to fill them up, and at the same time to get rid of it easily."

"But isn't there a great deal of coal that would burn in this mountain of refuse?" asked the girl.

"Yes, indeed, there is; and sometimes the piles get on fire, and then they seem to burn forever."

"I have an acquaintance in Philadelphia," said Mrs. Halford, "who has been trying experiments with the dust of these waste heaps. He pressed it in egg-shaped moulds, and has succeeded in making capital stove coal from it. The process is at present too expensive to be profitable, but I have no doubt that cheaper methods will be discovered, and that within a few years these culmpiles will become valuable."

"What's the use of bothering with it when there's an inexhaustible supply of coal in the ground?" asked Miss Nellie.

"But there isn't," answered Derrick. "This coal region only covers a limited area, and some time every bit of fuel will be taken out of it. I have heard that it is the only place in the world where anthracite has been found. Isn't it, Mrs. Halford?"

"I believe so," answered that lady; "or at least the only place in which anthracite of such fine quality as this has been discovered. Inferior grades of hard coal are mined in several other localities, and bituminous or soft coal exists almost everywhere."

From the culm pile they went to see the great pumping-engine, and the huge fans that act as lungs to the mine, constantly forcing out the foul air and compelling fresh to enter it. Then, as the day was growing warm, they did not care to go any farther, but went back towards the house to prepare for their descent into the mine.

On their way they stopped to call on Mrs. Sterling at Derrick's home, which, covered with its climbing vines, offered a pleasing contrast to the unpainted, bare-looking houses lining the village street beyond it. Here both Mrs. Halford and Miss Nellie were greatly interested in Bill Tooley, of whom they had already heard. He could not be induced to enter into conversation with them, merely answering, "yes, 'm" or "no, 'm" to their questions; but from what he said after they had gone he evidently thought their call was intended solely for him. For a long time he cherished it in his memory, and often spoke of it as a most wonderful event.

Derrick took this opportunity to secure his lunch-pail and water-can, which he slung by their chains over his shoulder. When the ladies had prepared themselves for their mine expedition, he was amused to see that Miss Nellie was similarly equipped, she having found and appropriated those belonging to her uncle. Both the ladies wore old dresses, and India-rubber boots, which they had brought with them for this very purpose, and both were provided with waterproof cloaks.

At the mouth of the slope Derrick said something through a speaking-tube that reached down into the mine. Directly the clang of a gong was heard in the breaker above them, and the great wire cable, extending its vast length between the rails of the tracks, began to move. Two minutes later a new coal-car, one of a lot that had been delivered in the mine the day before, and had not yet been used, was drawn up out of the blackness to the mouth of the slope, and stopped in front of them. Some hay had been thrown into the bottom, and as the ladies were helped in, Miss Nellie exclaimed that it looked as though they were going on a straw-ride.

Handing each of them a lighted lantern to carry, and lighting the lamp on his cap, Derrick tugged at the wire leading to the distant engine-room, and gave the signal to lower. The car at once began to move, and as they felt themselves going almost straight down into the blackness between the wet, glistening walls of the slope, and were chilled by the cold breath of the mine, the mother and daughter clung to each other apprehensively.

At first they looked back and watched the little patch of daylight at the mouth of the slope grow rapidly smaller and more indistinct, until it looked almost like a star. Then Derrick warned them that there was danger of hitting their heads against the low roof, and said they must hold them below the sides of the car. When next they lifted them they were amid the wonders of the underground world, in the great chamber at the foot of the slope. They were surrounded by a darkness that was only made the more intense at a short distance from them by the glimmering lights of a group of miners who had gathered to watch their arrival. Here Derrick left them while he ran to the stable to get his mule.

The ladies did not get out of the car, but stood in it after the cable had been cast off, and watched the loaded coal-wagons as, one at a time, they were pushed to the foot of the slope, and quickly drawn up out of sight. During this interval their eyes gradually became accustomed to the lamp-lit darkness, so that they could see much better than at first.

In a few minutes their young guide returned, leading Harry Mule, whose swinging collar-lamp and wondering expression struck Miss Nellie as so comical that she could not help laughing at him.

"Haw! he-haw, he-haw, he-haw!" brayed Harry Mule, in answer to the unaccustomed sound; and at this greeting the girl laughed more heartily than ever.

The mule was hitched to the car, Derrick sprang in front, cracked the whip that had hung about his neck, and they started on what, to two of them at least, was the most novel ride they had ever undertaken.

When they reached his stable Harry Mule stopped short and refused to go on.

"What is the matter?" asked Miss Nellie.

"I expect he wants us to go in and see his house," answered Derrick.

"Why, I never heard of such a funny mule. Do you suppose he knows we are visitors?"

"Of course he does," answered the boy, gravely; "and he knows that visitors always want to see the mine stable."

So they all went in to look at it. In the long, low, narrow chamber, hewn from solid rock, were thirty stalls. Several of them were occupied by spare mules, who turned an inquiring gaze at the visitors, and blinked in the light of their lanterns. At one end were bales of hay and bags of oats, while just outside the door stood a long water-trough, which, as mine water is unfit for use, was supplied from above-ground through iron pipes brought down the slope. In spite of living in a continual midnight, so far from pastures and the light of day, which some of them did not see from one year's end to another, these mine mules were fat and sleek, and appeared perfectly contented with their lot.

Apparently satisfied that justice had been done to his place of abode, Harry Mule offered no further objection to moving on, when they again got into the car, and the stable was quickly left behind.

By-and-by Derrick called out "Door!"

As it opened for them to pass, and Paul Evert recognized his friend, he cried, "Oh, Derrick, Socrates--" Then seeing the visitors, he stopped abruptly, and stared at them in confusion.

"Never mind, Polly; we'll be back pretty soon," shouted Derrick, as the car rolled on, "and then you can tell us all about it."

"What did he say?" inquired Mrs. Halford.

"I didn't quite understand," replied Derrick; "but, if you don't mind, we'll go back there after a while and eat our lunch with Polly--he'd be so pleased!--and then we'll ask him."

"Who is Polly?" asked Miss Nellie.

"He's Paul Evert, my best friend, and he's a cripple."

"Oh, he's the boy you saved from the burning breaker! Yes, indeed, mamma, let's go back and eat our lunch with him."

Mrs. Halford agreed to this, and after they had visited the blacksmith's shop, where a cheery young fellow named Aleck was installed in Job Taskar's place, they went back to Paul's station.

Both the ladies were charmed with the gentle simplicity and quaintness of the crippled lad, and he thought he had never been so happy as in acting the part of host to this underground picnic party. He showed them all the strange and beautiful pictures on the walls of the gangway, and Derrick managed to break off for them a couple of thin scales of slate on which were impressed the delicate outlines of fern leaves.

Mrs. Halford sat in Paul's arm-chair, and he made a bench of the tally-board for Miss Nellie. The two boys were content to sit on the railway track, and each ate out of his or her own lunch-pail.

All at once Paul said, "Sh! There they are! See!"

At this the visitors looked in the direction indicated, and both screamed.

"Oh, you've frightened them away!" said Paul, regretfully.

"Why, I do believe they were rats!" cried Mrs. Halford, in a tone of great surprise.

"Of course they were," answered Paul--"my rat Socrates and Mrs. Socrates and a whole lot of little Soc rats. I meant to tell you, Derrick; he brought them out this morning, his wife and a family of such cunning little fellows."

When the ladies had heard the whole story of Socrates the rat, and how wise he was, they became greatly interested, and wished he would appear again.

"He will," said Paul, "if we only keep quiet. He's too wise to stay away at lunch-time, but he don't like loud talking."

So they all kept very quiet, and sure enough the rat did come back after a little while, and sitting upon his hind-legs, gravely surveyed the party. In the gloom behind him could be seen the shining beady eyes of some members of his family, who made comical attempts to sit up as he did.

Being duly fed, they all scampered away with squeaks of thanks, and soon afterwards Harry Mule broke up the picnic by coming jingling back from his stable, to which he had been sent for dinner.

"I think he is just the very dearest old mule I ever saw," said Miss Nellie, when they were once more seated in the car,

and Harry, was taking them towards a distant heading.

"Yes, indeed, he is," answered Derrick, proud to hear his mule thus praised; "and I love him as much as--as he loves me," he finished, with a laugh.

They spent several hours in visiting different parts of the mine, and becoming acquainted with all the details of its many operations. At the end of one heading they found the miners who had just finished drilling a hole deep in the wall of coal beyond them, and were about to fire a blast. The visitors were intensely interested in watching their operations. First a cartridge of stiff brown paper and powder was made. The paper was rolled into the shape of a long cylinder, about as big round as a broom-handle, the end of a fuse was inserted in the powder with which it was filled, and the cartridge was thrust into the hole just prepared for it. Then it was tamped with clay, the fuse was lighted, the miners uttered loud cries of "Blast ho!" and everybody ran away to a safe distance.

In less than a minute came a dull roar that echoed and re-echoed through the long galleries. It was followed by a great upheaval of coal, a dense cloud of smoke, and the blast was safely over.

These miners had a loaded car ready to be hauled away. One of them asked Derrick if he would mind hitching it on behind his empty car, and drawing it to the junction, adding that the boy who had taken his place that day was too slow to live.

"All right," said Derrick. "I guess we can take it for you."

So, with two cars instead of one to pull, Harry Mule was started towards the junction. On the way they had to pass through a door in charge of a boy who had only come into the mine that day. This door opened towards them, and they approached it on a slightly descending grade.

As they drew near to it, with Harry Mule trotting briskly along, Derrick shouted, "Door!"

Again he shouted, louder than before, "Door! door! Holloa there! what's the matter?"

The little door-tender, unaccustomed to the utter silence and solitude of the situation, sat fast asleep in his chair. At last Derrick's frantic shoutings roused him, and he sprang to his feet, but too late. A crash, a wild cry, and poor Harry Mule lay on the floor of the gangway, crushed between the heavy cars and the solid, immovable door!



CHAPTER XIV

A LIFE IS SAVED AND DERRICK IS PROMOTED

Mrs. Halford and her daughter were flung rudely forward to the end of the car by the shock of the collision, and were, of course, badly frightened, as well as considerably shaken up and somewhat bruised. They were not seriously hurt, however, and with Derrick's assistance they got out of the car and stood on the door-tender's platform.

Derrick sent the boy who had been so sleepy, but who was now wide-awake and crying with fright, back to ask the miners they had just left to come to their assistance. Then he turned his attention to Harry Mule. The poor beast was not dead, but was evidently badly injured. He was jammed so tightly between the cars and the door that he could not move, and the light of Derrick's lamp disclosed several ugly-looking cuts in his body, from which blood was flowing freely.

The tears streamed down the boy's face as he witnessed the suffering of his dumb friend, and realized how powerless he was to do anything to relieve it. He was not a bit ashamed of these signs of grief when he felt a light touch on his arm, and turning, saw Nellie Halford, with eyes also full of tears, standing beside him, and gazing pityingly at the mule.

"Will he die, do you think?" she asked.

"I don't know, but I'm afraid so, or that he's too badly hurt to be made well again, and so will have to be killed."

"No, he sha'n't be killed. My uncle sha'n't let him. If he does, I'll never love him again!" exclaimed Miss Nellie, with determined energy. "Poor old mule! poor Harry! you shall have everything in the world done for you if you only won't die," she added, stooping and patting the animal's head with her soft hand.

Feebly lifting his head and pricking forward his great ears, Harry Mule opened his eyes, and looked at the girl for a moment so earnestly that she almost thought he was going to speak to her. Then the big, wondering eyes were closed again, and the shaggy head sank on the wet roadway, but Nellie felt that she had been thanked for her pitying words and gentle touch.

After a while the little door-tender came hurrying back, followed by the men for whom he had been sent. They were much excited over the accident, on account of the character of the visitors who had been sufferers from it, and were inclined to use very harsh language towards the boy whose neglect of duty had caused it. This, however, was prevented by Mrs. Halford, who declared she would not have the little fellow abused. She said it was a burning shame that children of his age were allowed in the mines at all, and it was no wonder they went to sleep, after sitting all alone for hours without anything to occupy their thoughts, in that awful darkness and silence.

The loaded car proved so heavy that it had to be unloaded before it could be moved. Then the empty car was pushed back from Harry Mule, and he made a frantic struggle to regain his feet. After several unsuccessful attempts he finally succeeded, and stood trembling in the roadway. It was now seen that he had the use of only three legs, and an examination showed his right fore-leg to be broken.

"He'll never do no more work in this mine," said one of the men. "The poor beast will have to be killed."

"He sha'n't be killed! He sha'n't, I say. We won't have him killed; will we, mother?" cried Nellie Halford, her voice trembling with emotion.

"No, dear, not if anything we can do will prevent it," answered the mother, gently.

"Don't you think," continued the girl, turning to Derrick, "that he might be mended if anybody would take the time and trouble?"

"Yes, I think he might, because there is a mule at work in the mine now that had a broken leg, and they cured him. He was a young mule, though. I'm afraid they won't bother with one so old as Harry."

"He's listening to every word we say," interrupted the girl, "and I do believe he understands too. Just look at him!"

The wounded mule was standing in a dejected attitude on the very spot where he had been so badly hurt; but his patient face, with its big eyes, was turned inquiringly towards them, and it did seem as though he were listening anxiously to the conversation about himself.

He managed to limp a few steps away from the door, so that it could be opened, and was then left in charge of the little door-tender, who was instructed to keep him as still as possible.

After the miners had given the empty car a start, Derrick found that he could keep it in motion, and undertook to push it as far as the junction, Mrs. Halford and Miss Nellie following on foot. The two miners remained upon the scene of the accident to refill the car they had been compelled to unload.

The ladies and Derrick had gone but a short distance when they heard, faintly, through the closed door behind them, a plaintive "Haw, he-haw, he-haw, he-haw."

As Nellie Halford said, it sounded exactly as though poor dear old Harry Mule were begging them not to leave him.

They had nearly reached the junction when a cheery voice rang out of the gloom ahead of them, saying,

"Holloa there! where's your mule? and where's your light? You wouldn't run over a stranger, would you?"

"I'm the mule," replied Derrick, as, panting and perspiring with his exertions, he looked around a rear corner of the car to see who was coming.

"Why, Derrick, is that you?" inquired the voice, in a tone of great surprise. "What has happened? where are the ladies?"

"Oh, Warren!" exclaimed Mrs. Halford, from somewhere back in the darkness, "I'm so thankful to see--I mean to hear--you. Here we are."

"But I don't understand," said Mr. Jones, for it was he who had so unexpectedly come to their assistance. "What is the meaning of all this? Where's the bumping-mule?"

"We had a collision with a door," explained Miss Nellie, "and poor Harry Mule got crushed. His leg's broken, and he's all cut up. But oh, Uncle Warren, you won't have him killed, will you?"

"I can't promise until I find out how badly he is injured."

"Oh, but you must, Uncle Warren. If you have him killed, I'll never love you again," insisted Miss Nellie, repeating the threat she had already made.

"Well, dear, I'll promise this: he shall not be killed unless I can show you that it is the best thing to be done, and you give your consent."

"Then he'll live to be an old, old mule!" cried Miss Nellie, joyfully; "for I'll never, never consent to have him killed."

As the ladies once more got into the car, and the mine boss helped Derrick push it towards the junction, Mrs. Halford said, "How do you happen to be back so early, Warren? I thought you were to be gone all day."

"Why, so I have been," he answered, with some surprise. "Don't you call from six o'clock in the morning to nearly the same hour of the evening all day?"

"You don't mean to say that it is nearly six o'clock?"

"I do; for that witching hour is certainly near at hand."

"Well, I never knew a day to pass so quickly in my life. I didn't suppose it was more than three o'clock, at the latest."

"It is, though; and to understand how time passes down in a mine, you have but to remember two often quoted sayings. One is, 'Time is money,' and the other, 'Money vanishes down the throat of a mine more quickly than smoke up a chimney.' Ergo, time vanishes quickly down in a mine. Is not that a good bit of logic for you?"

Both the ladies laughed at this nonsense, but it served to divert their minds from the painful scene they had just witnessed, and therefore accomplished its purpose.

From the junction Mr. Jones sent some men back to get Harry Mule and take him to the stable, where his injuries could be examined and his wounds dressed. He also ordered a report to be made concerning them that evening. Then the ladies' car was attached to a train of loaded coal-wagons, and the party were thus taken to the foot of the slope.

As the great wire cable began to strain, and they started slowly up the slope towards the outer world, both Mrs. Halford and Miss Nellie looked back regretfully into the mysterious depths behind them.

"I wouldn't have believed that in a few hours this awful place could exercise such a fascination over me," said the former. "I really hate to leave it, and wish we were coming down again to-morrow."

"So do I," exclaimed Miss Nellie; "and if I were a boy, I'd study to be an engineer, and spend my life down among the

'black diamonds' of the coal-mines."

Did this girl know of the hopes and ambitions of the boy who sat beside her? This question flashed through his mind; but he quickly answered it for himself: "Of course not, Derrick Sterling. What a fool you are to fancy such a thing! She only knows and thinks of you, if she thinks of you at all, as a mule-driver, such as she has seen a dozen of to-day."

Although the sun had set when they reached the top of the slope, and a breeze was blowing, the outer air felt oppressively warm after that of the mine, and the ladies became suddenly aware of a weariness they had not before felt.

Derrick was made very happy, and almost forgot for a time his sadness at Harry Mule's pitiable condition, when Mr. Jones invited him to come and take tea with them. Joyfully accepting the invitation, the lad hastened home to change his clothes, and the others, walking more slowly gazed after him.

"I think he's splendid!" exclaimed Miss Nellie, with the outspoken decision that generally marked the expression of her thoughts; "and I do hope he will have a chance to become a mining engineer."

"He will, if he keeps on trying for it as he has begun," said her uncle. "Any boy, no matter if he is born and brought up a gentleman, as Derrick Sterling certainly was, who goes in at the very bottom of any business, determined to climb to the top, will find a way to do it."

"I like to see a boy not ashamed to do dirty work, if that is what his duty calls him to do," said Mrs. Halford. "He comes out all the brighter and cleaner by contrast when the dirt is washed off."

If Derrick's right ear did not burn and tingle with all this praise, it ought to have done so; but perhaps he was too busy telling the exciting news of the day at home to notice it.

He did not walk past the Jones's house, nor hesitate before ringing the door-bell on this occasion, as he had the evening before, but stepped up to it with all the boldness of one who was about to meet and greet old acquaintances. Besides, his mind was too full of the sad fate that had befallen his mule to admit of more than the briefest consideration of personal feelings.

At the supper-table the conversation was wholly of mines, collieries, and the perils of miners' lives, in regard to which Mr. Jones related a number of interesting incidents.

"How wonderful it is!" said Miss Nellie, who had listened to all this with eager attention. "Who first discovered coal, anyway, Uncle Warren? and how did people find out that it would burn?"

"If you mean who discovered anthracite coal, I believe the credit is generally given to a man named Philip Gunter, who lived in a cabin on the side of a mountain not far from where we are now sitting. He was a hunter; and the story goes that one day in the year 1791 he had been out hunting for many hours, without securing any game, which made him feel very badly, for when he left home that morning there was no food in the house. Towards night he was returning, greatly depressed in spirits, and paying so little heed to his footsteps that he stumbled and fell over some obstacle. Stooping to see what it was, he found a black stone, different from any he had ever before noticed. He had, however, heard of stone coal, and thought perhaps this might be a lump of that substance. Having nothing else to carry, he decided to take it home as a curiosity. Soon afterwards he gave it to a friend, who sent it to Philadelphia, where it was pronounced to be genuine coal. A few gentlemen became interested in this discovery, and formed themselves in the 'Lehigh Coal-mine Company.' A mine was opened, and four laborers were employed to work it; but as there was no way of getting the coal they mined to market they were soon discharged, and the project was abandoned for the time being.

"Nothing further was done until 1817, when Colonel George Shoemaker, of Pottsville, took four wagon-loads of anthracite coal to Philadelphia, and tried to sell it there. People laughed at him for telling them that those black stones would burn; but he guaranteed that they would. Upon this a number of persons bought small quantities on trial; but all their efforts failed to set it on fire. Then they became very angry, and tried to have Colonel Shoemaker thrown into prison for cheating them. He fled from the city, pursued by officers who held warrants for his arrest. Finally he managed to elude them, and reached his home, thoroughly disgusted with coal, and ready to swear that he would have nothing more to do with it.

"In the mean time a lot of the black stones had been purchased for trial by the Fairmount Nail-works. It was placed in one of the furnaces, and the proprietor spent a whole morning with his men in trying to make the stuff burn. They were unsuccessful, and finally, completely disheartened by their failure, they shut the furnace door and went off to dinner, uttering loud threats against the man who had sold them such worthless trash. Upon their return to the works they were filled with amazement, for the furnace door was red hot, and a fire of the most intense heat was roaring and blazing behind it. Since that time there has been no difficulty in selling anthracite coal nor in making it burn. Now the production of coal in this country has reached such enormous proportions that its annual value is equal to that of all

the gold, silver, and iron mined in the United States during the year."

Just here Mr. Jones was interrupted by the arrival of the report of Harry Mule's condition. It was very brief, and pronounced the animal to be so badly injured, and his chances of recovery so slight, that it would cost more to attempt to cure him than he was worth.

"Now what am I to do about him?" asked Mr. Jones.

"I want to buy that mule, Warren," said Mrs. Halford.

"Please give him to me," pleaded Miss Nellie.

"I should like to have a chance to try and cure him," said Derrick; and all these requests were made at once.

Mr. Jones looked at them with a puzzled smile, thought a moment, and then said, "All right: I will sell him to you, sister, for one cent, provided you will give him to Nellie, and that she will leave him with Derrick to care for and cure if he can."

"That's a splendid plan!" cried Miss Nellie.

"Have you any place in which to take care of him?" asked Mrs. Halford of Derrick.

"Yes," answered the boy, "we have a little empty stable back of our house that will make a tip-top mule hospital."

"Then it's a bargain, Warren; and if you take care of him, Derrick, you must let me pay all the doctor's bills, and furnish all necessary hay, corn, and oats."

Thus it was decided that Harry Mule should be restored to health and usefulness, if money, skill, and kind care could do it.

Before Derrick left, the mine boss said to him, "Now that there is no Harry Mule for you to drive, I am going to promote you, and let you work with Tom Evert as his helper. In that position you will gain a thoroughly practical knowledge of mining. You may report to him to-morrow."



CHAPTER XV

A "SQUEEZE" AND A FALL OF ROCK

As it was impossible for Harry Mule to climb the gigantic stairway of the travelling-road, his legs were bound so that he could not move them, a platform was laid across two coal-cars from which the sides had been removed, and he was placed on this, and firmly lashed to it. In this manner he was drawn to the top of the slope, and from there he managed to limp, though with great difficulty and very slowly, to the little stable behind the Sterlings' house.

Here, by order of the mine boss, carpenters had been at work since early morning making a roomy box-stall in place of two small ones, and providing it with a broad sling of strong canvas, which was hung from eye-bolts inserted in beams overhead. This was passed beneath the mule's belly, and drawn so that while he could stand on three legs if he wished, he could also rest the whole weight of his body upon it.

After Harry Mule was thus made as comfortable as possible, a skilful veterinary surgeon set his broken leg, and bound it so firmly with splints that it could not possibly move. He also sewed up the cuts on various parts of the animal's body, and said that with good care he thought the patient might recover, though his leg would probably always be stiff.

These operations occupied the attention of Mr. Jones, the Halfords, and the Sterling family, including Derrick, until noon, when it was time for Mrs. Halford and Miss Nellie to take the train for Philadelphia.

Before leaving, Mrs. Halford had an interview with Bill Tooley, who was now able to hobble about with the aid of a crutch. She said that if he would, under Derrick's direction, take care of Harry Mule, and see that all his wants were promptly supplied until he got well, she would pay him the same wages that he could earn by working in the breaker.

Of course Bill gratefully accepted this offer; and either because he had a feeling of sympathy for an animal that was suffering in much the same way that he was, or because his own trials and the kindness shown him had really softened his nature, he proved a capital and most attentive nurse.

Often after this, when Derrick entered the stable unexpectedly, he discovered these two cripples engaged in conversation. At least he would find Bill Tooley perched on the edge of the manger, where he balanced himself with his crutch, talking in his uncouth way to the mule; while the latter, with great ears pricked forward, and wondering eyes fixed unwinkingly upon the speaker, seemed to pay most earnest attention to all that he said.

As Derrick watched the train bearing his recently made friends roll away from the little station, and disappear around a sharp curve in the valley, he experienced a feeling of sadness, for which he was at first unable to account. In thinking it over, he decided that it was because he felt sorry to have anybody go away who had been so kind to his much-loved bumping-mule.

Turning away from the station, he walked slowly back to the mouth of the slope, jumped into an empty car, and was lowered into the mine.

Why did the place appear so strange to him? All the interest, of which it had seemed so full but the day before, was gone from it, and Derrick felt that he hated these underground delvings. A feeling of dread came over him as he started along one of the gangways in search of Tom Evert, to whom he had been ordered to report for duty. The air seemed close and suffocating, and the lamps to burn with a more sickly flame than usual. To the boy the faces of the miners looked haggard, and their voices sounded unnaturally harsh. He overheard one of them say, "Ay, she's working, there's no doubt o' that; but it's naught to worrit over; just a bit settlin' into place like."

Derrick wondered, as he passed out of hearing, what the man meant; and as he wondered he was startled by a sharp report like the crack of a rifle, only much louder, and a horrible grinding, crushing sound that came from the rock wall of the gangway close beside him. The sound filled him with such terror that he fled from it, running at full speed through the black, dripping gallery. He ran until he came to a group of miners who were strengthening the roof with additional props and braces of new timber. He told them of his fright, and they laughed at him.

"He's heerd t' mine a-talking, and got skeert at her voice," said one.

"She's allus a-cracklin' an' a-sputterin' when she's uneasy and workin' hersel' comfortable like; don't ye know that, lad? It's only a 'squeeze.' Sich noises means naught but warnin's to put in a few new timbers here and there," explained another, more kindly. He was an old man, in that his cheeks were sunken and his hair was gray, though he had lived less than forty years. This is counted old among miners, for their terrible life and the constant inhaling of coal-dust ages them very rapidly. Seeing him thus aged, and feeling that he would be less likely to ridicule him than the others, Derrick

ventured to ask him if there was really any danger of a general caving in of that part of the mine.

"Hoot, lad! there's allus danger in t' mine," was the reply. "But if ye mean is there more now than ordinary, I'd answer ye 'No.' It's a common thing this squeezing and settling of a mine, and times there's men killed by it, but more often it's quieted without harm bein' done. No, no, lad; haud ye no fears! I'd bid ye gang oot an' I thoct ye war in danger."

Although Derrick was greatly comforted by these words, he could not help dreading to hear more of the rock explosions, which are caused by the roof, walls, and pillars of the mine giving slightly beneath the vast crushing weight of material above them. When he reached Paul Evert's station, and found that the crippled lad had heard some of the same loud snappings and crackings, but was not alarmed at them, he felt ashamed of his own fears, and casting them entirely aside, asked to see what the other was drawing.

Paul was very fond of drawing with a pencil, or bit of charcoal, or anything that came to his hand, on all sorts of surfaces, and really showed great skill in his rude sketches of the common objects about him. Since coming into the mine he had found more time to indulge his taste than ever before; and though his only light was the wretched little lamp in his cap, he had produced some beautiful copies of the dainty ferns and curious patterns imprinted on the walls about him. He had also afforded Derrick great amusement by making for him several sketches of Socrates the wise rat in various attitudes. Until this time he had never hesitated before showing his friend any of his efforts, but now he did, and it was only after much urging that he reluctantly handed Derrick the sheet of paper on which he had been working.

It was an outline sketch of the figures composing their underground picnic party of the day before, including Socrates, and Derrick had no sooner set eyes on it than he declared he must have it.

"I was doing it for you, 'Dare,'" said Paul, using his especial pet name for Derrick, which he never did except when they were alone. "But you must let me finish it, and that will take some time; there is so much to put in, and my light is so bad."

Derrick was obliged to agree to this, though he would have valued the sketch just as it was, and handing it back, he went on towards where Paul thought his father was at work. At last he found him, in a distant heading that was exhausted and about to be abandoned, engaged in the dangerous task of "robbing back."

In cutting into a vein it is often necessary to leave walls and pillars of solid coal standing to support the roof, and when the workings about them are exhausted it is customary to break away these supports for the sake of what coal they contain. This is called "robbing back," and is so dangerous a job that only the very best and most experienced miners are intrusted with it. Sometimes the roof, thus robbed of its support, falls, and sometimes it does not. If it does fall, perhaps the miner "robber" gets killed, and perhaps he escapes entirely, or with only bruises and cuts.

Tom Evert was a "company man"; that is, he received regular wages from the company owning the mine, no matter what quantity of coal he sent out, or what kind of work he was engaged upon. Most of the other men were paid so much per cubic yard, or so much by the car-load, for all the coal they mined. Evert was considered one of the best workmen in the mine, and for that reason was often employed on the most dangerous jobs. On this occasion he was "robbing back" in company with another skilful miner; but they had only one helper between them. The burly miner would have been glad to welcome any addition to their force, but he greeted Derrick with especial cordiality, for the boy was a great favorite with him.

"It does me good to see thee, lad," he exclaimed, when Derrick reported to him as helper, "and I'll be proud to have thy feyther's son working alongside of me. Pick up yon shovel and help load the wagon, while we tackle this chunk a bit more, and see if we can't fetch it."

A miner's helper has to do all kinds of work, such as running to the blacksmith's with tools that need sharpening, directing the course of drills beneath the heavy hammer blows, holding lamps in dark places, loading cars, or anything else for which he may prove useful. Shovelling coal into a car is perhaps the hardest of all, and this was what Derrick was now set at. It was hard, back-aching work, but he was fresh and strong, and he took hold of it heartily and vigorously.

Suddenly he dropped his shovel, sprang at Tom Evert who was stooping down to pick up a drill, and gave him so violent a push that he was sent sprawling on his face some little distance away. Carried forward by his own impetus, Derrick fell on top of the prostrate miner. Behind, and so close to them that they were covered with its flying splinters, crashed down the great pillar of coal, weighing several tons, that the "robbers" had been working on. It had unexpectedly given way before their efforts, and would have crushed Tom Evert beyond human recognition but for Derrick's quick eye and prompt action.

When the big miner regained his feet he appeared dazed, and seemed not to realize the full character of the danger he

had so narrowly escaped. He gazed at the fallen mass for a moment, and then, appreciating what had happened, he seized Derrick's hand, and shaking it warmly, said, "That's one I owe thee, lad. Now we'll knock off, for I'll do no more 'robbing' this day."

On their way to the foot of the slope the little party met the mine boss, superintending the placing of new timbers, and taking such other precautions as his experience suggested against the effects of the "squeeze," which still continued, though less violently than when Derrick entered the mine. He was surprised at seeing them thus early, for it wanted nearly an hour of quitting-time. When he heard of Tom Evert's narrow escape, he acknowledged that they had a good excuse for knocking off, and complimented Derrick upon his presence of mind.

"By-the-way, Tom," he said, "you may quit 'robbing' for a few days. I want you and your partner to go down on the lower level and pipe off the water that's collecting in the old gangway--the one in which Job Taskar was killed, you know."

"It'll be a ticklish job, boss."

"I know it, and that's the reason I send the steadiest man in the mine to do it. It's got to be done by somebody, or else it will break through some day and flood the whole lower level."

"All right, sir; I'll do my best wi' it; but I'll be mor'n glad when it's safe done."

With this Tom Evert went on towards the slope; but Derrick stayed behind with the mine boss to learn what he might of the operation of placing the timber supports of a mine roof.

He had not watched this work long when a distant muffled sound, something like that of a blast, and yet plainly not produced by an explosion, reached their ears. Although not loud, it was an ominous, awe-inspiring sound; and Derrick would have taken to his heels and made for the bottom of the slope had not his pride kept him where he was.

To his surprise the mine boss, who had listened intently to the sound while it lasted, seemed to regard it as a most natural occurrence. Giving a few directions to his men, he turned to the boy, saying, "Come, Derrick, let us go and see what is the trouble back in there."

For an instant Derrick looked at him to see if he were really in earnest; then realizing that he was, he followed him without a word.

When they reached Paul Evert's door, the mine boss said, "It's quitting-time, Paul; so get out of this as quickly as you can. It is just possible that we may all have to run," he explained to Derrick, after Paul had obeyed his order and left them, "and in that case all those using crutches will need a good start."

Of course this did not greatly reassure Derrick, and he would gladly have followed his friend Paul had not duty commanded him to remain with his friend the mine boss.

Finally they reached the place where, less than an hour before, Derrick had been helping to "rob" the old heading; and here they discovered the cause of the sound they had heard. The roof above that entire set of workings, so far as they could judge, had fallen; and had not Tom Evert decided to quit work when he did, it is probable that no trace would ever have been found of him or those with him.

Derrick felt deeply thankful that his life had been thus preserved, as he walked thoughtfully beside the mine boss away from the scene of disaster.

"How invariably Nature asserts herself in the end, and defies the puny efforts of man to alter her ways," said Mr. Jones to himself, musingly. Then to his companion he said, "I brought you with me to try you, Derrick. I hated to come myself, for I did not know what might be going on, after all these squeezes and movements of the mine. It had to be done, though, and it seemed a good opportunity for testing your courage, so I asked you to come with me. As a mining engineer, you will often be called upon to perform similar unpleasant and dangerous tasks."

"I was afraid, and didn't want to come one bit," said Derrick, with a nervous laugh.

"That doesn't make any difference. I was afraid too, but we came all the same. The proof of your courage is not whether you are afraid to do a thing or not, but whether or not you do it."

So Derrick's courage was tested, and withstood the test, which was indeed fortunate; for, within a short time, he was to be placed in a position that would try the courage of the bravest man in the world.

CHAPTER XVI

BURSTING OF AN UNDERGROUND RESERVOIR

Upon reaching the surface that evening, Derrick and the mine boss found that the weather had greatly changed since noon and that a storm threatened. It set in that night, and the rain poured down in a steady, determined sort of way, as though it had made up its mind that this time, at least, the earth should be thoroughly watered.

When Derrick joined the other miners at the mouth of the slope in the morning, it was still raining, and as they were lowered into the underground world, the men joked with each other about getting in out of the wet, and pitied the poor fellows who were obliged to work above-ground on such a day.

Descending the second slope into the lowest level of the mine, Tom Evert and his party made an examination of the place in which they were to work. The new excavations on this level were of limited extent, work having only recently been begun on them; but a powerful pump had been placed at the top of the slope leading down into them, and it was to bring the accumulated water in the old workings within reach of it that the mine boss had sent them down.

Going up the old gangway, past the chamber at the foot of the air-shaft which Derrick had such good reason to remember, they soon came to the fallen mass of rock, coal, and earth through which they were to cut a channel and insert a pipe for the release of the water beyond. The material was too loose for blasting, so the work had to be done with pick and shovel, and the debris removed with wheel-barrow, and distributed along the gangway. It was hard, dangerous, and exhausting work, and at the end of three days Derrick was heartily tired of it.

Still the rain poured steadily down, and people in the upper world began to talk of danger from floods, and great damage to the ungathered crops. Even in the mine the effect of the heavy rain began to be noticed. The drippings from the roof fell thicker and faster, the tricklings down the walls became little rivulets, and the black streams in the ditches swirled along angrily. The great pumps worked steadily, night and day, at their fullest speed, and from the mouths of the waste-pipes young rivers of black water were poured; but the mine grew constantly wetter and more uncomfortable.

Finally the mine boss decided that it was almost time to temporarily abandon the lower workings, and allow them to fill up, so that the whole force of both pumps might be directed towards keeping the upper level free of water. He spoke to Tom Evert of this, and the latter begged for just one day more, as he thought he had nearly cut through to the water, and was anxious to get the pipe laid, and have that job off his hands.

"Very well," said Mr. Jones, "you may have one day, Tom, and no more until after the rain stops; for without both pumps in the upper level we shall, very soon, have to shut down altogether."

During the morning of that fourth day they uncovered a wall of rock, which barred their way completely, and Tom Evert decided that at least one blast would be necessary to force an opening through it. After lunch-time he left the other miner, with the two helpers, to drill a hole in it, while he went up into the village to procure some powder and fuse for the work.

Those left below had not been long at work when Derrick noticed a little stream of water spurting out at one side of the rock. He called the attention of the miner to it, and he, without a word, sprang to the place and tried to check the stream, first with earth, and then with strips torn from his shirt, but could not. As he stopped its flow at one point, it burst out at another.

Finally he exclaimed, "It's no use, boys! we'll never be able to draw this water off through any pipe; it's going to take that business into its own hands, and the best thing we can do is to get out of here quick as we know how."

Even as he spoke there came a rattling rush of earth and loose rock, followed by the roar of angry waters, as they leaped out of the blackness like a savage animal upon its prey. The long pent-up waters, swollen by the heavy rains and scorning any effort to draw them off gradually, had burst forth in all their fury, and in less time than it takes to write of it, the old gangway was filled with the surging torrent.

At the first outbreak Derrick and his companions started to run for their lives down the gangway, but as they reached the door of the Mollies' meeting-room the torrent was upon them. They had barely time to spring inside the door and close it as the mad waters swept past. The door offered but a momentary protection, but ere it had been crushed in they were climbing the old air-shaft towards the upper level. It was a desperate undertaking, for the few timber braces left by those who had cut the shaft were so far apart that often they had to dig little holes for their hands and feet in the coal of the sides, and thus work their way slowly and painfully upward. It was their only chance, and they knew it, for they could hear the detached bits of falling coal and rock splash into the water as it rose in the shaft behind them.

Finally they reached the top. As they drew themselves wearily, with almost the last of their strength, over the edge, and lay on the floor of the gangway, they were filled with new terror at seeing the light from their lamps reflected in the black waters apparently but a few feet below them. The water was evidently rising into the upper level, and before long their present place of refuge would be flooded. Urged by this peril, they made all possible speed down the gangway into the new workings at the foot of the slope, where they were confronted by a scene of the greatest confusion.

The gangways, headings, chambers, and breasts of the lower vein were already full of the turbid flood, and the few miners who had been at work down there had barely escaped with their lives into the level above. Now the water was rising so rapidly that it was evident the upper level would also be flooded in a few minutes.

In the great chamber at the bottom of the slope that led to the upper world and safety, miners were flocking from all parts of the workings. Some were trying to drive frightened mules up the travelling-road; others were throwing movable property into cars to be drawn up the slope, and others still were crowding into the same cars, that they too might reach a place of safety.

The two men who were with Derrick ran to one of these cars, calling on him to follow them. It was already so crowded that they could not wedge themselves into it, so they clung on behind, and were thus dragged up the slope.

That Derrick did not follow them was because he thought of Paul Evert. Poor little lame Paul! where was he amid all this danger and confusion? Had he already got out of the mine, or was he still at his station back in the dark gangway, unmindful of danger? Perhaps somebody had seen him. Derrick shouted, "Where is Paul Evert? Has anybody seen him?"

The answer came in the voice of one of the mule-boys. "Yes, I seed him, 'bout five minutes ago, when I run out de las' load. He ain't come out yet."

Could Derrick leave him down there, to take his chances of getting out or drowning, while he sought safety for himself?

With one instant of agonized thought he decided that he could not. Snatching up a can of oil on which his eye happened to light as it stood by the track just at the foot of the slope, he dashed into gangway No. 1, shouting as he did so, "I'm going to try and get Paul Evert out! If we don't get back come and look for us; we'll hold out as long as we can."

They tried to stop him, and shouted to him to come back; that there was no hope, and he was only throwing away his own life; but he paid no attention to them, and was gone before they could prevent him.

He had hardly disappeared from their sight when the water began to rush and roar up from the mouth of the lower slope, in a froth-crowned, surging torrent. At the same instant it poured out from the old gangway, to which it had access through the air-shaft up which Derrick and his companions had escaped.

They knew by its great leaps and spurts that some other reservoir had broken loose, and that before it found the level it was seeking the whole mine must be flooded and drowned. There was no more thought of saving property, but each man became intent only on escaping with his life from the swirling flood.

They had got several cars fastened together, ready for such an emergency, and now these were quickly filled with grimy-faced, frightened men and boys. The signal was given to hoist. There came a strain on the great cable, and as the fierce waters rushed at them, and even flung their black, wet arms about them as if to hold them back, the cars were drawn up, slowly up, beyond reach of the destroying flood, towards daylight and safety.

At the top of the slope was another scene of wild anxiety and confusion most pitiable to witness. Men, women, and children stood, without other protection than their thin garments, in the pitiless rain, praying, shouting, discussing, asking questions which nobody could answer, and crowding forward to scan, with breathless anxiety, the faces of each car-load of miners as it reached the surface.

At the mouth of the slope stood Mr. Jones, in constant communication with a trusty fellow down in the mine, at the other end of the speaking-tube. With him were half a dozen steady men, upon whom he could depend, and to whom he had given orders not to allow a living soul to go down in any of the empty cars he was despatching as rapidly as possible to those below,

"There are plenty down there now," he said, "and perhaps more than can be drawn up before the water reaches them. You can do no good there yet awhile. When the time comes that I want volunteers to go down I'll let you know fast enough." He kept the mouth of the travelling-road similarly guarded, and no one was allowed to descend.

Among those who pressed close to him, and begged, almost with tears in their eyes, to be allowed to go down and make one effort to save their loved ones before the waters reached them, was burly Tom Evert.

"My lad, my crippled lad's down there, boss; ye can't refuse a feyther the chance to save his boy," pleaded the big miner.

"Tom, if he's not already at the foot of the slope, you know as well as I that there's not one chance in ten thousand of finding and getting him out. They tell me the water's rising fast on the upper level already. No, my poor fellow, you must wait a bit. You're to be my right-hand man in the work that I fear is ahead of us. I can't let you throw away your life without a chance of its doing good."

"And Derrick, boss, the brave lad I left in the low level facing the waters. It's fearful to think on. If he's drowned and my lad's drowned, their death'll be on my hands. I might ha' gone more slow and cautious like. I might ha' kep' out altogether the day, an' let the low level flood, as ye talked of, boss, but for being a pig-headed fool."

"Don't take on that way, Tom. Cheer up, man. You'll see them all coming up out of the trouble safe and sound yet. And don't take this matter to heart as you're doing. If there's any blame to be placed it's on my head; but I don't think there's blame to be placed on any of us. There's One above who rules such matters, and who sends rain and floods as He does the sunshine, all for some wise purpose."

Just then word came up the speaking-tube that the water was gaining so fast that all hands were about to leave the mine. At the same instant the harsh clang of the engine-room gong was heard. The wire cable was strained taut, and then began to move slowly over its rollers. "They are coming!" shouts the mine boss. "Stand back and give them room."

But the crowd could not stand back. Who were coming? Were all there, or were some left? It was not in human nature to stand back. They must see, and learn the worst at once.

Oh, how slowly the cable moved! How terrible was the suspense! A great silence fell upon the waiting people. It was unbroken save by the creaking of the rollers on the slope, the pattering of raindrops, and an occasional hysterical sob.

At last the twinkling lights are seen down in the blackness. Then the first car comes in sight; then another, and another, until at last the entire train, with its human freight, has reached the surface.

"Stay where you are, men!" commands the mine boss, "Answer to your names as I call them off."

The young man's voice rings out sharp and clear as he calls the long roll, beginning, "Adams, Andrews, Apgar," and so on down the alphabet to "Zegler"; and clear and prompt come back the answers, "Here, here, here," of those who have come up from the pit.

At last it is finished, and the awful truth is known. Nine men and boys are unaccounted for, and they were not at the foot of the slope when the cruel waters sprang into the great chamber and the last car was drawn up. Nine are down there, alive or dead; and among them are Derrick Sterling, Paul Evert, and Monk Tooley.

With the cries and tears of joy over those who had come up and were restored to loving hearts, a shudder passed over the assembly, and a groan of anguish rose from it that was pierced by a single sharp cry. It was that of a widowed mother for her only son.

Springing on an empty car, and standing where all could see him, the mine boss spoke to them.

"It will all come out right yet," he said. "Keep up your courage. Those brave fellows down there are not going to let themselves be drowned like rats in a hole. They'll make a strong fight for life first, and it's going to be a fight that we can help them in. They're safe enough for the present, in some high place beyond the reach of the water, and there they'll stay till we go for them and fetch them out. We'll have two more pumps here and at work before morning. They will soon make room for us to work down there. Then if we don't find the lads we're after, we are no miners, that's all. There's a promise for you now! See it, men?"

With this the speaker pointed to the eastern sky, and all eyes were turned in that direction. From horizon to horizon it was spanned by a glorious rainbow. One end rested on the opposite side of their own valley, above the old workings of the mine, while the other was uplifted on a lofty mountain-top. In the west the sun had broken through the black rain-clouds, and was now sinking in a glory that passes description.

CHAPTER XVII

IMPRISONED IN THE FLOODED MINE

Mr. Halford looked up from the paper that he was reading at the breakfast-table in the pleasant Philadelphia home, and exclaimed, "Here's an account of a terrible colliery disaster, wife; and I do believe it is in Warren Jones's mine, the very one you and Nellie visited a few days ago."

"Oh, husband, it can't be!"

"It certainly is, though. 'Raven Brook Colliery. Flooded last evening just as men were about to quit work. Rushing waters cut off retreat of nine men and boys, of whose fate nothing is yet known. Rest escape. Water still rising. But little hope of a rescue. Following is list of victims: Sterling, Evert, Tooley----'"

"Not Derrick Sterling, father, nor Paul Evert, nor Bill Tooley?" interrupted Miss Nellie, as she left her seat and went to look over his shoulder.

"Yes, my dear, those are the very names. Derrick, Paul, and Monk--not Bill--Tooley; and here is something more about one of them:

"Derrick Sterling, whose name appears among those of the victims, is the only son of the late Gilbert Sterling, a mining engineer, formerly well known in this city. The young man was seen at the foot of the slope just before the final rush of waters. He might easily have escaped, but went back into the mine in the vain attempt to save his friend Paul Evert, a crippled lad. He fully realized the terrible risk he was running, for his last words were, "If we don't get out, come and look for us." This is a notable instance of modern heroism, and is an example of that greatest of all love which is willing to sacrifice life for friendship."

"Poor Derrick! Poor little Paul! Oh, it is too awful!" and tender-hearted Nellie Halford burst into tears.

So all the world knew that Derrick Sterling was a hero, and that, alive or dead, he was somewhere in that flooded mine. After that morning thousands of people who had never heard his name before eagerly scanned the daily papers for more news concerning him and the poor fellows whose fate he was sharing.

Derrick had not gone far in his search for Paul Evert when his lamp, which had been burning dimly for some minutes, though unnoticed in his excitement, gave an expiring flash and went out. The boy's impulse was to return to the foot of the slope for a new supply of oil. Then he remembered that he had a canful with him, the one he had almost unconsciously snatched up when he started on his present errand. Filling the lamp in the dark was slow work, and occupied several minutes of valuable time.

While thus engaged his ear caught the sound of rushing waters that seemed to come from out of the darkness behind him. Nearer and nearer it came, and it grew louder and louder, as with trembling hand he struck a match and relighted his lamp. Its first gleam fell upon a wall of black waters rolling rapidly towards him, up the gangway, breast-high, and cutting off all chance of escape.

What should he do? It was useless to run; the waters could run faster than he. It would be impossible to stem that fierce current and fight his way out against it. Must he, then, die, alone in that awful place with no sound save the roar of waters in his ears? Could it be that he should never again see his mother and little Helen and the sunlight? Was his life over, and must he be carried away by the black flood that was reaching out to seize him?

Like a flash these thoughts passed through his mind, and like another flash came a ray of hope. Close beside him was the mouth of a chute belonging to a breast that he knew followed the slant of the vein upward for a great distance.

He sprang towards it, flung his oil-can into it, and in another moment, though the chute was above his head, he had climbed the slippery wall and entered it. As he drew himself up beyond their reach the savage waters made a fierce leap after him, and swept on with an angry, snarling roar. A few minutes later they had risen above the mouth of the chute and completely filled the gangway. Derrick was entombed, and the door was sealed behind him.

In the mean time a similar escape was being effected but a short distance from him, though he knew nothing of it. Monk Tooley and four other men working near him in a distant part of the mine received no intimation of the outbreak of waters and the disaster that was about to overwhelm them. Their first warning of trouble came with the stoppage of the air-currents that supplied them with the very breath of life.

For a few minutes they waited for them to be resumed; then, flinging down their tools, and filled with a strange fear,

they started through the maze of galleries towards the slope. On their way they were joined by Aleck, the blacksmith, and Boodle, his helper. Next they came upon Paul Evert, standing anxiously by his door. He had become conscious, without being able to explain how, that something terrible was about to happen, though he had no idea what form the terror was to take.

Joining the fugitives, he was hobbling along as fast as possible, and trying to keep pace with their rapid strides, when Monk Tooley stopped, picked him up, and, holding him like a baby in his strong arms, said, "We'll get on faster dis way, lad."

Half-way to the slope they met the advancing waters from which Derrick had just escaped.

The miner who was in advance gave a great cry of "It's a flood, mates, and it's cut us off. We're all dead men!"

"No we beant!" shouted Monk Tooley. "Up wid ye, men, inter de breast we just passed."

Running back a few steps to the mouth of a chute he had noticed a moment before, the miner tossed Paul up into it much in the same way that Derrick had tossed his oil-can into a similar opening. Springing up after him, Tooley lent a hand to those behind, and with an almost supernatural strength dragged one after another of them up bodily beyond the reach of the flood. Only poor Boodle was caught by it and swept off his feet; but he clutched the legs of the man ahead of him, and both were drawn up together. In another minute they too were sealed in behind an impassable wall of water.

Although they did not know it at the time, they were in a chamber adjoining that in which Derrick had sought refuge, and were divided from him only by a single wall of coal a few feet thick. It was a very small chamber, for the coal found in it proving of an inferior quality, it had quickly been abandoned. The one on the opposite side of the wall from them, in which Derrick found himself, was of great extent, being in fact several breasts or chambers thrown into one by the "robbing out" of their dividing walls of coal.

"Out wid yer lights, men!" cried Monk Tooley as soon as they had all been dragged in. "De air's bad enough now, an' de lamps 'll burn de life outen it. Besides, we'll soon have need of all de ile dat's left in 'em."

The air of that confined space was already heavy and close, with eight men to breathe it, and eight lamps to consume its oxygen. Extinguishing all the others, they sat around one lamp, pricked down low, for they could not bear the thought of absolute darkness.

Monk Tooley had assumed a sort of leadership among them, and by virtue of it he ordered every lunch-pail to be emptied of what scraps of food it contained, and all of it to be given to Paul for safe keeping. There was not much--barely enough of broken crusts and bits of meat to fill Paul's pail; but it was something, and must be doled out sparingly, for already the men gazed at it with hungry eyes.

Then they tried to talk of their situation and discuss the chances of escape. On this subject they had but little to say, however, for they all knew that long before the waters could be lowered so that any attempt to save them could be made, the foul air of that small chamber would have done its fatal work. Indeed, they knew that before one day should have passed their misery would be ended.

Even as they tried to talk, poor Boodle, saying that he was sleepy, lay down on the bare rock floor, where he was almost instantly fast asleep and breathing heavily. "'Tis like he'll never wake again," said one of the miners, gloomily.

"Let him sleep, then; 'tis the easiest way out of it," responded a comrade.

One after another they succumbed to the effects of the heavy atmosphere, and fell asleep. Finally, all excepting the crippled lad, even including Monk Tooley, whose light Paul had taken and set beside him, lay stretched out on the hard floor, sound asleep and breathing in a distressed manner.

Paul felt drowsy, but the horror of his surroundings was too great to admit of his sleeping. He wanted to think, and try and prepare his mind for the awful unknown future that overshadowed him. As he thought, great tears began to run down his thin cheeks, then came a choking sob, and he buried his face in his hands. Gradually he became calm again, and his thoughts resembled delightful dreams, so full were they of pleasant things. In another moment they would have been dreams, and the last of that little band would have been wrapped in a slumber from which neither he nor they would ever have wakened. From this condition a sharp squeak caused Paul to start and look up.

Directly in front of him, and so close that he could have touched it, was a large rat, whose eyes twinkled and glistened in the lamplight. As Paul lifted his head it uttered another squeak and sat up on its hind-legs.

"I do believe it's Socrates," said Paul; and sure enough it was.

Mechanically, and without thinking of what he was about, Paul took a bit of meat from his lunch-pail and tossed it to the rat, which immediately seized it in its mouth and scampered away. Then Paul realized that he was wasting precious food, and made a vain effort to catch the rat. The beast was too quick for him, and darted away towards a dark corner of the chamber, whither Paul followed it, hoping to discover its nest and perhaps recover the meat.

He saw the rat run into a hole in the wall about two feet above the floor; and putting his face down to it, trying to look in, he felt a delicious current of fresh air. It was not very strong, but it caused the flame of his lamp to flicker, so that he withdrew it hurriedly for fear it should be extinguished.

Suddenly he started as though he had been shot, and almost let fall the lamp in his excitement. Had he heard a human voice? Of course not! How absurd to imagine such a thing! But there it was again; and it said,

"Holloa! Is anybody in there?"

The sound came to his ear distinctly enough this time through the hole, and placing his mouth close to it, Paul shouted back,

"Holloa! Yes, we're in here, and we want to get out. Who are you?"

The boy almost screamed for joy at the answer which came to this question; for it was,

"I'm Derrick Sterling. Are you Paul Evert?"

Derrick was almost as greatly affected when the voice said,

"Yes, I'm Paul, and there are a lot more of us in here, and we are stifling. But oh, Derrick, dear Derrick! I'm so glad you're not drowned."

Then Paul went back to the others, and found it almost impossible to waken them. He finally succeeded; and when they comprehended his great news, each one had to go to the hole, draw in a deep breath of the fresh air, and call through it to Derrick, for the sake of hearing him answer. It was so good to hear a human voice besides their own; and though they knew he was a prisoner like themselves, it somehow filled them with new hope and longings for life. They had no tools with them, but all fell to work enlarging the hole with knives, the iron handles of their lunch-pails, or whatever else they could lay hands upon, while Paul stood by and held the lamp.

Although Derrick had plenty of air and space to move about in, his situation had been fully as bad as theirs, for he had been alone. Nothing is so terrible under such circumstances as solitude, with the knowledge that you are absolutely cut off from mankind, and may never hear a human voice again.

He had pricked his lamp down very low so as to save his oil, and was lying at full length on the cold floor, a prey to the most gloomy thoughts. All sorts of fantastic forms seemed to mock at him out of the darkness. He could almost hear their jeering laughter, and was rapidly giving way to terror and despair, when a ray of light flickered for a moment on the rocky roof above him.

Springing to his feet and rubbing his eyes, he looked in the direction from which it seemed to have come, and saw it again, shining through what he had taken for a solid wall of rock. Then he called out, and Paul Evert, the very one of whom he had been in search, answered him.

Half an hour later the hole was sufficiently large to allow a man to squeeze through it, and Derrick had thrown his arms around Paul, and hugged him in his wild joy and excitement.

The thing for which the miners felt most grateful, next to their escape from the little stifling chamber and their meeting with Derrick, was his can of oil. Now they knew that with care they might keep a lamp burning for many hours; and the dread of total darkness, which is greater than that of hunger, or thirst, or any form of danger, no longer oppressed them.

Aleck, the blacksmith, had a watch, and from it they learned that it was still early in the evening; though it already seemed as if they had been imprisoned for days. Some of the men began to complain bitterly of hunger and to beg for food, but Monk Tooley said they should not eat until the watch showed them that morning had arrived.

To divert their thoughts, he proposed that they should make their way along the breast to its farther end, so as to be as near as possible to the slope and a chance of rescue. Acting upon this advice, they made the attempt. It was a most difficult undertaking, for the floor was of smooth slate, sloping at a sharp angle towards the gangway. It was like trying to crawl lengthwise of a steep roof to get from one row of the timbers that supported the upper wall to another. They were several hours on the journey, but finally reached the end of the long breast in safety. There they must wait until relieved from their awful situation by death, or by a rescuing party who would be obliged to tunnel through many yards

of rock and coal to reach them.

They managed to construct a rude platform of timbers, on which to rest more comfortably than on the smooth sloping rock floor, and here most of them lay down to sleep.

Derrick and Paul lay side by side, with arms thrown about each other's necks. The former was nearly asleep when his companion whispered, "Dare!"

"Yes, Polly."

"Here's something for you; and if I don't live to get out, you'll always keep it to remember me by, won't you?"

"I shouldn't need it for that, Polly; but I'll always keep it, whatever it is."

It was Paul's sketch of the underground picnic-party, and Derrick knew what it was when he took it and thrust it into the bosom of his shirt, though days passed before he had a chance to look at it.

Three days after this the same men and boys lay on their log platform, in almost the same positions, but they were haggard, emaciated, faint, and weak. Their last drop of oil had been burned, and they were in total darkness. A light would have shown that they lay like dead men.

Suddenly one of them lifts his head and listens. "Thank God! thank God!" he exclaims, in a husky voice, hardly more than a whisper, "I hear them! they're coming!"

Derrick's quick ear had detected the muffled sound of blows, and his words gave new life to the dying men around him.



CHAPTER XVIII

TO THE RESCUE!--A MESSAGE FROM THE PRISONERS

From the moment the news came that nine men and boys were imprisoned in the flooded mine, preparations for their rescue, or at least of learning their fate, were pushed with all vigor. Although it had stopped raining, the night was dark, and great bonfires were lighted about the mouth of the slope. These were placed in charge of the old breaker boss, Mr. Guffy, and his boys, who fed them with dry timbers, and kept up the brilliant blaze until daylight.

Around these fires the entire population of the village stood and discussed the situation; and by their light the workers were enabled to perform their tasks. The miners were divided into gangs, headed by the mine boss and by Tom Evert, and their work was the fetching of the steam pumps from across the valley and setting them up near the mouth of the slope. They had to be connected, by long lines of iron pipe, with the boilers under the breaker, and from each a double line of hose was carried down the slope until water was reached.

It was nearly daylight when these operations were completed, and a faint cheer went up from the weary watchers as they saw four powerful streams of water added to the torrent that the regular mine pump had kept flowing all night.

"Now, men," said the mine boss, when he saw that all was working to his satisfaction, "I want you to go home and get all the solid rest you can in the next two days, for after that I shall probably call upon you to work night and day."

"We'll be ready boss, whenever you give the word," was the prompt answer from a score of stalwart fellows. Then all turned towards their homes, knowing they could do nothing more until the pumps had prepared a way for them.

During the next day the news of the disaster spread far and wide, and from all sides visitors poured into the little village. Among these were a number of reporters from the metropolitan papers, some of whom, filled with a sense of their own importance, buzzed around like so many bumblebees. They blundered into all sorts of places where they had no business, bored everybody whom they could approach with absurd questions, and made of themselves public nuisances generally.

While some among them acted thus foolishly, there were others who behaved like gentlemen and the sensible fellows they were. Of these the most noticeable was a well-built, pleasant-faced young man, named Allan McClain. He asked few questions, but each one had evidently been well considered and was directly to the point. He was quiet and unobtrusive, never displayed a note-book or pencil, kept his eyes and ears wide open, and, as a result, sent to his paper the best accounts of the situation that were published. How he did it was a mystery to the others, few of whom had even thought of giving to their business the careful study and attention that McClain bestowed upon it.

The mine boss had been particularly annoyed by the conduct of several of these members of the press, and when they applied to him for permission to accompany the first gang of workmen down into the mine, he firmly but courteously said "No."

He explained to them the dangers attending the proposed undertaking, and that there would be no room in the mine for any but those actively engaged in the work of rescue.

Some of the reporters made such an outcry at this, and talked so loudly of their rights and of what they would do in case the mine boss persisted in his refusal, that he finally said if they could not behave better than they had he should be compelled to order them from the colliery altogether.

During this scene Allan McClain listened to all that was said without speaking a word. Shortly afterwards the mine boss, meeting him alone, said, "I am sorry, sir, to be obliged to include you in my apparent discourtesy, but you know that if I made a single exception I could not enforce my rule."

"I know it, Mr. Jones," was the pleasant answer, "and I do not expect any privileges that may not be extended to the rest. Your action will, however, make no difference to me, as I expect to leave the village to-day."

Allan McClain did take the afternoon train away from Raven Brook, after bidding his companions good-by; but none of them knew where he had gone or the reasons for his departure.

The pumping of the mine was so successful that two days later the water in it was lowered a few feet below the roof of the great chamber at the bottom of the slope. The mine boss had watched it closely, going down almost every hour to note the change of its level, and he now decided that the time had come to begin more active operations.

The day before, a sturdy young man, much begrimed with coal-dust, and wearing a rough suit of mine clothes that had

evidently seen long service, had presented himself at the mouth of the slope, and asked leave to take part in the rescue, in case there was any way in which he could be made useful. He said that he came from the neighboring colliery of Black Run, where the Raven Brook men had once rendered good service during a time of disaster, and that his name was Jack Hobson. The mine boss had thanked him for his offer of assistance, and said he would gladly accept it if he found an opportunity. The young man remained near the scene of operations, making himself so generally useful, and performing with such promptness and intelligence any little task given him, that the mine boss took a decided fancy to him before the day was over.

Now that Mr. Jones wanted three reliable men to go down with him and make an exploration, he selected Tom Evert, Jack Hobson, and another young miner who had a brother among the victims of the flood.

The departure of this little party was watched by a great crowd of people, who realized that if work could not be begun at once there would be little chance of finding any of the imprisoned men alive. Among the spectators were many reporters, any one of whom would gladly have paid a round sum to be taken along, and thus gain an opportunity of describing the appearance of the drowned mine.

At the foot of the slope the exploring party found a rude but strong flat-boat that the mine boss had caused to be built and sent down for this very purpose. Sitting in it with bent bodies, for there was but little space beneath the roof of the chamber, they pushed off across the black waters and began a voyage so weird and mysterious that at first their thoughts found no expression in words.

All about them floated traces of the disaster; here the body of a drowned mule, and there a bale of hay, or a quantity of timbers that, wrenched and broken, told of the awful force of the waters. These and many like tokens of destruction came slowly within the narrow circle of light from their lamps, and vanished again behind them.

After a careful search along the opposite side of the chamber, they located gangway No. 1, in which the water was still within two inches of the roof.

"It'll be some time afore we can get in there, sir," said Tom Evert.

"Yes, Tom, three days at least, perhaps more."

"T' big breast lies in here on this side t' gangway."

"I know it, Tom; and if you'll pick out the spot that promises easiest working, we'll open a heading into it. We may find them there. If we don't we can work our way through it, above the water level, to the wall that divides it from the next one. Some of them are almost sure to be there if they're still alive."

"That's what I think, sir; and if you say so, we'll start in right here. Can you tell just how far in t' breast lies?"

"If that's all, we'll soon knock a hole through that, and then, please God, I'll find my crippled lad, an' t' brave one that went back after him. If we find 'em dead, old Tom Evert don't never want to come out alive. He couldn't."

"Never fear, Tom, we'll find them alive," said the mine boss, cheerily. "I have full faith that we shall. If they're only in the big breast we'll have them out in three days more. Now, men, drive those staples into the wall, make the boat fast to them, and pitch in. As soon as you've cut a shelf to work on, I'll go back for fresh hands. This job's going to be done with half-hour reliefs."

Jack Hobson held the staples in position while Tom Evert, lying on his side, drove them into the wall of solid coal with a dozen blows from his heavy hammer.

These were the blows heard faintly by Derrick Sterling on the farther side of that massive wall; and the welcome sound carried with it new life and hope to him and his fainting comrades.

Dropping the hammer, and seizing his pick, the burly miner struck a mighty blow at the wall, and followed it up with others so fast and furious that the coal fell rattling into the boat, or splashing into the water in glistening showers. The work of rescue was begun.

As he sat there, Jack Hobson's eye lighted on a long, dark object floating near them, and calling attention to it, he said,

"Don't you think, sir, that water trough might be bailed out and used as a sort of boat to establish communication between this point and the foot of the slope? I have been used to canoes, and believe I could manage it."

The mine boss said it was a good idea, and he could try if he wanted to.

So the trough, which was simply a long, flat-bottomed box, was brought alongside, bailed out, and placed in charge of

the young man from Black Run. He made a rude paddle, and during the next two days did capital service in ferrying miners and tools back and forth between the opposite sides of the chamber. By this addition to the underground fleet the large boat could be left at the entrance to the heading, where it proved most useful as a landing-stage.

The work was pushed with all possible speed, a dozen of the strongest and most skilful miners, who handled their picks with desperate energy, taking half-hourly turns each at driving the heading. Behind the miner who was thus at work, other men passed out the loosened material from hand to hand, and thus kept the opening clear. Whenever there was no demand for his services as ferry-man, Jack Hobson took his place among these workers, and by his cheering words and tireless energy kept up their spirits and spurred them on to greater efforts.

When they had got about half-way through it was thought best to close the outer end of the heading with an air-tight door, and place another ten feet behind it, thus forming an airlock. Fresh air was forced into and compressed in the heading by means of an air-pump operated from the flat-boat at the outer end. These precautions were taken for fear lest when they broke through into the breast the air in it, compressed by the flood, should rush out with destructive force. It was also feared that, relieved from its air pressure, the water in the breast would rise and cut off the escape of any persons who might be in there.

The position of those engaged in the work of rescue was by no means free from peril. The pumps, running at fullest speed, were barely able to keep the water from rising and flooding the new heading, so great and continuous was the flow into the mine from the soaked earth above it. They did not know but that any moment some fresh and unsuspected accumulation in the old workings might break forth and send a second flood pouring in upon them. Above all there was an ever-present danger from foul gases, which formed so rapidly that at times work had to be entirely suspended until they could be cleared away. Thus every time the relief men went down to their self-imposed labor their departure was watched by anxious women with tearful eyes and heavy hearts.

For a day and a night these stout-hearted men worked without knowing whether they sought the living or the dead. On the afternoon of the second day, during a momentary pause in the steady rattle of the picks, Jack Hobson, who was at the inner end of the heading, thought he heard a knocking. Calling for perfect silence, he listened. Yes, it was! Faint, but unmistakable, it came again.

"Tap, tap, tap; tap, tap, tap; tap, tap, tap," and a pause. Then it was repeated, and its meaning could not be doubted. As plain as human speech, it said,

"Here we are, still alive, but in great distress. We know you are coming, but you must hurry."

From mouth to mouth the joyful news was carried out from the heading, across the sullen waters, up the slope to the anxious waiting throngs, and on throbbing wires throughout the length and breadth of the land.

Mrs. Sterling heard it and lifted her tear-stained face in earnest thankfulness to Heaven. The Halfords heard it in Philadelphia, and Mr. Halford said he could stand it no longer, but must go to Raven Brook and be on hand when the men were rescued. Before another sun rose that faint tapping made in the recesses of the drowned mine by Derrick Sterling with a bit of rock had been heard around the world.

Now the brave fellows in the heading knew what they were working for, and the blows of their picks fell faster and harder than ever on the glistening wall that still opposed its black front to them.

The excitement at the mouth of the mine was now intense, and every man who came up from it was besieged by anxious inquiries for the very latest news. What was the meaning of the three taps three times repeated? Did it signify that there were nine persons in the breast, or only three? If only three, where were the others? Who were the three? How many were alive? Were any dead? These and a thousand like questions were asked and discussed, but nobody could answer them certainly.

The reports brought up were only regarding the progress of the work. So many feet in an hour, so many yards a day. Now there are only six feet more to cut through; now five, four, three, and now but eighteen inches. The suspense is terrible. To the mothers and wives waiting for the end up in the little village it is almost too great to be borne. To the haggard men behind those eighteen inches of black rock it seems as though the breath of fresh air for want of which they are dying would come too late.

They press eagerly against the wall, and in their feebleness pick vainly at it with their fingers. It will not yield. Even Monk Tooley, who was so fierce and strong five days before, can make no impression on it.

Now but one foot of wall remains, and Tom Evert pauses in his task to dash the sweat-drops from his eyes, and to call, as he has already a dozen times,

"Holloa! Holloa in there!"

Like an echo comes the answer, faint but distinct,

"Holloa! Hurry!"

He only stops to call louder than before, but with a tremble in his voice,

"Is--Paul--Evert--alive?" and with ear held against the wet wall he breathlessly awaits the answer.

"Yes."

The word is enough, and with the fury and strength of a giant he again attacks the wall. He pays no attention to the relief who is ready to take his place. He knows nothing, cares for nothing, save that his boy is waiting for him beyond those few inches of crumbling coal.

At last his pick strikes through. A few more desperate strokes and the barrier is broken away. He springs into the breast. Another instant and his crippled lad, whom he had thought never to see again, is strained to his heart, and the burly miner is sobbing like a child.



CHAPTER XIX

RESTORED TO DAYLIGHT

In the overwhelming joy of the moment, Tom Evert had no thought save for the son whom he had snatched from the very gates of death. He was absolutely unconscious of the presence of another human being in the breast, nor did the broken words of blessing and gratitude uttered by the faint-voiced miners find their way to his ear. His instinct was to get his lad out from that stifling, foul-aired place, and, still holding him in his arms, he crawled back through the heading, was borne swiftly across the waters from which he had snatched their prey, and drawn up the slope.

As he stepped from the car at its mouth, and they saw what it was he bore so tenderly and proudly, a mighty cheer went up from the assembled throng. Another and another. They were wild with joy. The long suspense was over, the terrible strain was relaxed, and they gave way to their feelings.

Suddenly they noticed that the drooping head of the lad was not lifted from the broad shoulder on which it rested. His arms hung limp and lifeless. A great silence came over the multitude. They stood awe-stricken, as in the presence of death, and pressing aside in front of the advancing miner, they made way for him to pass.

Still bearing his burden, unconscious of all besides, and looking neither to the right nor to the left, Tom Evert passed through the human lane thus formed, and went home--home to the rude, unpainted house in which Paul was born, and which, during the darkness and despair of the past five days, had been a constant picture before his mind's eye--home to the mother whose tenderest love has ever been for her crippled boy. Home!

Although Tom Evert, with eyes and ears only for his own, had no thought of the others for whom he had broken open the prison door, there was no lack of warm hearts and willing hands to help them.

Following close after the miner Warren Jones entered the breast, and directly behind him was Jack Hobson. The light from their lamps dazzled the eyes that for three days had lived in a darkness as absolute as though no light existed in the universe. Turning them away from the light, the prisoners listened eagerly for the voices of their deliverers. The first words they heard were from the mine boss, the man on whom they had depended, and who they knew had planned and carried out their rescue.

"Are you all here, men?"

"There's nine of us."

"And all alive?"

"All alive yet, thank God; though Boodle, poor lad, is wellnigh gone."

"Where is Derrick Sterling?"

"Here I am, sir," came a weak but well-known voice from back in the darkness.

Before Mr. Jones could locate it, the young man who had followed him so closely into the breast sprang to the side of the lad, and seizing his hand, exclaimed,

"Derrick Sterling, you are a splendid fellow, and this is one of the very happiest moments of my life!"

"Who are you?" asked Derrick, faintly.

"My name is Allan McClain," was the answer, "and if you will give me your friendship I shall consider it an honor to be proud of."

Trying weakly to return the hand-pressure of the young stranger, Derrick answered,

"He who has come to our rescue at the risk of his own life must indeed be my friend!"

Then the mine boss found them, and saying, "Drink this, my poor, brave lad," gave him a cup of rich warm soup, that had been made nearly an hour before, and kept warm over a spirit-lamp in the boat, just outside the heading.

It filled the boy with new life, and when he and the others had drank of it all that was allowed them, they felt strong enough to crawl out through the heading.

Derrick was the first to go and the first to be drawn up the slope, supported in the car by the young man to whom he had just given his friendship. As they approached the blessed sunlight, and the weary lad caught its first gleam, still far

above him, he pressed the hand of his companion, and could do nothing but gaze at it. Could it be the very light of day that he had longed for and prayed for and despaired of ever seeing again? He knew it must be, but it seemed almost too glorious to be real.

When they reached the surface, the light that had roused such a tumult of feeling within him revealed two great tears coursing slowly down through the grime of his hollow cheeks.

The excitement over Paul Evert's appearance was as nothing compared with that aroused by the sight of Derrick Sterling. Had not his name been a household word throughout the land for days? Was he not a brave fellow whom they all loved? Could they cheer loud enough or long enough to do him honor, and testify their joy at his deliverance? It did not seem as though they could; and poor Derrick stood before them, trembling with strong emotion, without knowing which way to turn or look.

The reporters, who were taking mental notes of his appearance, also gazed curiously at the young man who had come up from the mine with him, and on whom he now leaned. He was a miner, of course, for he was dressed in mine clothes, and was as begrimed as the sootiest delver of them all, but who was he? He had somewhere lost his miner's cap, and the yellow, close-cropped curls of his uncovered head had a strangely familiar look.

He noticed their stares, knew what was passing in their minds, and laughingly said:

"Yes, fellows; I'm McClain of the *Explorer*, and I guess I've got a beat on you all this time." Then to Derrick he said, "Come, Sterling, we must get out of this; there's a mother waiting for you over there."

Just then another car-load of rescued men was drawn up, and again the excited spectators broke forth in a tumult of cheers. Under cover of this diversion, Derrick, half supported by Allan McClain, walked slowly away towards the little vine-covered cottage at the end of the village street. Here his mother awaited him, for she felt that their meeting was something too sacred to be witnessed by stranger eyes.

At the mouth of the slope similar meetings were taking place between others who had less self-control or less delicacy, but who, in their way, showed equal affection and deep feeling. Wives greeted husbands who appeared to them as risen from the dead, and mothers wept over sons whom they had deemed lost to them forever.

As Monk Tooley stepped from the car, the first to hold out a hand to him was his son Bill, leaning on a crutch, and still bearing traces of his illness. His greeting was,

"Well, feyther, we've missed yer sad! Thought maybe yer wouldn't get back no more."

"I'm not dat easy got rid of, lad. Had a plenty ter eat, hain't yer?"

"Plenty, feyther, sich as it was."

"Dat's more'n I have, an' I hope yer've saved a bite fer yer dad. Starvin's hungry work."

Nothing else was overheard; but the tones of the rough man and his equally rough son held an unwonted accent of tenderness. As they grasped each other's hand, one gazed curiously at his father's haggard face, and the other cast a pitying glance at his son's rude crutch.

Not the least interested spectator of these touching scenes was Mr. Halford, who had arrived that morning from Philadelphia. When, after all the rest had been sent safely to the surface the mine boss was drawn up the slope, and was in turn greeted with a rousing cheer, that gentlemen slipped an arm through his, and led him away, saying,

"You have done nobly, Warren, and I am proud to call you brother."

"I could have done nothing, Harold, if these brave fellows had not stood by me as they have."

"And they could have done nothing without your level head to direct them and your splendid example to stimulate them."

So the great colliery disaster was happily ended, and in Raven Brook village great sorrow was turned to great joy.

As the two gentlemen sat talking together in the room that the mine boss called his den, that evening, Mr. Halford said,

"By-the-way, Warren, I did not take this trip wholly out of curiosity to witness your rescue of the miners. I want to learn something of this young Sterling. Did you know his father?"

"Yes, he was one of my warmest friends."

"Was his name Gilbert?"

"Yes."

"Do you know whether he ever lived in Crawford County?"

"That is where he came from; he was born and raised there."

"Did you ever hear him speak of owning any property there?"

"I have heard him mention a little old rocky farm that was left to him; but he always spoke of it as being too poor to have any value. In fact he once told me that it was not worth the taxes he paid on it."

"I declare, I believe it is the very place! If these Sterlings turn out to be the people you lead me to think they are, Warren, there's a small fortune awaiting them."

"What! a fortune awaiting the widow Sterling and Derrick? It can't be! Why, they haven't a relative in the world."

"That may all be, but what I tell you is true. If this Gilbert Sterling was a son of Deacon Giles Sterling of Newfields, in Crawford County, his heirs are the owners of one of the most valuable bits of property in the State. Why, man, this little old rocky farm you speak of, if it is the same--and I am inclined to think it must be--lies in the very centre of the richest oil district that has yet been discovered. The best-paying well owned by our company is located on its border. For a clear title to that farm I am authorized to offer twenty-five thousand dollars cash, and a one-fifth interest in whatever oil may be taken from it."

The next morning Mr. Jones called at the Sterlings', and was amazed to find Derrick already showing signs of recovery. A splendid constitution and a determined will, aided by twelve hours of sleep and an abundance of nourishing food, were already beginning to efface the traces of hunger and suffering.

The boy gave his visitor a cheerful greeting, and tried to express something of his gratitude in words, but they failed him utterly.

The other said, "Don't try, Derrick. It's over now, and we all have cause for the most profound gratitude; but each of us understands the other's feelings, and there is no need of words between us."

Mrs. Sterling's eyes were filled with happy tears as, sitting beside her son, she tried to tell something of the pride she felt in him. After a while she said,

"I know it's wrong, but I can't help trying to look ahead a little, and, I confess, with some anxiety. I want my boy to do what is right, and I do not want him to remain idle; but oh! Mr. Jones, I cannot let him go down into that awful mine again. It has nearly killed him; and I am sure I could not survive another such experience."

"I don't blame you for feeling as you do," said the young man, "and I think perhaps some other arrangement can be made. One reason for my calling this morning was to ask if I might bring a gentleman to see you who is greatly interested in Derrick, and desirous of making his acquaintance. Are you willing that I should, and do you think Derrick is strong enough to receive visitors?"

"Certainly I am," said Mrs. Sterling; and Derrick answered for himself that he felt strong enough to see any number of gentlemen who were interested in him.

So Mr. Jones left them, and shortly afterwards returned with Mr. Halford, who soon won his way to the mother's heart by saying pleasant things about her boy, and to Derrick's by thanking him for his kindness to Mrs. Halford and Miss Nellie. He said that he had been especially commissioned by his daughter to inquire concerning the welfare of her bumping-mule, and was glad to hear from Derrick that that knowing animal was rapidly recovering from his injuries.

The conversation was led on from one thing to another, until Mr. Halford was satisfied that he had really found the family of whom he was in search. Then he told them of the good-fortune in store for them, provided they could prove their ownership of the little Bradford County farm.

Trembling with excitement, Mrs. Sterling brought out a box full of her husband's papers, among which was found a deed for the farm, and receipts for taxes paid up to the time of his death.

Having satisfied himself of the correctness of these, Mr. Halford made them the offer of which he had spoken to Mr. Jones the evening before. Then he left them, saying he knew they would want some time to consider his proposition, and that he would call the next day to learn their decision.

After their visitors had gone, Derrick and his mother gazed wonderingly at each other. Could it all be true? Were their

days of poverty really over? Was the overworked mother to have a release from the toil and the bitter anxieties that made her look so thin and careworn? Were Derrick's dreams of a college education and a profession about to be realized?

Long and earnestly they talked, but not as to what answer they should give Mr. Halford. They had decided that almost before he left. They talked with grateful and loving hearts of the Heavenly Father who had so ordered their ways as to turn their very darkness into brightest light. As she thought over her mercies, the wonderful promises that had sustained the widowed mother through so many an hour of trial came back to her with their fullest force.

That afternoon Derrick felt strong enough to walk out, and went to the Everts' to see his dear friend and recent companion in suffering. He found Paul able to see and talk to him, but in bed, and very weak and languid.

"If I could only get away, far away from it all, Dare," he said. "The horror of the mine hangs over me all the time, and I'd almost rather never get well than go down into it again."

Then Derrick bent down and whispered something that brought a new light into the crippled lad's eyes and a faint flush to his pale cheeks.

"Oh, Dare!" he exclaimed. "Is it true? Really! Do you mean it?"

Derrick answered that it was true, and he meant every word of it.



CHAPTER XX

GOOD-BY TO THE COLLIERY

What Derrick whispered to Paul Evert as he bent over him was: "You needn't ever go down in the mine again, Polly. I want you to go to Philadelphia with me to learn to be an artist. The money's ready, and it's all fixed that I'm to go; and if you only say the word it will be fixed for you to go too. I'm only waiting for you to get strong to tell you the whole story. Don't say a word about it yet, though, for it's a secret."

A hope like this was a wonderful medicine to the delicate lad, and when, an hour later, his father came in, he was astonished at the change for the better that had come over him.

"Why, Paul lad, an hour since I was thinking I'd saved thee for naught but to die, after all," said the miner. "Now I find thee bright and smiling, and chipper as a tomtit. Whatever's happened?"

"Derrick's been to see me, father."

"Ay; I might ha' know'd it. No other could cheer thee like him. He's a noble lad, and a true friend o' thine, Paul. I doubt if another would ha' gone back i' t' face o' t' skirling waters on chance o' saving thee."

"I'm sure not, father."

While Paul was thus talking of Derrick, Derrick was talking of Paul.

He had gone home full of a newly formed plan. In fact plans had formed themselves so rapidly in his mind since Mr. Halford's visit that they were already trying to crowd each other from his memory. The one now uppermost was in regard to Paul.

Going to his own room, he took out from a small drawer, where he kept his choicest treasures, the sketch of the underground picnic party that Paul had drawn down in the mine, and given him while they were imprisoned together in the darkness. It was soiled and a little torn, but every spot of grime upon it was a memento of that terrible experience; and though the picture was of recent origin, associations were already clustered so thickly about it that to Derrick it was a priceless treasure.

Showing it to his mother, he asked what she thought of it.

"I think it is capital!" she exclaimed.

Then Derrick told her the story of the sketch, of Paul's longing to be an artist, and his dread of going into the mine again. He ended by saying, "Now, mother, when I go to Philadelphia to prepare for college, can't Polly go with me and study to be an artist? He won't be very expensive, and I'm sure we're going to have money enough for all."

"Of course he can, Derrick. I would much rather you had a companion than to go alone, and I know you two will enjoy much together, and be of great help to each other. As for the money, dear, I would rather remain poor all my life than not have you willing to share whatever you have with those who need it. The longer you live, Derrick, the more fully you will realize that the greatest pleasure to be gained from money is by spending it for the happiness of others."

So it was settled that Derrick and Paul should go to Philadelphia together, and Paul made such haste to get strong, so as to hear the whole story, that it had to be told to him that very evening.

By the next morning, when Mr. Halford called upon the Sterlings to receive their answer to his offer, they had already in imagination spent so much of the money they expected to receive from him that it would have been impossible for them to say anything but "Yes," even if they had wanted to.

Mr. Halford was greatly pleased with the plans made for Derrick and Paul, and promised to look out for them in Philadelphia, secure a pleasant boarding-place for them, and see that they got into the best schools in the city. He said they ought to start as soon as possible, for the autumn terms were about to begin. Before he left he handed Mrs. Sterling a check for a larger amount of money than she had ever in her life possessed. He said she might find it convenient for immediate use while the necessary steps for the transfer of the little Crawford County farm to the great oil company were being taken.

In two weeks after Mr. Halford's departure everything was in readiness for that of the boys, and the time had arrived for them to start for the great city.

Harry Mule, whose leg had been so well mended that it could be taken out of splints, was to be left in charge of Bill Tooley. Bill was to be allowed to hire him out to the mine boss as soon as he was able to work, and that gentleman had promised them both a job at hauling waste cars over the dump. Thus neither of them would be obliged to go down into the mine again.

Bill Tooley was now able to walk without his crutch; but his leg would always be stiff, and he would never be free from a limp in his gait. As Harry Mule had the same peculiarity in his, they became known in the colliery as the two "Stiffies." Under this title they acquired considerable fame for their fondness for each other, and for the wisdom of one of them.

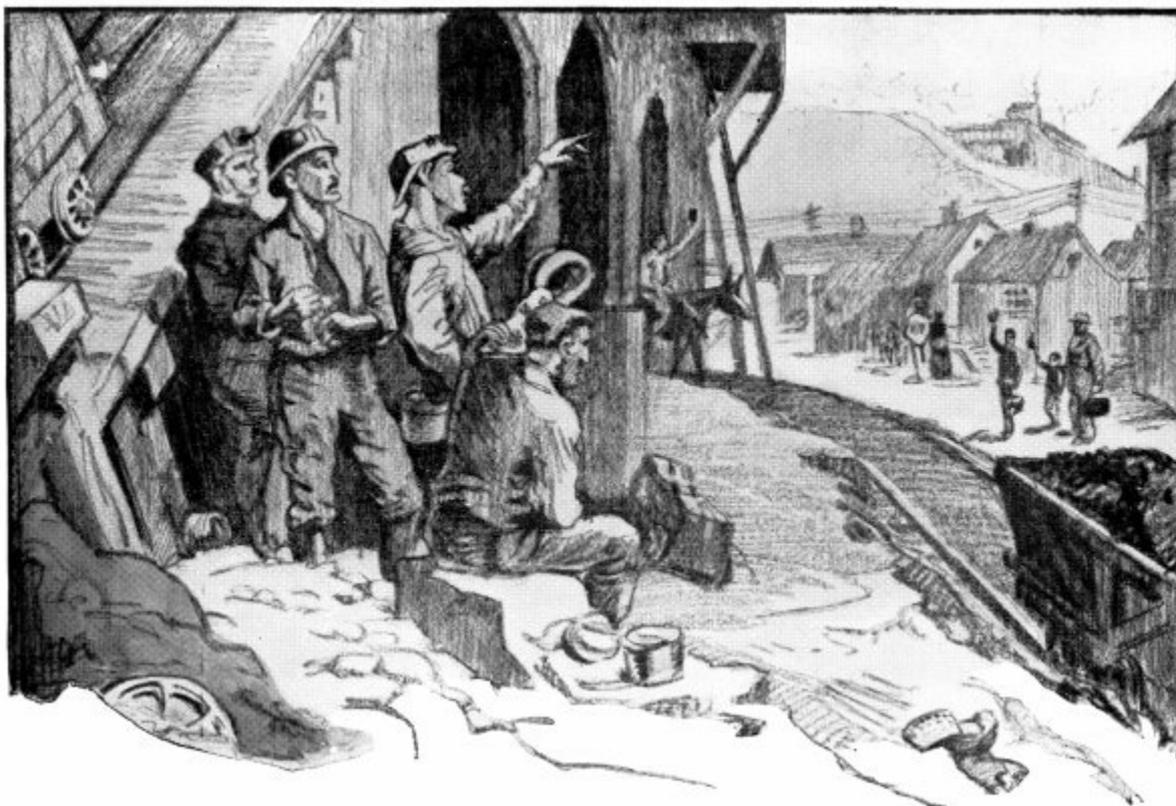
The first of October was a glorious autumn day, and even the ragged colliery village looked pretty, after a fashion, in the golden haze through which the rising sun shone down upon it.

As Derrick, and Paul, accompanied by Mrs. Sterling, Helen, the mine boss, and burly Tom Evert, walked down to the little railway-station, the miners of the day shift were gathering about the mouth of the slope, and preparing to descend into the recently pumped-out workings. From them came many a rough but honest farewell shout to the boys who had endeared themselves to all the village.

"Tak' care o' thysels, lads!" "We'll not forget ye, an' ye'll bear us in mind!" "Whene'er thee's tired o' city, coom back, an' ye'll find a welcome!" "Mind t' fire-damp i' t' city, lads, an' use naught but safeties!" "Good-by!"

As long as they were within hearing the boys, shouted back such answers as, "We'll try to!" "Thank you, Ike! We won't forget you; never fear!" "Good-by all!"

Then the train came along. A few loving words were hastily spoken, and they were off. The hard, grimy, perilous life of the breaker and the mine was left behind, and a new one of study, ambitious dreams, and successes was opening broadly before them.



GOOD-BY TO THE COLLIERY

At first the boys were inclined to feel very homesick, and their conversation was only of the dear ones whom they had just left. Gradually the feeling wore off, as their attention was attracted by the grand scenery through which they were travelling.

Paul revelled in the gorgeous coloring of the autumnal foliage which covered mountain, hill, and valley with splendid mantles of crimson and gold. As the train, following the picturesque windings of the Lehigh, crept along some mountain-side hundreds of feet above the low-lying bottom lands, his delight at the vast expanse of exquisite scenery

unfolded before them knew no bounds.

"I didn't know the world was so beautiful," he said to Derrick, with a sigh of deep content, as the vivid pictures of the grand panorama flashed rapidly by.

Derrick shared this enthusiasm, though to a less extent. He was more interested in the various forms of mining operations which were to be seen on all sides. His continued exclamations of, "Oh, Paul! look at that new breaker," or, "Isn't that a capital idea for a slope?" at last attracted the attention of a middle-aged gentleman who, with a lady, occupied the seat immediately behind them.

Finally he leaned forward, and, speaking to Derrick, said, "Excuse me; but as you seem to be familiar with mining operations, perhaps you will kindly tell me what the great black buildings, of which we now see so many, are used for?"

"Why," answered Derrick, somewhat surprised that anybody should be ignorant regarding what to him were among the commonest objects of life, "those are breakers." Then seeing that the other was still puzzled, he explained, simply and clearly, the uses of breakers, and in a few minutes found himself engaged in earnest conversation with the stranger upon mining in general, and coal mining in particular.

At last the gentleman said, "You seem to be as well informed on the subject as a miner."

"I am, or rather I have been employed in a mine until very recently," answered Derrick.

"Indeed! It must be a most interesting occupation, but I should think a very dangerous one. I have a son who visited one of these coal-mines at the time of a disaster that threatened a number of lives, and his accounts of what he saw and experienced at the time are very thrilling. It was, I believe, at a place called Raven Brook."

It was now Derrick's turn to be interested, and he said, "Why, that's where we have just come from! Raven Brook is the station at which we took the train."

"If I had known that we were to stop there," said the gentleman, "I believe my wife and I would have got off and waited over one train, for we have been very curious to see the place. We have been on a trip to the West," he added, by way of explanation, "and our son's accounts of his experience came to us by letter. Besides, we read much of that disaster in the papers."

"It was awful," said Derrick, simply.

"Then you were in the village at the time? Perhaps you know a brave young fellow named Derrick Sterling?"

A quick flush spread over the boy's face as he answered, "That is my name."

"What!" exclaimed the gentleman; "are you the young man who went back into the mine and risked his life to save a friend?"

"I expect I am," answered Derrick, with burning cheeks; "and this is the friend I went to find."

"Well, of all wonderful things!" cried the stranger. "To think that we should meet you of all persons. Wife, this is Derrick Sterling, the brave lad that Allan wrote to us about, and whose name has been so much in the papers lately."

"You don't mean to say," exclaimed Derrick, "that you are Allan McClain's father?"

"I am," answered the gentleman; "and this is his mother. We are both very proud to make the acquaintance of the Derrick Sterling of whom our boy writes that he is proud to call him friend."

Paul received an almost equal share of attention with Derrick; and during the rest of the journey their new-found friends did everything in their power to make the time pass quickly and pleasantly to them.

Both Mr. and Mrs. McClain gave the boys an urgent invitation to make their house their home, at least until they selected a boarding-place, and were greatly disappointed to learn that this was already provided for them.

Nothing could exceed Allan McClain's amazement when, upon meeting his parents at the railway-station in Philadelphia, he found them in company, and apparently upon terms of intimate acquaintance, with two of his friends from the Raven Brook Colliery. He was delighted to learn that Derrick and Paul had come to the city to live, and promised to call the next day and arrange all sorts of plans with them.

Mr. Halford, who was also at the station, was almost equally surprised to see them with the McClains, who, he afterwards told Derrick, were among the best families in the city. His carriage was at the station, and in a few minutes more the two boys, who but a short time before had been only poor colliery lads, were ushered into a handsome house,

where Mrs. Halford and Miss Nellie were waiting to give them a cordial welcome.

Two days later they were established in pleasant rooms of their own, had begun their studies, and, above all, found themselves surrounded by a circle of warm friendships.

Very nearly five years after the date of this chapter, just before sunset of a pleasant summer's day, a barge party of gay young people rowed out over the placid Schuylkill from the boat-house belonging to the University of Pennsylvania. In the stern of the barge, acting as coxswain, sat a young man of delicate frame and refined features. His pale, thoughtful face showed him to be a close student, and the crutch at his side betrayed the fact that he was a cripple.

On each side of the coxswain sat a young lady, both of whom were exchanging good-natured chaff with the merry-faced, stalwart fellow who pulled the stroke oar.

"I don't believe rowing is such hard work after all," said one of them, "though you college men do make such a fuss about your training and your practice spins. I'm sure it looks easy enough."

"You are quite right, Miss Nellie," answered the stroke; "it is awfully easy compared with some things--cramming for a final in mathematics, for instance."

"Oh, Derrick!" exclaimed the other young lady, "you can't call that hard work. I'm sure it doesn't seem as though you had spent your time anywhere but on the river for the past two months. If you can do that, and at the same time graduate number one in your class, with special mention in mathematics, the 'cramming,' as you call it, can't be so very difficult."

"All things are not what they seem," chanted Derrick. "It may be, sister Helen, that there are some things in heaven and earth not dreamt of in your philosophy, after all!"

"Oho!" laughed Nellie Halford. "*Pinafore* and Shakespeare! What a combination of wit and wisdom! It's quite worthy of a U. P. Senior."

"He's not even a U. P. Senior now," said the coxswain, from the stern of the barge. "He has gone back in the alphabet, and is only an A. B."

"An idea for your next cartoon, old man," cried Derrick. "The downfall of the Seniors, and their return to the rudimentary elements of knowledge. By-the-way, Polly," he added, more soberly, "do you remember that to-day is the anniversary of your entering upon the career of breaker-boy five years ago?"

"It is a day I never forget, Dare," answered Paul Evert, gravely, as he gazed into the handsome sun-tanned face in front of him, with a look in which affection and pride were equally blended.

THE END

A law of the State of Pennsylvania forbids the employment of boys less than twelve years old in breakers, or less than fourteen in mines. This law is not, however, strictly enforced.

Butty is the word used by miners to denote helper or partner.