

# THE PITMAN.

*THE ROMANCE OF HIS TOIL.*

ON a winter's night, when the wind is howling around the house, or the snow drifting against the window-pane, it is the custom of the fortunate man to draw his easy-chair nearer the cosy hearth, and to thank God for a good fire. In a condition of bliss he toasts his toes, smokes his pipe, and indulges in retrospect. He sees faces in the fire, and memories of joyous youth and successful manhood absorb him in pleasant reverie. Or perhaps he indulges in conjecture, with his children, as to the object of the visit of the sooty stranger on the bar, or wonders whether the bit of coke flung out of the red glow and leaping flame is a coffin or a jewel-casket. It is possible he may turn aside from these homely pleasures to contrast his expenditure with his income, and grumble, especially if he resides in town, at the enormous amount of his coal bill; but he never gives a thought to the daring toil and peril that have made the house fire possible.

Yet the coal, be it hand-picked, nuts, or

cobbles, that groups within the grate and sends out blue or golden flame, heat and life, has not been brought from its deep hiding-place in the earth's crust without much enterprise and adventure. The log fire in the old English home has become a tradition, worked up now and again in Christmas story; still, for years before the wood fire was discarded by the humblehouseholder, coal was known and used by the rich as fuel. If the historian is to be believed, there were coal-miners in China two hundred years before the birth of Christ; and centuries back the monks of Beauchief dug for coal in East Derbyshire pits. The shrewd freeman of Newcastle entered upon the same industry in the reign of Henry III.; and not long since

the workings of an ancient coal-mine were discovered at Howburn, near Morpeth. Here, one hundred yards beneath the surface, with crude implements, and without any scientific system of ventilation, the colliers of the time delved fearlessly, and the coal was hauled from



*Photo by Seaman, Chesterfield.*

THE AUTHOR AS A PITMAN.



the workings in tubs and on sledges to the pit bank.

The early scratching for coal on the surface of the land, and the primitive working of coal in crude pits by old-fashioned iron pick, wooden shovel, and the hauling of fuel by the patient barrowman, have been superseded by a skilful and systematic industry that employs in this kingdom alone no fewer than 650,000 miners, and yields 190,000,000 tons of coal per year; but the industry has not developed without many a fight against prejudice and greed.

In 1661, the citizens of London were very angry at the more general use of the hideous fuel, forwarding a memorial to the Crown, in which they gravely stated: "This coal flies abroad, fouling the clothes that are a-drying on the hedges. Being thus incorporated with the very air that ministers to the necessary respiration of our lungs, we find it in all our expectorations, being for the most part of a blackish and fuliginous colour. It comes in time to exulcerate the lungs, when a mischief is produced so incurable that it carries away multitudes by languishing and deep consumption." Notwithstanding these dire effects and the sardonic eagerness with which live coal lends itself as a helper to London fog, mining has increased. In the beginning of this century coal was not only used for the house fire, but in the factory, and later in locomotive and steam-ship. The capitalist found that he had discovered a gold-mine in the recesses of the pit, and he worked chiefly with only one object—the acquisition of wealth.

Women as well as men crowded into the workings with oath and ribald jest, and toiled, nearly naked, and not ashamed. The hurriers, mostly girls, who pushed or dragged the loaded corves from the coal-face to the horse-track, were literally beasts of burden. The mode of working was ingeniously described by one of the Yorkshire pit-girls, examined before the Mining Commission in 1841. She said: "When the corve is loaded, one of us is harnessed with a belt round the waist, and a chain comes from the front of the belt and

passes betwixt our legs, and is hooked on to the corve, and we go along on our hands and feet on all fours." Youths and young women, so far as they were attired at all, were naked to the waist and wore loose trousers; but in some of the pits adult miners, whom the female hurriers assisted, worked perfectly naked. Purity and modesty were mere phrases, and education had scarcely touched the mining population, for this remarkable statement was made by Ann Eggle, aged eighteen, a hurrier: "I never heard of Christ at all. Nobody ever told me about Him"; and another girl said: "Jesus was Adam's son, and they nailed Him to a tree."

The revelations of colliery life were so revolting that in 1842 the Legislature passed an Act making it unlawful for females to work in pits; but Parliament did not prohibit them altogether from colliery working. They were driven from bank and underground way to the surface, and one of the most picturesque sights in English industrial life to-day is afforded at Wigan, where the muscular pit-brow lasses, dressed in tightly fitting pitman's cap, jacket, or short skirt, well-patched moleskin trousers, and Lancashire clogs, twirl the laden corves on the pit bank and unload them with dexterous strength. These women make a pleasant contrast to the degraded creatures who worked in the mines half a century ago. They are healthy, cleanly, and thrifty; and they have considerable determination of character. Nine years ago an attempt was made in the House of Commons to deprive the pit-brow women of Lancashire, Wales, and Scotland of their toil, on the plea that it was unwomanly and inimical to home life; but the stalwart females laughed the suggested amendment to scorn. They put many a touch of bright colour to their pit-brow dress, and came to town, with ruddy faces and quaint dialect, to cajole the Parliament men; and they interviewed the then Home Secretary with such rough grace, earnestness, and sincerity, pointing out the hardship they would suffer if prevented from pursuing their employment, that he



became their champion, frankly admitting that they were industrious, well-conducted, and even a noble class of women.

The male collier has also improved. There is a common notion that even when in holiday attire, which generally consists of dark blue pea-jacket, checked trousers, muffler, and cap, he is a being apart from ordinary society; but the notion is a mistaken one. The miner may be seldom seen, or identified, south of the Black Country; but he is a power in the

more sober, and more thrifty. Education, easier access to literature, and the expansion of political thought, have all tended to raise him from a mere pick-wielder and drink-consumer to a thoughtful, responsible being, with higher aim than the satisfaction of gross appetite. The better conditions under which he works in the mine have also benefited him physically and morally. The interior of a pit is at the best a gruesome subterranean workshop, with possibilities of three perils—the



HOW SOME WOMEN WORK IN LANCASHIRE.

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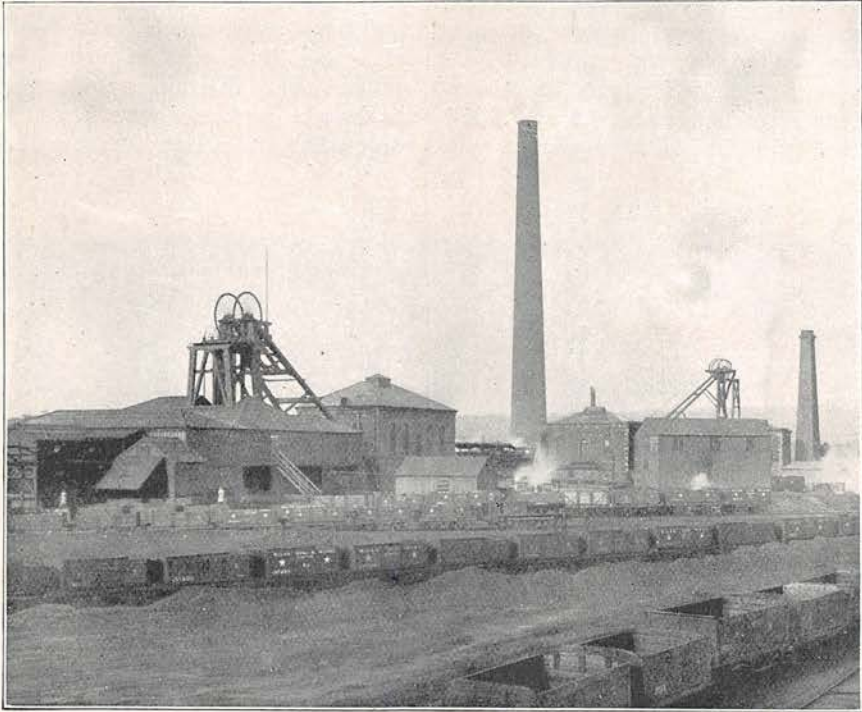
Midlands, Wales, and the North, and is a very different person from the coal-getter of half a century ago. He is not so thirsty as his progenitor, and not by any means so frequently drunk. He is not so passionately fond of coursing, pigeon-flying, pitch-and-toss, knur and spell, wrestling, and pugilistic encounter. He is less brutal in many ways. There are occasionally scenes of week-end dissipation in the mining villages; but the home and social life of the collier shows distinct and gratifying reform.

He is in the main more self-respecting,

fall of bind, the fierce explosion, and the sudden inrush of water. It can never be an attractive place of employment, like the snug and luxuriously furnished office of the Government clerk; but the risk of death in it is not quite so great as of yore. Science has improved the ventilation of the mine, and given the collier a more efficient safety-lamp. In some mines he has the advantage of quick conveyance to his toil, and swift method of transit of coal to the surface. The telephone and the electric light have been introduced for his additional security and convenience;

but he detests the innovation grimly called "The Iron Man." The hatred of the compositor to the type-setting machine is mild in comparison to the collier's rage

one of his first captains. Then, as crises arose, a host of mining leaders worked their way stolidly to the front, perhaps the most notable being Thomas Burt, Sam



A BURY PIT BANK.

*Photograph by permission of the Wigan Coal and Iron Company, Limited.*

at the coal-getting machine, and he growls ominously when it is suggested that the electric transmission of power into the farthest recesses of the mine will ultimately bring coal-getting machinery into general use and rob him of his occupation. Not even the prospect of worked-out coal-fields in some parts of the North perturbs him so much as this threat from scientific invention.

The miner still believes that force is the best remedy for hardship and wrong, but only in extremity does he resort to physical demonstration of his belief. The trade union is the weapon with which he fights his way through the opposing force of capital, and he is led by remarkable men. Macdonald, with his striking garb and peculiarities of pronunciation, was

Woods, and Ben Pickard, men of great resource, and the last conspicuous for his strength of will and dogged pertinacity.

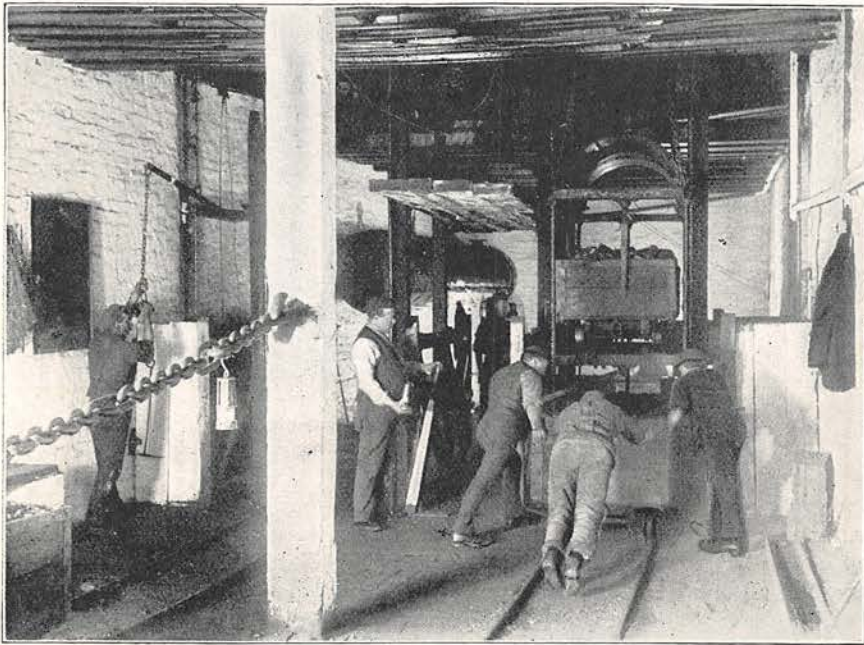
Normansell has a vivid place in memory for the part he took in the strike of the Thorncliffe miners in 1870, with its fierce accompaniment of riot and siege; but Ben Pickard was the mining Bismarck during the gigantic struggle several years ago. Like Thomas Burt, he has done good work in Parliament; but it is in conference with the masters that he shows the most indomitable spirit. He never swerves from his position. He has a stubborn answer to every argument, and he smiles at the capitalist's plea that he cannot work his pits at a profit, for Ben Pickard's political economy is altogether averse from the proposition. His creed is that



miners' wages should govern prices. Strong in this faith, he became a remarkable figure in the struggle. All through the privation, riot, bloodshed, and paralysis of trade, he never lost sight of his purpose. The life and death of the Conciliation Board did something towards its achievement, and he is determined to secure for the miners a living wage.

The collier is seldom a humorist. At the beginning of his career, when he is an irresponsible pit lad, he is full of frolic, a mischievous young scamp; but his experience in the mine soon sobers him. The early hour at which he rises, the lonely trail along the main road of the pit, the work in the imperfect light, and the daily association with the taciturn coal-hewers, tend to make him prematurely old. He has practically no youth. One day he

to work. He has a good opinion of himself. He knows that he contributes to the country's prosperity and happiness, that without the fuel he picks trade would stagnate and the fireside become a travesty; but he derives little enjoyment from his mile trot, with bent back, by prop and brattice to his working-place. Whether he hews the coal by the pillar system, cutting the coal into blocks or pillars, and gradually working them out; or whether by the long-wall system, removing the whole of the coal as he advances, picking his way through the seam, his work is sombre and solitary. He indulges, perhaps, in a laconic remark to the muscular toiler who, with wedge and sledge-hammer, breaks the great lumps as they fall; he may soliloquise in strong language on the stifling heat in the heading as he wipes the



AT THE BOTTOM OF THE SHAFT.

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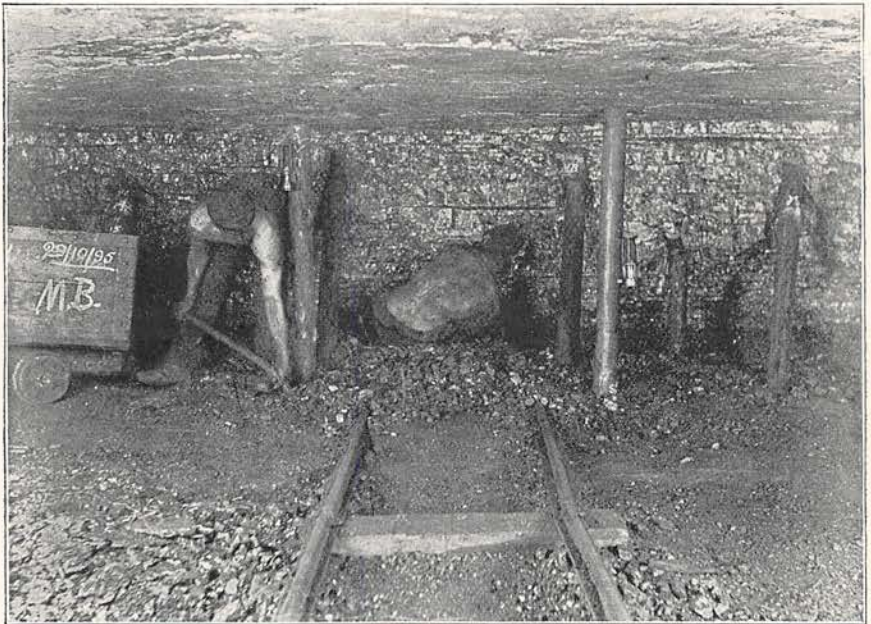
romps like a kitten in the flickering light of the safety-lamp in the hurrying corve. The next, as it were, he strides with deeply lined face, and with his lamp and tea-can slung on his belt, silent or monosyllabic,

dust and sweat off his naked breast. But he does not waste much time in idle gossip. He works on with dogged persistence till the hour comes for his snap, or forenoon drinking. Even then he says



little as he sits on coal slab or corve-rim. He is too busy with his luncheon—bread and bacon, or bread and cheese, washed down with copious swigs of cold tea, facetiously styled “Wigan ale” or “Silkstone stingo”—to talk much. He never becomes garrulous even in the afternoon, when his day’s work is done, and he has had his bath and his dinner, and sits with his mates on his haunches, miner fashion, on the curbstone in the village market-place, contentedly pulling at his pipe. He

quietly observed, “Weh; if Ar’ve damaged t’ engine Ar’m ready to pay for it!” Another collier, riding in a third-class compartment, with his face black as a negro minstrel’s with coal-dust, persisted in keeping the windows up, remarking to an irate passenger: “If thah wants to tak’ a chill, thah’d better tak’ it in another carriage. Ar rayther fancy thah wants to spile us complex-shuns.” But perhaps the most humorous incident comes from Lancashire. A



WHEN THE SAFETY LAMPS GLEAM.

*Photograph by permission of the Wigan Coal and Iron Company, Limited.*

may make a stray comment on pigeon-flying, or dog-racing, or football, or his wages, or the latest policy of his mining leader; but, as a writer who knows the English collier well has remarked, “The mere rest from physical toil is a pleasure, and his satisfaction is written on his face.” As a rule it is when he is away from pit environment that his rare humour reveals itself. For instance, the story is told that during the prosperous era in the coal trade in 1874 a miner, strolling on the railway, was knocked down an embankment by a locomotive, and on recovering consciousness,

Radcliffe miner, watching the late Bishop Fraser swing down the street, said to a mate: “Eh, mon, yon’s a gradely Bishop. What a chap he’d be for a hup-and-deawn foight!”

The miner’s humour, like the light from his safety-lamp, merely flickers in the hard and dull monotony of his daily toil; but, notwithstanding education, superstition pulsates and creeps strongly within him. The sailor will not go to sea with a mate who possesses a white-handled knife. The pitman, if he meets a woman on his way to work, growls at his ill-luck,



and probably turns on his way homeward, for he dare not descend the shaft. Though brave as a crusader in actual disaster, he is often nervous in the pit. In mining class and at popular lecture he has obtained some knowledge of the formation of coal and the action of various gases in the mine; nevertheless, the seething movement in the seam, the sweep of wind across the wet breast of the stony "fault," the crack of timber bearing, like Atlas, the weight of the earth above him, are sufficient to make him start, and lean on his pick intently listening. There is in Wales a haunted pit. A strange figure, it is said, has been seen stalking through the underground ways; and sometimes the miners are so terrified by the mysterious knockings in unworkable places in the mine that they fling down their picks, and hastily retreat, not daring for that day at least to resume their toil. It is the deeply rooted conviction of the miner when an explosion does occur that misfortunes never come singly. The colliers at other pits in the vicinity immediately cease their toil, and make their way to the scene of the catastrophe, some pitman perhaps remarking, "None on us likes to work after such ado as this. It's much if we don't lake [idle] to-morrow as well."

Whatever the miner's faults and follies—his swagger, obstinacy, and lingering brutality—he is a hero in the presence of colliery disaster. In the dark ways of the mine, when struggling for his own life against the insidious power of the after-damp, or the wild rush of subterranean torrent, or the hot blast of air and smoke from seam on fire, he will forget his own peril, and show marvellous courage and

endurance in the rescue of his mate. Men as brave as Plimmer, of Normanton Common, abound in the mining districts. He was caught in the explosion in the Silkstone pit, and when crawling, injured and dazed, along the main road, buckled a comrade to his belt, and dragged him through the darkness, over the bodies of the dead, to the bottom of the shaft. Cool and daring, the miner is always eager at rescue. There is no nobler story in mining history than that of the explorers in the Oaks Colliery, when Parkin Jeffcock and his brave band, pushing onward through the wrecked road thick with sulphurous gas, perished by the second outburst which filled the mine with fire! Often clumsy in gait, uncouth in form, repellent in manner, there is in the truest heroism which he reveals a fascinating side to the miner's character; and considering the innumerable risks of his calling, his readiness to carry his life in his hands for the succour of those in peril, and the home and trade benefit of his toil, he is entitled not only to reasonable hours of labour and equitable payment, but to the sympathy, if not always to the admiration, of mankind. Anyhow, his ambition keeps pace with his evolution. Formerly, his highest aspiration was to become the village publican. Now he strives for the responsible position of colliery manager, or becomes the leader of the men, and enters Parliament. There is, in fact, in this democratic age no limit to the possibilities of his career; and those who are inclined to hold him in contempt and to scoff at his erratic ways and failings should remember that there is a good deal of truth in the famous saying: "A live collier is better than a dead Cardinal." JOHN PENDLETON.