

AMONGST LEAD-MINERS.



"THE CAPTAIN."

ONE of the oldest industries is that of lead, and it is thus to be found that in it and in its methods of raising and working there are customs that have not attached to newer industries, and that even in the lead trade must now be looked upon as likely soon to become obso-

lete. We may briefly indicate the facts that there is not only a fluctuating production of lead in the United Kingdom, but that large quantities are also imported. In 1885 we had a little over 51,302 tons of "dressed lead ore" produced in the United Kingdom—Durham, the Isle of Man, Northumberland, Shropshire, and Derbyshire being the chief of the producing districts. In all some 37,000 tons of metallic lead were smelted from this ore, and in addition to it there were imported 108,000 tons of pig lead and sheet lead. Of course there was a large export of lead, both of the foreign and of the home produce.

The number of lead-miners cannot be stated with exactness, but they form a very large portion of the 41,044 persons employed in and about the mines under the Metalliferous Mines Act in Great Britain and Ireland. These figures will in degree indicate the extent of this ancient industry of lead-mining in this country. But neither in the extent of the employment it affords nor in the money value is there possibility of comparison with some of the other metallurgical industries, so it is in other respects that there is the chief interest.

Lead-mining in this country is generally carried on in hilly districts—the regions of Weardale and Allandale in Durham, and the mines of Derbyshire, being examples of this, as well as some of the southern valleys of Yorkshire, and the prolific little Isle of Man. The industry is carried on under conditions which are primitive and peculiar, but which are largely owing to the industry itself, and to some of the qualities of lead.

It is well known that lead-working has its especial physical dangers, and to that are ascribable some of the conditions of labour of the lead-miner. Thus, in some of the Durham dales, the "week" of the miner includes not a given number of days, but a given number of working hours, and these are wrought in less than six days, the remaining portion of the working week being spent sometimes in sheep-tending, sometimes in cultivating a comparatively large garden, or in other out-door pursuits, which in large degree counteract the unhealthy work in the dark mine. Again, the work is often necessarily at a distance from the place of abode of the miners, and there are huts or barracks built for them near the mine, where food can be had, where rough beds are prepared, and where the short "week" of the miner may be spent. These gatherings of men sometimes required a little rule to decide as to the turn to perform cooking, and other household offices, and so in some parts the "mine shop" has its "king." Other customs similarly arise, having their effect, and all tending in the direction of making the miners a class of similar views, diverse from the community at times.

The pay of the miner has had its peculiarity. By the fathom of ground worked, or by the "bing" of lead produced, it was impossible to measure the work done by a company of miners very often, hence the wages settlements were not frequent, and there was a custom of paying a given weekly sum on account—a sum which had the graphic name of "subsistence money." With settlements thus delayed, some of the miners necessarily ran accounts long with tradesmen; and if the lead was found in less quantities than had been expected, and the settlement yielded nothing to the miner, the debt would perforce go on from time to time, and cases have been known of men who lived long and died in debt, while others have been recorded in which unexpected mining success enabled a miner

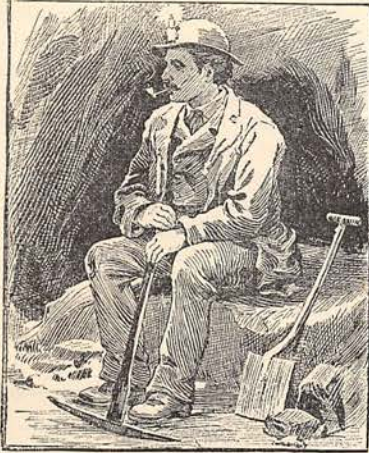
to clear off the debt of years—his own, and even that of a father. The writer has seen a shopkeeper in a mining village receive from a miner several pounds in clearance of a debt incurred years before by a step-father, who had passed away from mines and debts.

As we have said, there is comparative isolation



WASHING ORE.

of the miners owing to the nature and the location of the work, and that isolation has led to the preservation of customs that have passed away elsewhere, and led to the retention of dialects and localisms in speech. Modes of speech are quaint ; olden words are retained,



TAKING IT EASY.

and at times peculiar methods of description of individuals needed where there are many scions of similarly-named families ; and in some of the places of worship, especially when "supplied" by local preachers, there are indications of the quaintness and of the old customs. In places, the choir is still aided by fiddle and bassoon ; the preacher will employ a dialect that puzzles the unaccustomed to follow it ; and the singing has more heart than melody. But in the dales it is certain that much of the religious life is due to the efforts, unwearied and unpaid, of these local preachers. In the schools, too, often begun by the proprietors of the mines, there are the indications of the comparative poverty of some of the people, of the varying dialects, and of the patient struggle in the "hard times" that so often fall on the lead-miners ; for, of late, Spanish and American "cheap labour" have done much to ruin the lead trade, by flooding this country with lead often rich in silver, and therefore preferred to that of our own dales.

The competition with foreign lead is crushing out the antiquated and partly patriarchal life of the lead-miner in some of the dales—where the owner of the land and the minerals found homes and labour for the miners, gardens, little plots of land, "subsist money," schools. A new and a commercial spirit begins to rule ; the "buddle" is giving place ; "washing" is no longer seen in the streets and villages ; a stated wage, and one regularly paid, if very low, is taking the place of the "bargains," and co-operation is introducing cash payments into the affairs of the miners. The transitional period, with lead at a very low price, is a painful one, and though the ultimate outcome will be beneficial, yet some

will regret the change which removes the old type of lead-miner—courageous, patient, persevering, quaint, cheerful, thrifty, and religious, with his opposite qualities of stubbornness and resolute adherence. But it is a change flowing from the transfer to the commercial aspect of mining, and it is one which may in the end cause the occupiers of land in the dales to turn their attention to more productive farming, and may induce the owners of royalties to grasp less harshly the rent which they receive from the mine-owners. With a free importation of lead, there is a competition which in due time brings about changes in mining, as it does in farming and in other industries.

In the valleys where lead is produced just now there is some little improvement in the condition of the industry and in the position of the miner—an improvement ascribable to the rise in the price of lead. Last year the price of what is called "W.B." lead, after the initials of one of the great lead-miners, rose from £11 to £13, and this means much to the trade. Still in the dales there is dulness, and partial idleness ; emigration taking away the flower of the youth, and reducing the number of miners and smelters employed, and lessening the earnings of the workers. The smelting works are partially unoccupied ; stacks of lead are in the yards ; workmen know what "short time" and scanty pay means ; and shops, mines, and flues are idle and waiting for that uprisal in the demand which would give fuller work to the descendants of those who lived frugal lives and sometimes



GOING TO WORK.

had large earnings out of the mines. Whether the Spanish treaty, and the larger lead imports, will add to the probability of better times, need not be discussed in these pages.

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