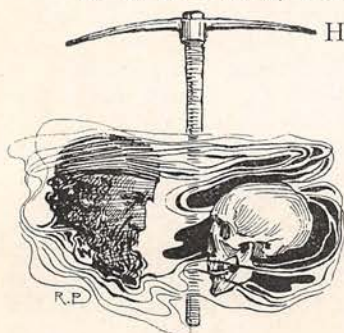


PEOPLE WHO FACE DEATH: MINERS.

BY A. E. BONSER, AUTHOR OF "THE QUEER PASSENGER'S STORY," ETC. ETC.



HERE is something fascinating in the gruesomely mysterious coal-mine. Above the great heaps of rubbish that accumulate about the pit's mouth, two gigantic

arms are seen, upon which are mounted the pulleys and wheels that carry the great wire ropes of the shaft. Around rise tall chimneys and lines of long black sheds, and winding in and out is a labyrinth of small railways, on which run trains of full or empty coal-trucks. At night the mystery is enhanced, for the scene is lighted by the flare of suspended coal crates, whilst the waste heaps of small coal and cinders burn fitfully with dull lambent flames.

Some eighteen hundred feet, perhaps, below the surface of the earth, miles of narrow passages lead in different directions. Here, in the dim light furnished by glimmering lamps, dark forms flit to and fro, and one can hear the ring of hammers, the creaking of wheels, the rushing of water, and muttered rumblings that startle the ear as they echo from passage to passage. The air is oppressive and stifling, and the position of the workers terribly constrained; what wonder that they are stunted in growth, and often in intellect?

Such men pre-eminently face death by the very nature of their occupation. Inspectors of collieries report over one thousand deaths annually, and a glance at the official list is instructive.

Comparing, for instance, the years 1867 and 1875, we find them singularly alike. In 1867, 1,190 persons perished: 286 by explosions of fire-damp, 449 by falls of ground, 211 by other subterranean causes, 156 in the shafts, and 88 above ground. In 1875, the number was 1,244: 288 by fire-damp, 458 by falls of ground, 227 by other subterranean causes, 172 in the shafts, and 99 on the surface.

The most appalling accident that has ever happened, perhaps, was that at the Oaks Colliery, Barnsley, where, by an explosion of fire-damp on the 12th December, 1866, 361 lives were lost. In the same year, and from the same cause, 91 persons perished at Talk-o'-th'Hill Colliery.

On the occasion of an explosion it is not always the fire-damp that kills, but the choke-damp that follows it, caused by the carbon or the inflammable gas uniting with the oxygen of the air to produce carbonic acid gas.

Here there is a double chance of death, either by burning or by suffocation.

It goes without saying that fiery mines are the most dangerous, and it not unseldom happens that if once a mine catches light, it goes on burning for years, and cannot be extinguished.

In Staffordshire there are such mines, for example; and in Saxony there is a mine that was on fire in the fifteenth century, and is burning still.

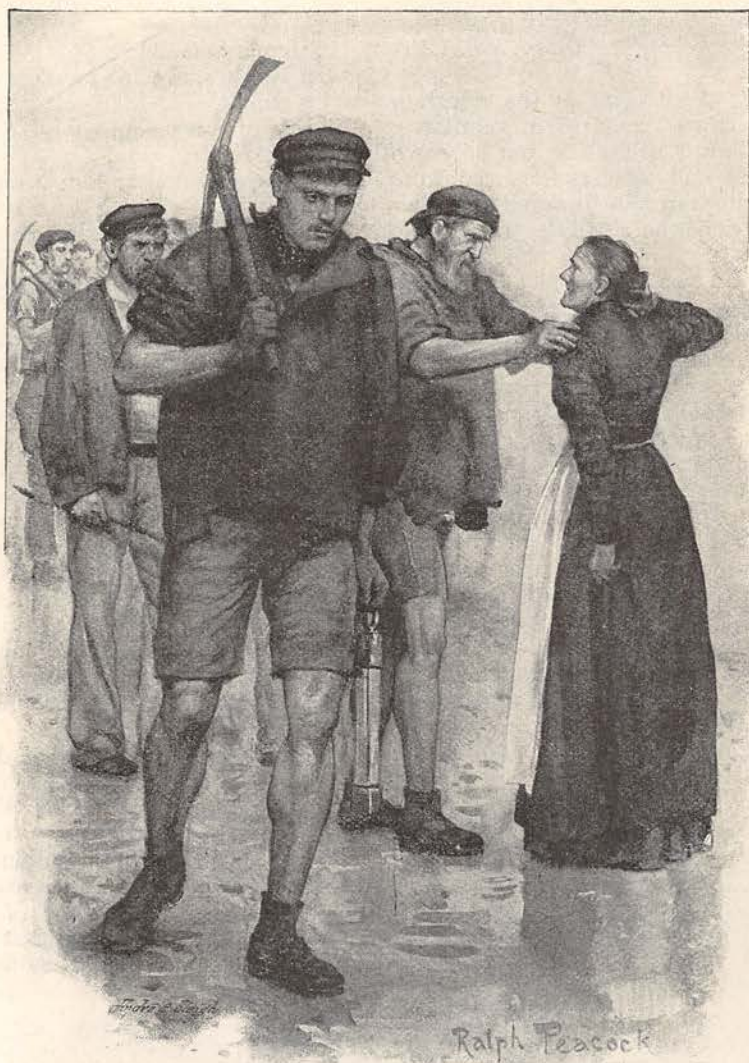
It sometimes happens that the very means devised to ensure the miner's safety works his destruction. Here is an instance:—

In most collieries only one shaft is employed, and this is sub-divided into two, three, or four compartments by wooden or brick partitions. These are used for the passage of the men up or down, for bringing the coal to the surface, for ventilating the mine, and for draining it by means of engine-pumps. From some pits upwards of 3,000 gallons of water per minute have been pumped; so it can easily be understood that the engines used are of enormous power, and the pumps gigantic.

At the Hartley Colliery, in the county of Northumberland, one of these huge pumps was employed, and on the morning of January 16th, 1862, its great beam of cast iron, projecting over the mouth of the pit shaft, suddenly snapped asunder. It weighed forty tons, and as it fell bodily down the shaft it tore away the partitions, and carried with it an immense quantity of stones, earth, and rubbish. Five miners who were being drawn up were hurled from the cage and precipitated to the bottom, and the two hundred men and boys at work below seemed consigned to a living tomb.

Any help, to be effectual, must be speedily rendered, and so not a moment was lost in commencing the herculean task of clearing the shaft. The space was so confined that few men could work at a time; but they persevered, and when one set were tired, another took their place.

At daybreak a crowd of anxious relatives gathered at the pit's mouth, and the news was soon spread about that the prisoners were alive, for those at work could hear them



"NO NEED TO ASK THE NEWS" (p. 274).

knocking and shouting. The efforts put forth were redoubled, but the sun went down, and the progress made seemed indeed infinitesimal.

Very early in the morning eager questioners learned that knocking and shouts could still be heard. Many a despairing wife and mother took heart afresh, and did her best to cheer up others, for all that it was possible to do was being done, and, as they said, "whilst there is life there is hope." Still, the progress made was terribly slow, and the most sanguine found themselves unconsciously debating: Was it likely that the imprisoned men could hold out long enough?

Not a breath of fresh air could reach them; ventilation was absolutely stopped; the

deadly gas must be slowly, but surely, accumulating, and there was no other exit save the choked-up shaft.

A third day dawned; the anxiety was terribly accentuated; the excited crowd could scarcely be restrained. Alas! the shouts and knocking had ceased. It was argued that the imprisoned men might be only unconscious or too weak to make themselves heard; there was still a hope: but it was a forlorn hope, at best, and waned with the waning day. Yet it was hard to believe it possible that they could be dead who so lately were full of lusty life, and so the rescuers worked on desperately.

On Wednesday there came a message from

Osborne: "The Queen is most anxious to hear that there are hopes of saving the poor people in the colliery, for whom her heart bleeds."

Shortly after the receipt of the telegram the shaft was cleared and partly ventilated. There was no lack of volunteers, but only two of the strongest and most experienced were chosen, and were carefully lowered on their dangerous mission, the risk lying in possible foul air.

For those who were gathered at the pit's mouth the suspense was indeed trying; but though the result was pretty much a foregone conclusion, it came as a terrible shock. No need to ask the news when the two men regained the surface *alone*: their blanched faces were quite enough; they had seen the dead, but never a living soul. The entombed miners had got as near as they could to the bottom of the shaft, and there they lay as death overtook them.

Some had evidently died in great suffering—others had a calm and peaceful expression on their faces. Relatives had clustered near together, boys lay close to their fathers; united they had prayed, and watched and waited in an agony of suspense for the aid that only reached them too late—alas! too late.

On a tin box belonging to one of the

men the words were found scratched with a nail—

"Mercy, O God!"

On another, the last message of a husband to his wife—

"Friday afternoon. My dear Sarah, I leave you."

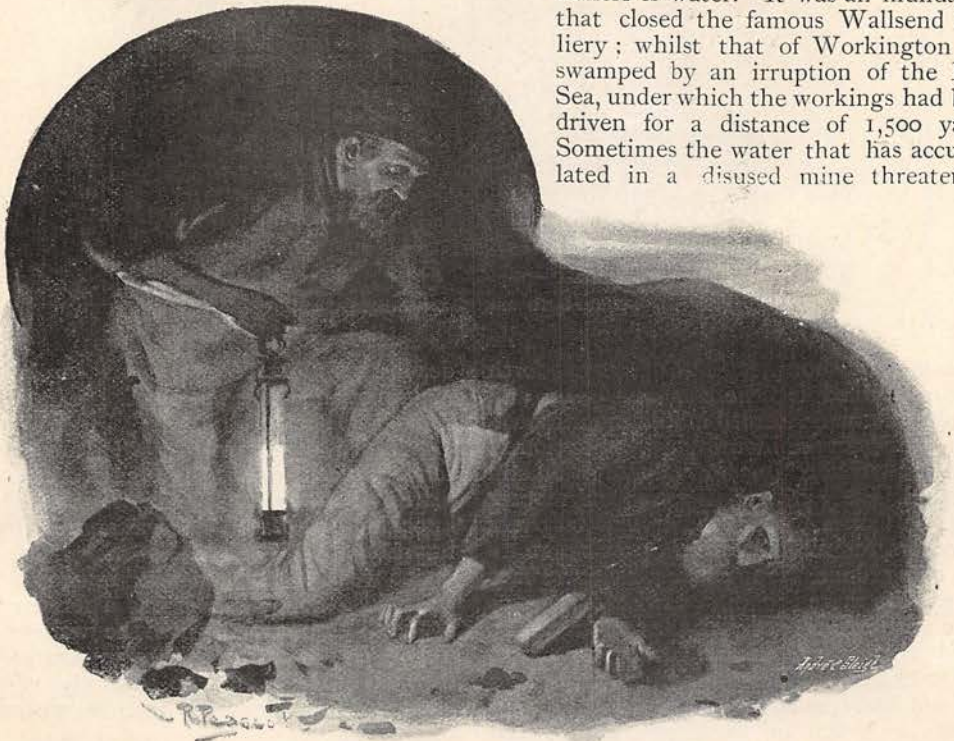
In a small memorandum book these words were pencilled—

"Friday afternoon, at half-past one, Edward Armstrong, Thomas Elden, John Harding, Thomas Bell, and others, took extremely ill. We also held a prayer-meeting at a quarter to two, when Tibbs, Henry Sharp, J. Campbell, Henry Gibson, William Palmer prayed. Tibbs exhorted to us again—H. Sharp also."

Unspeakably distressing were the scenes that followed—the discovery of the bodies, the identification of them as they came to light.

Of the male population employed at the colliery, but twenty-five remained alive; and by the accident one hundred and three wives became widows, and two hundred and fifty-seven children were left fatherless. The funeral procession extended for three miles, and was witnessed by thousands, for it was indeed felt to be a national calamity, and called forth universal sympathy.

A more merciful agent of destruction to miners is water. It was an inundation that closed the famous Wallsend Colliery; whilst that of Workington was swamped by an irruption of the Irish Sea, under which the workings had been driven for a distance of 1,500 yards. Sometimes the water that has accumulated in a disused mine threatens a

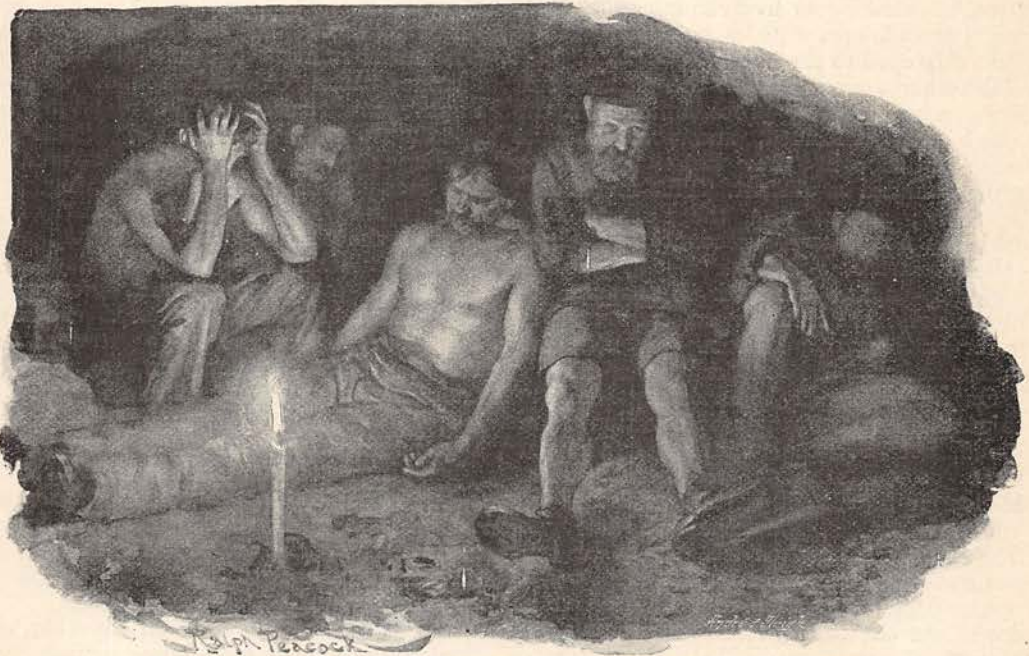


"ON A TIN BOX THE WORDS WERE FOUND SCRATCHED—'MERCY, O GOD!'"

neighbouring colliery with destruction. This sudden influx of water causes a tremendous compression of the air, so that anyone exposed to its effects may die of suffocation or cerebral congestion, even if he escapes death by drowning.

At Pontypridd, in the mining district of

cut off, five occupied a slight rise somewhat near to the shaft, where, powerless to help themselves, they awaited the approach of death. Every now and then they would descend a few paces, in the faint hope that the flood might have receded; but the feeble glimmer of their lamps was only reflected



"EIGHT DAYS THE FIVE HAD LISTENED, AND LONGED FOR RELIEF" (p. 276).

Glamorganshire, is an old worked-out mine, called the Cymner. It had been closed for many years, and during that time a vast quantity of water had collected in it. A new mine had been opened near by, and the workings—which were deeper—had been carried perilously close to those of the old.

On Wednesday, April 11th, 1877, the miners were at work as usual, when suddenly, between four and five o'clock in the afternoon, a tremendous noise was heard. The alarm of "Fire-damp!" was raised; but this was contradicted by one of the hands.

"No," said he; "it is not fire, but water. Cymner pit has broken in; it is all over with us!"

The surmise as to the nature of the accident was correct; but, fortunately, the greater number of the men had just time to reach the shaft and escape to the surface. Fourteen, however, were discovered to be missing, and the gravest fears were entertained for their safety, as most of the galleries were filled with water from floor to roof.

Among those who were thus completely

in fitful flashes from a murky pool, that hour by hour slowly, but surely, rose, and lapped the floor of the narrow gallery in which they were confined.

These men—like many of their Welsh brethren—were deeply religious, and so, after taking an affectionate leave of each other, they joined in singing a hymn, of which the following is a rough translation:—

"In the deep and mighty waters
No human help is nigh,
So to Jesus Christ, my saviour,
In my dire distress I fly;
He, my Friend, in death's dark river
Holds up my fainting head;
With His smile I pass rejoicing
Through the regions of the dead."

They had hardly finished singing when they heard the tapping of a party of men who had descended the mine to attempt the rescue of any who might be still alive. Hearing voices, they had begun to cut the coal in the direction of the sound. The imprisoned men took heart, and handling their picks, also began to cut the coal in the direction of their friends. They had the

greater hope as the water had now somewhat subsided.

About five o'clock on Thursday morning the remaining coal barrier was pierced, but at once there was so tremendous a rush of compressed air that one of the five was jammed in the hole with such force as to kill him instantly. It was not until eight o'clock at night that his four living companions were rescued, and, in a state of great exhaustion, were conveyed to the surface.

Whether anyone else in the pit were still living was extremely problematical, but the search was continued, and some of the explorers thought they heard knockings, which sounded far distant. This might only be fancy; at any rate, the hearers could approach no nearer, on account of the depth of the water. Wherever it was possible, pumping-engines were set up that worked unceasingly, but though 20,000 gallons of water an hour were taken out, little impression seemed to be made.

On the fourth day some divers attempted to penetrate in the supposed direction of the sound, but they could get no farther than some 500 feet, so much were they imperilled by floating timber and other obstacles.

Sunday dawned, and knockings were again heard about a hundred feet off—as was conjectured—and the water by this time was so much reduced that six men volunteered to go down and cut through the intervening wall of coal. They were divided into parties of four, and relieved each other every three hours, and by Thursday, the eighth day, they had cut so far that they could hear the knocks plainly, and by-and-by a voice, telling them to work more to the right.

To obviate as far as possible a repetition of the first disaster, a series of air-tight doors were fixed up, so that when communication should be made, the risk of an explosion from the compressed air would be considerably lessened. Some doctors, too, were with the party of rescue, and they had prepared tubes to convey warm milk, beef-tea, and arrowroot to the starving prisoners.

At last a small hole was made through the remaining wall of coal. A violent blast of air was the result, but when this had subsided the question was asked—

"How many are you?"

"Five," was the reply; "two of us very ill."

"Have you any light?"

"No."

"Can you cut the coal?"

"No, we can't; we are too weak. We are starving. Oh, make haste!"

As the rescuers approached, the compressed air found vent with violent explosions; and

as the pressure was removed, the water rose where the poor men were imprisoned, and by-and-by one of them was heard to say, "We are up to our middle in water"; and a little later, "It is almost all over with us!"

But now, just when help seemed assured, there was such a rush of gas that the explorers and doctors had to hastily extinguish their lights and run for their lives. On being raised to the surface, the scene that ensued was heartrending. The relatives of the imprisoned men crowded round, well-nigh frantic with anxiety. "Where is my husband?" "Where is my son?" Such were the eager questions, so hard to answer. It was indeed disappointing that, having got so near, in the very moment of success the brave attempt should fail. Eight days the five had listened, and longed for relief. They had no provisions, as was afterwards ascertained; their stock of candles was soon exhausted, and there was only the tallow-grease on their empty candle-boxes for food, and for drink the filthy water. It was found that in their half-naked condition they had huddled together for warmth in an empty coal-truck. There, in that narrow space, threatened with death, either by drowning, by explosive gas, by cold, or by starvation, they had bravely awaited the approach of their friends, and were then abandoned to despair amid the increasing horrors of their situation.

It was not until the tenth day that, on a final attempt being made, the remaining wall of coal was completely demolished, and one of the explorers crept through the hole. He groped about in the darkness, but as he could find no one, the worst fears seemed confirmed that all had miserably perished.

"Do not be afraid," he said in awestruck accents.

What was his surprise to hear a feeble voice reply—

"All right; we are not afraid."

And then an arm was round his neck, and his cheeks were fervently kissed, whilst, in broken voices, the men expressed their heartfelt thanks for their great deliverance.

Back through the long narrow tunnel, back from the very jaws of death, the poor fellows were carried. They were raised with care to the surface of the earth once more, tenderly placed on stretchers, and conveyed to the hospital that had meanwhile been improvised. With skilful nursing they eventually recovered, and were restored to their joyful families, being scarcely able to credit their wonderful escape.

Of the four miners still remaining, nothing was ever heard, for they were far beyond the hope of rescue.