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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK SON PHILIP ***

George Manville Fenn

"Son Philip"

Chapter One.

Their Boy.

"Well, why not be a soldier?"

Philip Hexton shook his head.

"No, father. There's something very brave in a soldier's career; but I should like to save life, not destroy it."

"You would save life in times of trouble; fight for your country, and that sort of thing."

"No, father; I shall not be a soldier."

"A sailor, then?"

"I have not sufficient love of adventure, father."

"Oh no, my boy, don't be a sailor," said Mrs Hexton piteously. "I have had sufferings enough over your father's risks in the mine."

"No, no, Phil; you must not be a sailor," said sturdy, grey-haired old Hexton, laughing. "I should never get a wink of sleep if you did. Every time the wind blew your mother would be waking me up to ask me if I didn't think you were wrecked."

"No, dear; I shall not be a sailor," said Philip Hexton; and leaving his chair at the breakfast table he went round to his mother's side, sank down on one knee, passed his arm around her, and drew her to his broad breast.

It was a pleasant sight to see the look of pride come into the mother's face, as she laid one hand upon her son's shoulder, and pressed a few loose strands of hair away from his thoughtful forehead, which wrinkled slightly, and there was a look of anxiety in his face as he looked tenderly at the loving woman.

"That's right, Phil dear," she said; "don't choose any life that is full of risks."

"Don't try to make a milksop of him, mother," said Mr Hexton, laughing. "Why, one would think Phil was ten years old, instead of twenty. I say, my boy, had she aired your night-cap for you last night, and warmed the bed?"

"Well, I must confess to the warm bed, father," said the young man. "A night-cap I never wear."

"I thought so," said Mr Hexton, chuckling. "You must not stop at home, Phil. She'll want you to have camomile tea three times a week."

"You may joke as much as you like, Hexton," said his wife, bridling, "but no one shall ever say that I put anybody into a damp bed; and as for the camomile tea, many a time has it given you health when you have been ailing."

"Why, you don't think I ever took any of the stuff you left out for me, do you?"

"Of course, dear."

"Never took a glass of it," said Old Hexton, chuckling. "Threw it all out of the window."

"Then it was a great shame," said Mrs Hexton angrily, "and a very bad example to set to your son."

"Never mind, Phil; don't you take it," chuckled Mr Hexton. Then becoming serious he went on: "Well, there's no hurry, my boy; only now that you are back from Germany, and can talk High Dutch and Low Dutch, and French, and all the rest of it, why it is getting time to settle what you are to do. I could allow you so much a year, and let you be a gentleman, with nothing to do, if I liked; but I don't hold with a young fellow going through life and being of no use—only a tailor's dummy to wear fine clothes."

"Oh no, father; I mean to take to a business life," said Philip Hexton quickly.

"Of course, my lad; and you'll do well in it. I began life in a pair of ragged breeches that didn't fit me, shoving the corves of coal in a mine; and now," he exclaimed proudly, "I'm partner as well as manager in our pit. So what I say is, if I could do what I have done, beginning life in a pair of ragged breeches that didn't fit me, why, what can my boy do, as has had a first-class education, and can have money to back him?"

"My dear James," said Mrs Hexton, "I do wish you would not be so fond of talking about those—those—"

"Ragged breeches, mother?" said the old fellow, chuckling; "but I will. That's her pride, Phil, my boy. Now she wears caps made of real lace, she wants to forget how humble she used to be."

"Nothing of the kind, James," said the pleasant lady tartly; "I'm not ashamed of our humble beginnings, but I am ashamed to make vulgar remarks."

"That's a knock-down, Phil, my boy," said Mr Hexton. "There, I won't mention them again, mother. But come, we are running away from our subject. I'm heartily glad to see you back, Phil," he cried; and there was a little moisture gathered in his eyes as he spoke; "and I thank God to see that you have grown into so fine, healthy, and sturdy a fellow. God bless you, my boy! God bless you!"

He had left his seat at the foot of the table, and came round to stand beside his son, patting his shoulder, and then taking and wringing his hand. He half bent down, too, once, as if to kiss the broad sunburnt forehead, but altered his mind directly, as he thought it would be weak, and ended by going and sitting down once more.

"There's plenty of time, of course," he said, "but somehow I shouldn't dislike to have it settled. Have you ever thought about the matter, Phil?"

"Yes, father, deeply," said the young man, rising, and then standing holding his mother's hand. "I like sport, and games, and a bit of idleness sometimes, especially for a Continental trip."

"Well, if you call that idleness, Phil," said the elder, rubbing his legs, "give me the hardest day's work in the pit. Remember our climbing up the Gummy Pass, mother, last year?"

"Oh, don't talk about it, father," said the old lady. "But then we are not so young as we used to be. Go on, Philip, my dear."

She held on tightly by her son's hand as she spoke, and kept gazing up at him with a wonderfully proud look.

"Well, father, as I say, I like a bit of change."

"Of course, my lad; all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy."

"But I think it is the duty of every young man—boy, if you like, mother," he said, smiling.

"Young man, Philip," she replied, "for I'm sure you've grown into a very fine young man."

"Ugly as possible," growled the father, with a twinkle in his eye.

"I'm sure he's a much finer and handsomer young man than you were when I married you, father!" said the old lady with spirit.

"Oh, of course!" chuckled Mr Hexton; "he's lovely! Phil, boy, pray use scented soap and plenty of pomatum."

"Come, father, let's set aside joking for the time," said Philip quietly. "I'm very glad to get home again, and to find my mother so proud and happy to have me back—and you, too, sir."

Mr Hexton nodded, and changed his position a little.

"You want to know what I mean to settle to be, sir?"

"Yes, my boy; I should like to know."

"Well, father, I'll tell you, for I have thought of it long and deeply, and I have studied chemistry a good deal for that end."

"Bravo, Phil!" said Mr Hexton. "A doctor, mother; I thought as much."

"No, sir, not a doctor; though I think a medical man's a grand profession, and one only yet in its infancy. But I want to be of some use, father, in my career. I want to save life as a medical man does. You know the old saying, father?"

"About getting the wrong pig by the ear, as I did?"

"No, sir; about prevention being better than cure."

"Yes, my boy; but what are you going to prevent instead of cure?"

"I want to prevent so much loss of life in our coal-pits, father."

"Oh, my boy, my boy," cried Mrs Hexton passionately; "don't say you want to take up your father's life!"

"Why not, mother dear?" said the young man firmly; "would it not be a good and a useful life, to devote one's self to the better management of our mines—to studying nature's forces, and the best way of fighting them for the saving of life?"

"But, my boy, my boy, think of the risks!"

"I didn't spend hundreds on your education to have you take to a pit life," growled Mr Hexton.

"Oh, my boy, it is such a dangerous life. The hours of misery we pass no one knows," cried Mrs Hexton, wringing her hands.

"Mother," said the young man, "it is to endeavour to save mothers and wives and children from suffering all these pains; for I would strive to make our mines so safe that the men could win the coal almost without risk. And as for education, father," he said proudly, as he turned to the stern, grey, disappointed man, "is it not by knowledge that we are able to battle with ignorance and prejudice? Don't regret what you have given me, father."

"But it seems all thrown away if you are going to be nothing better than overseer of a mine."

"Oh, no," said the young man smiling, "it will give me the means for better understanding the task I have in hand; and if, mother, I can only save four or five families from the terrible sufferings we know of, I shall not have worked all in vain."

"No, my boy, no," said Mrs Hexton mournfully.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, "knowing what I have of pit life, it has made me wretched scores of times to read some terrible account of the long roll of unfortunates burned, suffocated, or entombed, to die in agonies of starvation and dread. Don't be disappointed, father, but let me make my effort, and work with you."

The elder seemed to hesitate for a moment, and then held out his hand.

"No, Phil," he said, "I won't stand in your way. I'm disappointed because I wanted you to be something better, but—"

"Better, father! Could you find a better man than Davy, whom we bless for his lamp?"

"Which the reckless donkeys will open in a dangerous gallery," cried Mr Hexton angrily. "No, my boy; Humphry Davy was a man indeed, and if you turned out half as good, or a quarter, I should be proud of you."

"That I shall never be, father," said the young man; "but I mean to try."

Chapter Two.

Down in the Pit.

"Don't tell me, lad; I hev'n't worked in t'pit twenty year for nowt. Think I don't know? Him and his newfangled ways are wuth that!"

The great swarthy pitman snapped his fingers as he stood in the centre of a group waiting for the return of the cage from the bowels of the earth.

All about them was dark and weird-looking, with the lights casting strange shadows where the machinery stood around. There was a hissing noise and a ruddy light from the engine-house, with the panting clank of machinery; pistons worked up, and wheels spun round; while where the group of miners stood there was a square, black-looking pit, surrounded by a massive frame-work, supporting one big wheel, from which depended a thin-looking wire-rope, which was rapidly running down.

A few minutes after, and there was the ringing of a bell, the clink-clank of machinery; the wheel spun round in the other direction, and in due time the cage, as it was called, came to the surface; the group of men stepped in, and the signal for descent was about to be given, when one of the men exclaimed:

"Here he cooms!"

Philip Hexton strode up the next moment, nodded shortly to the men, stepped into the crowded cage, and giving the signal, the stout iron-framed contrivance began rapidly to descend, and the fresh comer, who was still very new at these descents, felt that strange sensation as the cage rushed down, just as if the whole of the internal organs had burst out laughing at the fun they were going to have of trying to frighten their owner's head.

It is not a pleasant sensation, that of a descent into a coal-pit. There is the rushing noise of the cage, the whirring of wheels, the constant dripping and plashing sound of falling water, the thudding of the pump, the stifling feeling of dank heat, the stuffy mist, and joined to all the knowledge that if that slender thread of wire-rope should happen to

break, the cage would fall perhaps hundreds of feet, and its occupants be killed. Then, he who descends knows that he is going into a series of subterranean caves where the gas escapes, that the slightest contact with a light will explode, burning, slaying, and destroying, and leaving behind the choke-damp, which is even more deadly in its insidious effects.

Now Philip Hexton, in making up his mind to take to his father's life, had readily prepared himself to run all risks, in the hope of soon lessening them; but after three months' action as deputy assistant-manager under his father, he had awakened to the fact that all he had done had been to establish a general feeling of dislike amongst the men, who, though they did not openly show it, opposed Philip Hexton all the more by a stubborn, quiet resistance that he found it difficult to overcome.

It was something unusual for the manager's son to come down upon the night shift; but, after mastering the various technicalities of the place, the young deputy had set himself vigorously to work to try and more rigorously enforce the rules of the mine, many of which, he soon found, were terribly neglected by the men.

Upon reaching the bottom, Philip saw the party go into a kind of office, where each was supplied with a locked and lighted Davy-lamp, whose little wick burned dimly through the wire gauze; and then, as they were about to shoulder their sharp steel-pointed picks, he said aloud:

"You'll need to be very careful to-night, my lads, for there's a good deal of gas up in the new four-foot."

The men did not answer, but went sulkily away, leaving Philip to take a gauze lamp of a larger construction to go and spend a couple of hours inspecting different parts of the mine, in company with one of the oldest hands in the pit.

"I wish I could get the men to believe a little more in me," he said, as they went plashing along through the dark passages of the muddy pit, past places where the black roof was supported by stays, some of which were seamed and charred by explosions and fires in the mine.

"Ay, lad, they're a bit obstnit," said the old miner; "they don't like interference."

"No," said Philip rather bitterly, "not even when I am working to save their lives."

"Nay, lad; but that's what they don't believe. Yo' mun go on wi' 'em more gently. But what brought you down to-neet?"

"There was a fall in the barometer, and a great want of pressure in the atmosphere this evening," said Philip. "I could not rest without coming to see that everything possible was done."

"Ah," said the overman grimly, "that's what our lads weant believe in—your brometers, and pressures, and such like. They don't like to be teached by one who they say's nobbut a boy."

"Does it matter how many years old a person is," cried Philip sternly, "if he can point out what is right? Look here," he said, as he stopped short in a low-roofed and distant part of the mine, "do you see this?"

He pointed to his Davy-lamp, inside of which the light kept burning blue, and there was a series of little sputtering explosions.

"Ay, I see it, lad; it's often so," said the overman coolly; "but the ventilation's about reet, and it will soon carry that off. It's nowt to do wi' no brometers."

"Listen!" said Philip; and as the man impatiently stood still, there was a low dull hissing noise plainly to be heard, where the gas was rushing from the cracks and fissures of the shaley rock and gathering in the long galleries of the mine.

"Now," said Philip, "does not the barometer speak truly? When the air is weighty and dense it keeps back the gas, when it is light the gas forces its way out. What would be the consequences if I were to open our lamp?"

"There wouldn't be no consekences," said the overman with a grim laugh; "there'd be a inquest, if they had pluck enough to come and hunt out what of us was left."

In spite of himself, Philip could not help a shudder, as he listened to the cynical, callous manner in which his companion spoke of their proximity to a dreadful death. Then, bidding him follow, he went on along the gloomy maze towards where he could hear the rumble of trucks laden with coal, the sound of the ringing picks, the echoing shouts of the men, and the impatient snort of some pony, toiling with its load up an incline.

There was a quick sharp draught of air as they passed through a door which was closed behind them by a boy, and, satisfied that the ventilation was good, Philip Hexton and his companion went on.

Meanwhile Ebenezer Parks, the big miner who had been complaining when the young man came up, kept on with his remarks as, in company with his party, he made his way to the four-foot seam, as it was called—a part of the mine where the good coal was but a yard in thickness, and at which they had to work in a stooping, sometimes in a lying, position.

"She sings to-night, lad," said one of the men, as they stripped themselves to their trousers, and then began to use their sharp-pointed picks, their blackened skins soon beginning to glisten with perspiration in the stifling heat.

"Hey, she do," said Ebenezer, giving a careless glance at his sputtering lamp. "There's part gas in pit to-neet."

The dim sputtering lamps, and the warning hiss of the gas were forgotten as the men worked on, showing wondrous skill in the handling of their picks, and fetching out great lumps of coal with the greatest ease, in spite of the awkward position in which they worked.

This went on for a couple of hours, when Ebenezer threw down his pick, seated himself with his back against a pillar of coal, one of those left to support the roof, and took from his trousers pocket a steel tobacco-box, a black short pipe, and a nail.

"Who's going to hev a smoke?" he said.

"I wouldn't let young master ketch you smoking," said one of the men.

"He'd better not say owt to me," said the man fiercely. "I know what I'm 'bout better than he can tell me;" and as he filled his pipe several more laughed and filled theirs; while, looking like some black spirit of mischief, the big miner took the gauze lamp from the roof where it hung.

"Now then, lads, who wants a leet?" he said; and, taking the nail, he proceeded to pick the lock of the Davy-lamp, or rather unfasten it with the improvised key.

There was a click as the little snap flew back; and then, placing his pipe in his mouth, he proceeded to open the lamp.

This was about as wise an act as for a man to strike a match over an open barrel full of glistening grains of gunpowder—perhaps far worse.

Chapter Three.

Making an Enemy.

Even as the big miner had his hand upon the gauze cover of the Davy-lamp there were tiny little explosions going on within, for in spite of the great current of air that was kept up through the pit, a draught which swept away the dangerous gas, there were places which its purifying influence did not reach, places such as this new gallery in the four-foot seam, where the vapour had been steadily increasing for hours and collecting round the heads of the men.

Familiarity breeds contempt. Often enough we know that the men who work in gunpowder mills have to be searched to keep them from taking matches with them when they enter the mill.

Philip Hexton and his companion went on, the latter ready to grumble as he grew weary of what he looked upon as unnecessary labour. "T'pit was reet enew," he said to himself; and what need was there of "peeking and poking about this how?"

For the young inspector seemed never satisfied. He was always on the look-out for danger; and as they went on and on through the black galleries, where the iridescent tints of the shaley coal flecked with iron pyrites glittered and flashed in the dim light, he kept pausing and listening.

"He won't stop at it long," said the overman to himself; "he's 'bout scarred of it now. I niver see a lad so freckened at every sound."

It was quite true. Philip Hexton was startled at every sound; but it was from fear for others—not for self. So far from feeling the ordinary coward's dread, he would have gone at once into the most dangerous places to save another's life; but he was at times appalled at the reckless ways of the men.

In one gallery the roof, as the light glimmered upon it, was one beautiful fret-work of ancient vegetation, being carved, as it were, into knotted stems full of beautiful flutings. Huge ferny leaves could be seen bending in graceful curves, and here and there, shining like cuttings in jet, traces of the cone-like fruit borne by some of the trees of that far-back age when the coal was deposited in bituminous beds.

These geological remains had a great interest for Philip Hexton, and he promised himself plenty of amusement when his time of leisure came. At present it was all work—extremely hard work, for, until he could thoroughly master every technicality in the pit, he felt himself to be at a great disadvantage with the men.

"Yo' weant be so partic'lar when yo've been here a few year, Master Hexton," said the overman, as they were making their way down a wide gallery whose coal had been worked out long enough before, and across which part of the mine they were passing to reach a distant portion where the men were at work on the "new four-foot."

"Indeed!" said Philip, smiling, "I think you'll find me twice as strict."

"Not yo'," chuckled the man; "I used to think the same when I was young; but, bless thee, lad, a man's life would be a burden to him if he was fancying the pit o' fire at every bit of gas. There'd be no coal-mining at all, for the lads'd be too scarred to come down."

"If I live and have my way," said Philip sternly, "the pit here shall be so safe that work can go on in peace for every one, and every man shall act as guardian of his fellow's safety."

"Sounds very pratty, lad," said the overman, "but it weant wuck. Look here, there's a bit o' gas in this corner."

He held the lamp up close to the roof, and tiny explosions again began inside the gauze.

Then he lowered the lamp, and they ceased, showing how light the explosive gas was, and how it floated about the roof.

"Sithee," continued the overman, holding up the lamp again, so that Philip could make out that there was a rift above their heads, where at some time or other the roof had fallen; "that place has got part gas in it, for the ventilation don't touch here; but that don't mean as the whole mine's dangerous."

"But the whole mine *is* dangerous," said Philip hastily. "It's made dangerous by the recklessness of the men. Stop, man, what are you going to do?"

He was too late, for, unperceived by him, the overman had unlocked the lamp, and held it up open above their heads, when there was a blinding flash, and an echoing report, and then a rumbling, distant, rushing noise.

"What do you think o' that, lad?" said the overman coolly, relocking his lamp.

"I think it was madness," said Philip excitedly. "You might have fired the mine."

"Nay, lad, there was no fear o' that I knowed well enew what I was doing, and that bit o' gas was just as well away."

The young deputy's heart beat fast, and he was about to speak angrily, but he felt that it would be better to consult with his father to see if a stop could not be put to such reckless ways. For he argued if an overman would run such a risk as this, knowing that the detached portion of gas might possibly communicate with a larger body, was it not likely that the ordinary winners of the coal would, without the overman's knowledge and experience, run even greater risks?

"Yo'll get used to it all by and by," said the man condescendingly; "and if yo'll take my bit of advice, yo'll let the men tak' care o' theirsens."

Philip Hexton must have walked in and out quite a couple of miles, examining ventilating-doors, seeing that the boys who opened and shut them for the corves to pass were doing their duty, and the like; and, trifling as it may sound, a great deal depends in a coal-mine upon such a thing as the opening and shutting of a door, for by means of these doors the current of air that is sucked, as it were, through the passages of the pit by the great furnace at the bottom of the shaft is altered in its course, and turned down this or that passage, sweeping out the foul air or gas, and making safe the pit. Hence, then, the neglect of one boy may alter the whole ventilation of some part of a mine, the purifying draught may be stopped from coursing through some dangerous gallery where the gas comes singing out of the seams, a light be taken inadvertently there, and ruin and death be the result.

The young deputy was going on thinking to himself whether it would not be possible to invent a process by which the dangerous gas of a mine might be collected in great gasholders, and then burned within gauze shades for the lighting up of the pit, when the distant *chip—chip—chip* ringing and echoing where the men were at work in the new four-foot grew less persistent, and in place of becoming louder as they drew nearer, gradually began to cease, as if first one man and then another had thrown aside his took.

"Hadn't we better turn down here now, Master Hexton?" said the overman.

"No; I want to inspect the new four-foot," replied Philip.

"My lad, thee needn't go theer to-neet," said the overman. "That's all right, I warrant."

"He has some reason for stopping me from going there," was Philip Hexton's first thought. "The men have ceased working; something must be wrong."

"This is the gainest wayer," said the overman, turning sharply down a passage, light in hand, of course thinking that his companion would follow him, for he knew well enough what the stoppage meant, and he did not want the young man to see the miners smoke.

But Philip Hexton was made of different metal to what he expected, and, careless of being left in the gloom of one of those weird passages, the young man stood for a moment peering forward into the black darkness, and, making out a faint glimmer of light, stretched out his hands and began to make his way cautiously along by the shaley wall.

It was terribly bad walking, the floor being uneven from the many falls of coal from the roof. Here and there, too, were wooden supports which had to be avoided; but after stumbling along cautiously for about fifty yards, and avoiding the obstacles as if by a miracle, the distant glow of light was sufficient, dim as it was, to show him the supports that intervened, and fifty yards further he could walk quite fast, for there were the Davy-lamps hanging here and there, each forming a faint star, with a dull halo around.

They seemed very near the ground till the young deputy remembered that they were in the four-foot seam, and the next moment he was spared a violent blow by one of his hands coming in contact with the roof.

Philip Hexton's heart beat fast at the sight he saw; and for a moment he felt as if he must turn and run for his life.

But he did not. Bending down half-double, he ran towards the group of men, gaining impetus each moment, till, stumbling over some of the newly hewn-out coal, he was thrown, as it were, full against Ebenezer Parks, his right fist catching the burly miner in the ear, just as he was, pipe in mouth, about to open the lamp, and they fell heavily together, the lamp fortunately being extinguished by the shock.

An Unpleasant Threat.

"You villain!" cried Philip excitedly, as he rose, and then seated himself panting upon a lump of coal; "another moment, and you would all have been lying scorched and dying where you now stand."

"Villain, eh?" roared the great pitman, staggering up with his head bleeding from a cut caused by his fall, "villain, am I, lad? Then I'll be villain for some'at."

As he spoke, beside himself with passion, he caught up his miner's pick, and, but for the quick movement of the young man, would have dealt him what might have been a deadly blow.

"Nay, nay, Eben, lad," cried one of the men, closing with him, "howd thee hand: we don't want murder here." But it was not until a couple more of the miners had seized him by the arms and wrested away the short sharp pick, that he ceased to struggle.

Philip stood as well as the low roof would allow of the erect posture, and looked on.

"There lad, thou'st better goo," said one of the men; "and don't thee coom interferin' agen."

"Interfering!" cried Philip, with spirit, "recollect who I am, and that I will not have such reckless acts in the mine."

"Oh, it's thy mine, is it?" said the man in a provoking tone. "I didn't know that. Say, Eben Parks, thee mustn't niver smoke a pipe in Master Philip Hexton's mine."

"Let me goo!" cried the big miner; "let me goo, I tell 'ee! I'll mak' such a mark on him as he weant forget again."

"Let him go!" cried Philip angrily, "and let him touch me if he dare; and let him recollect that there is law in the land for men who commit assaults, as well as for those who break the rules of the pit."

"I'll put such a mark on him as he weant forget," cried the big miner, after another ineffectual struggle to be free.

"Why don't 'ee goo!" cried one of the men again. "Thee keeps makin' him savage wi' staying."

"Loose him, I tell you!" said Philip firmly; and they released the big miner, who came at him like a bull; but as the young man did not flinch, but gazed full in his eyes, the great fellow made what we call "an offer" at him, and then let his arms fall to his side.

"Sithee!" he exclaimed, pointing to his bleeding head, and speaking in a low, hoarse voice, "thou'st made thy mark on me, and I don't rest till I've made mine on thee. Now goo, while thee shoes are good; thou'st not wanted here."

Philip turned from him with an angry look of contempt, and addressed the men:

"You seem to forget, my lads, that under my father I'm inspector of this mine."

"Ay, and a nice pass too, for a set o' boys to be put over us, ordering men about as if they was bairns," growled the big miner.

"And that my orders here are to be strictly obeyed," continued Philip, ignoring the great ruffian's presence. "Why did you men stand by and see that fool—I can call him nothing else—I say, why did you, a set of experienced men, stand by, and see that fellow deliberately break the most important rule in the mine, and not interfere?"

"S'pose men are going to wuck here through a night shift and not want a pipe o' 'bacco?" said one of them fiercely.

"I suppose that when you work for a company of proprietors, and receive their money, you are going to obey their regulations, and are going to avoid damaging their property, if you will not even take care not to risk your own lives."

"Bah! Stoof!" exclaimed one of the party. "Theer's no danger."

"No danger!" cried Philip, pointing to the other lamps, "why, you see for yourselves that the mine is terribly fiery to-night. Shame upon you! Look how the gas keeps flashing inside the lamps. You know there is danger. I told you there was danger before you came to work."

"And how did you know?" cried Ebenezer Parks insolently.

"By study, brute!" cried Philip passionately; "by making use of the brains with which I have been blessed, and not going through life willing to risk the lives of my fellow-men for the sake of a little self-indulgence."

"Don't see much self-indulgence, as thou calls it, in having a pipe o' 'bacco."

"Ay! how wouldst thou like to wuck all neet on the neet shift?" cried another.

"Sithee," cried Ebenezer, spitting in his great black hands and thrusting his head forward, "thou ca'st me a fool, lad."

"Stand back!" cried Philip, so sternly that the great fellow flinched. "You are worse than a pack of children," he continued. "Shame on you! learn to give up your self-indulgence sooner than run such risks."

"Ay, it's easy enew to talk," growled one of the men; "but don't you think you are coming to lord it over us. S'pose we don't know when she's safe and when she isn't?"

"If I'm to judge from what I've seen to-night," cried Philip, "I'm sure you do not know, and that you are not fit to be trusted. Because you work in a seam and it is safe to-day, do you suppose it follows that it will be safe to-morrow? I tell you men that you are always working on the very edge of death through your own folly."

"And I tell 'ee," cried Ebenezer Parks, "that thou knows nowt about it."

"Silence, sir!" cried Philip, whose blood was up; and in a puzzled way, as if he could not half understand it, the big miner shook his head, and shrank back astonished that this boy, as he called him, should master him as he did.

For the big miner had yet to learn that knowledge is power—a power of ten thousand times greater force than the stoutest muscles ever owned by man.

"I have never spoken to you before as I am speaking now," cried Philip. "You force me to it, and I tell you that, while I have the management here, the regulations shall be strictly carried out to the very letter; there shall be no evasions—no more of these contemptible tricks. How did you open that Davy-lamp, sir?" he cried, turning sharply upon Ebenezer.

There was no answer, and the big fellow actually shrank as Philip made a sharp movement forward.

But it was not to strike a blow, only to pick up something lying shining amongst the pieces of coal.

"Just as I thought," said the young man, holding out the nail; "a contemptible pick-lock, to open the lamps that are locked up, by a wise rule, for your safety; and you—you great mass of bone and muscle, you call yourself a man! Shame upon you, shame!"

Without another word, Philip picked up the extinct lamp just as the overman came up in search of him, placed it under his arm, signed to the new-comer to lead on, and followed, hot, flushed, and angry, along the dark galleries, and out of the pit.

"Yah!" growled Ebenezer Parks, breaking the silence that lasted some few minutes after Philip's steps had died away; "he's nobbut a boy."

"Nobbut a boy, eh?" said one of the men who had held him; "well, all I can say is, as I hope my bairn'll grow up just like un."

"He was man enew to tackle thee, Eben," said another.

"Ay, he's a plucked un," said another. "I like the lad, that I do."

"Like him!" growled Eben, glaring vindictively round at his companions. "Man enew for me? Sithee: you know me, lads, and what I can do."

There was no reply.

"Yo' all know me, and what I can do, and do you think I'm going to let a bit of a boy, wi' his pretence about his larning and studies, bunch me and ca' me a fool and a brute when I know more about t'mine wi' one o' my hands than he does wi' his whole body."

Still there was no reply, the men taking up their picks and looking uneasily at the speaker.

"Tell 'ee what. I'm a man, I am, and a man o' my word. I said I'd put my mark on him for this job; and I will. Yo' all hear me, don't 'ee? I say I'll put my mark upon him."

The big miner, with his fierce blackened face and rolling eyes, looked vindictive enough then to be guilty of any atrocity as he seemed to be seeking for an answer.

"Yo' hear me? I say I'll put my mark upon him."

"Not thou, lad," said one of his companions at last.

"I tell 'ee I will. Never mind when or wheer. And now wheer's the man as'll go and tell him what I say?"

No one spoke, and soon after that was heard the regular metallic *chip—chip—chip* of the picks in the black wall of coal, Ebenezer Parks muttering to himself the while, and thinking of how he could best revenge himself upon "that boy."

Chapter Five.

'Twixt Father and Son.

When her son went home, Mrs Hexton was sitting up very straight and stern-looking in her chair, with a knitted stocking in one hand, a worsted-threaded needle in the other, and a handkerchief tied over her head to keep off the draught, for the new drawing-room was cold.

Mr Hexton was seated in an easy-chair—at least, he was in the easy-chair; but it is not fair to say that he was seated, for he was filling up the chair just as if he had no bones, and making a rather sonorous noise as he breathed.

It was past one o'clock, and the servants had gone to bed at ten, soon after which time Mr Hexton had proposed that they should follow, but Mrs Hexton had declared her intention of sitting up for her son.

"Why, what nonsense!" her husband had said. "Come along to bed."

"You can go, dear," she replied quietly. "I should not be happy if I did not see him safely back. And, besides, he will want a cup of tea and a bit of toast."

"And his face washed, and his feet put in warm water, while his mother brushes his hair, and fusses over him," said Mr Hexton pettishly. "For goodness' sake, don't go on petting and coddling the boy like that."

Mrs Hexton said nothing—only rose from her chair, and placed the tea-tray and the caddy ready, for they had been brought in the last thing by one of the maids. Then she lifted the bright copper kettle out of the fender and placed it on the hob, where it began to sing a song of its own composition, and she ended by taking up three pairs of her son's stockings to darn.

There was not the slightest need for Mrs Hexton to perform such a duty as this, but she had darned her husband's stockings when they were poor people, and she could not easily give up her old habits when they were comparatively rich. And now, as she ran the long, glistening needle in and out amongst the worsted threads, her husband sat back in his chair and said it was absurd; but all the same, as he watched her with half-closed eyes, he thought what a good woman she was, and how happy it made him to think that she was not in the slightest degree spoiled by prosperity, while he fervently prayed that she might continue as she was to the end.

Then, as he sank back lower and lower, thinking how earnestly his son had set about his task of reforming and improving the matters in the mine, he began to recall the terrible accidents that had happened at their pit, and at those in the neighbourhood. It would be a grand thing, he thought, if Philip, with his fresh and earnest mind and his knowledge, could do something to lessen the dangers of the pitman's life; though he rather trembled for the result, knowing as he did how hard it is to get over old prejudices.

Then all became very misty and strange; and to his blurred eyesight it seemed as if Mrs Hexton's grey stocking-covered hand got itself mixed up with her head, and her head appeared to be mixed up with the copper kettle on the hob, and then it was his wife who was singing like the tea-kettle, and then all was blank till he started up wide awake, for there was a noise at the door, and Mrs Hexton immediately began to make the tea.

"Have I been asleep, mother?" said Mr Hexton. "Hallo, Phil! back again?"

"Why, father—mother!" exclaimed the young man, "why haven't you both gone to bed?"

"I thought you'd find a cup of tea so refreshing," said the old lady briskly; and, waiting till it had stood long enough, she poured out a cup, placed a pair of slippers a little more in front of the fire, her work in a basket, and ended by kissing her son and saying good-night.

He followed her to the door, where she laughingly turned round and bade Mr Hexton make haste up, kissed her son once more, and left him with his father.

"Nice to be you, Phil," said the latter. "Oh, she has left out two cups! I'll have a cup of tea with you."

This he took, and then, as father and son sat together, the latter was the first to speak.

"I've had rather a scene to-night, father," he said.

"Scene! What! Not an accident?" said Mr Hexton, nearly upsetting his tea in his excitement.

"No, father, no accident; but the pit was so foul to-night that I believe if I had not interfered the place would have fired."

"They will do it, Phil; they will do it," said Mr Hexton, as soon as his son had finished his narration. "I've tried all I know to stop it, but they'll run any risk, especially if they've tried the same thing before without accident."

"Yes, I see that," said Philip. "It is so hard to make them see that there is danger at one time that does not exist at another."

"Exactly," said the elder seriously. "But I'm very sorry about that fellow Parks. He's a spiteful and dangerous man. I don't like his owing you a grudge."

"I'm not afraid, father," said Philip. "I've right on my side. I believe, too, that he is a great coward."

"Maybe," said Mr Hexton thoughtfully; "but still I would much rather it had not happened. Bother the fellows! it does seem hard; we are always striving to give them the means of working in safety, and in return they fly in your face."

"We'll forgive them that, father," said the young man smiling, "but we must have the rules of the mine strictly carried out."

"I'll back you up, Phil, in anything in reason," said Mr Hexton; "but look here: be careful—don't trust yourself in that fellow's way, my boy. I'm afraid he's an ugly character, and there's no knowing to what lengths spite will lead an ignorant man. What shall you do? Haul him up before the bench for threatening language—have him bound over?"

"No, father," said Philip quietly, as he sipped his tea. "I shall take no further notice. I have shown the men to-night

that I mean business, that I am working for their good; and I have no doubt in the end that they will learn to respect me as well as obey."

"And I wanted to stop him from going down the pit," said Mr Hexton to himself, as he sat watching his son.

"It will be a long fight, father," cried Philip, rising and holding out his hand. "Good-night!" he said with a smile; "we've declared war, but I mean to win."

Chapter Six.

In great Peril.

There could be no doubt that Philip Hexton did mean to win the fight, and there could also be no doubt that he was going the right way to work to win it. The greater part of the men met his efforts for their good in a surly, churlish way, as people will meet any one who tries to interfere with their cherished notions; but there were others, few though they were, who had the good sense and honesty to own that the young deputy was right, and to join with him in trying to reform the ways of the men in the pit.

Ebenezer Parks went on with his work as usual, showing no disposition to resume the quarrel; but Philip noticed one thing, and that was—the man never would look him in the face. No sooner did the young deputy come in sight than Parks bent over his work, or stooped to trim his lamp with the wire that passed through it; he never once gazed frankly and openly in Philip's eyes.

Time wore on, and there could be no doubt about it, the mine regulations were better kept, and hence there was less likelihood of an accident occurring, though, of course, the utmost vigilance could not protect those who worked from mishap.

Philip, with his father's help, devised two or three alterations in the ventilation of the mine, which also made it less fiery, as the pitmen called it; but his great project was to have another shaft.

"You see, father," he said, "we burrow into the ground like animals, but we do not take their precautions. A fox or a rabbit always has a second hole by which he can escape if there is anything wrong with the first. Ours is without doubt a dangerous pit, and if anything happened to block the shaft, the poor fellows down below would be entombed."

"Yes, my boy," said Mr Hexton grimly; "but it doesn't cost the rabbits or the foxes ten thousand pounds to make their second hole. It would cost us that. We must be content with one."

That question of a second shaft was always cropping up in Philip Hexton's brain, for, said he to himself, it is a sin against four hundred men to let them go down that place without providing them with proper means of escape. But upon going into calculations he found that the cost of a second shaft would approach the ten thousand pounds before all was ready, and he knew that the proprietors would not listen to such a proposition. What, then, was to be done?

The answer came to him one evening like a flash of thought; and, starting off, he made his way through the scrubby patch of woodland on the hill-slope joining the colliery lands to the next property.

It took him some time to find that of which he was in search, for the neglected ground was overgrown with tangled brambles, hazels, and pollards; and a stranger would have at once looked upon the wilderness of a place as unturned ground. But Philip knew better. He was growing weary of his search, however, when he made his discovery in a fashion that he did not anticipate, for, just as he was forcing his way through a tangled part of the wood, and parting the shady hazel stubbs that arrested his progress, his feet seemed to drop suddenly from beneath him, and he went down into semi-darkness, to hang clinging with the energy of despair to the hazel boughs; while, had he had any doubt about his position as he swung gently to and fro, he was taught by the horrible echoing plash that came up from hundreds of feet below, as the mass of crumbling earth and roots, upon which he had stepped, fell into the water.

For a few moments the horror of his position seemed to paralyse him, and such a strange sense of terror mastered his faculties that he felt that he must lose his hold and fall into the depths, to be drowned in a few moments in the awful pit. For this was the place of which he had been in search—the shaft of the old colliery, that had not been worked for quite a hundred years; a place almost forgotten, but of whose existence he was sure, for in the plan of their own mine he had found allusions to it and some former manager had made notes of the risks that might be encountered if any of the galleries were driven far enough to tap either of those belonging to the ancient mine, which would contain water enough to flood their own.



PHILIP'S FALL INTO THE OLD PIT-SHAFT.

The elastic hazel boughs had bent down and down until Philip Hexton's head was five or six feet below the crumbling edge of the mine shaft; and as he endeavoured to obtain more hold for his feet, he only seemed to kick the earth and stones away, causing them to fall and send up a repetition of that horrible echoing plash. Below him, as he glanced down once, all was terrible darkness, though even in his horror he noticed that the sides of the old shaft were covered with beautiful ferns. Above him was a tangle of crossing and interweaving branches, twigs, and brambles, and if, as might take place at any moment, the boughs by which he held should break, there was no hope for him. He knew that he must die, and probably his fate would never become known.

He hung there swinging to and fro for some moments, making not the slightest effort, till the horribly paralysing shock had somewhat passed away. Then, as his nerves began to resume their wonted tone, he tried to think.

All depended upon his being perfectly cool, and calling up all his strength of mind he made his plans.

If he struggled vigorously he knew that the chances were that he would tear the rotten moss-grown stubb up by the roots; if he swung about too much the branches would give way at their intersection with the low stem; if he should force his feet into the crumbling sides he would only kick down more stones and soil, and undermine the hazel roots.

It was indeed a position of awful peril—one in which, though such a proceeding would have been folly, most people would have exhausted themselves by shrieking for help where there was not a soul within hearing.

To and fro, with a gentle pendulum-like swing, as he let himself hang to the full extent of his muscles, swayed Philip Hexton; and then, with the greater part of his horror mastered by enforced coolness, he made his first effort for life.

There was no other plan open to him but to draw himself up hand over hand with as little effort as possible; and this he began to do.

There were plenty more hazel boughs above his head if he could reach them, and each of these, if added to those he grasped, would strengthen his position, for they came from other roots; and very cautiously he made his first effort, drawing himself steadily up till his chin reached his hands, and then, after waiting a moment, loosening his hold with one hand, and with a lightning-like rapidity getting a fresh grasp.

In spite of his efforts to change his position cautiously, the hazel boughs swayed to and fro in a most ominous fashion, and he could hear the loosened earth and stones falling below him in a shower.

It was enough to unnerve him, but he strove on, knowing now that it was a question of moments, and that if he could not grasp the boughs of another stubb the one from which he was banging must give way, and be precipitated with him into the abyss.

The splashing below was horrible, and it seemed to be multiplied to a vast extent by the echoes, till the noise came up like a strange hissing roar.

But there was not a moment to lose; and though the suggestion of his own fall nearly unnerved him he kept up the struggle hand over hand, but with the knowledge that he seemed to get no higher, for all he did was to turn the hazel boughs into powerful levers strong enough to begin tearing the stubb up by the roots.

One by one he could hear them crack on the side farthest away, and the great bush came slowly bodily over towards him, bringing bough after bough within his reach; and these he seized, forcing those he before clung to down beneath him into the pit.

But still he seemed to get no higher, and—horror of horrors! he could now see the roots of the hazel coming over towards him.

Crack, crack, in a dull heavy way, they kept being torn asunder, and it soon became evident that the bush was only held now by one of its stoutest roots. The soft earth showered down upon the panting man, and his muscles quivered under the tension to which they were exposed; but now he was able to rest his arms to some extent by clinging to

the branches below him with his legs.

Was there no hope? Such a short distance to climb if the hazel stubb would only hold; but he dare now hardly move, for the slightest vibration brought down more earth, and, moment by moment, be expected to hear the final crack, and then to feel the rush of the air as he was hurried down into the black depths below.

It was very horrible, and so great was the strain upon his mind as well as muscles that for a moment he found himself thinking whether it would not be a relief to loosen his hold and fall into oblivion.

“When I have made my last effort!” something seemed to whisper to him, and with it came the thought that if he were merely clinging to the hazel stems over the side of a road by some woody bank, he would feel none of this paralysing fear. The task to win to safety would seem easy then. Why should it not now?

It was the triumph of mind over cowardice and ignorant fear; and rousing his energies, while there was yet time, he looked about for the means of safety.

Yes; there it was. He was no nearer the top than when he first made his attempt at escape. All he had done was to tear the hazel up by the roots, but it had bent down with it the bough of another stubb, a stout, tough-looking bough, belonging evidently to a hazel growing farther from the edge of the shaft. Could he reach that he might better his position, but the long, tough, thorny brambles that hung down swaying about were in his way, unless he could make use of them as ropes.

It was for life, and regardless of their cruel thorns he seized two in one of his hands and made a snatch higher towards the root of the stubb.

Another: clinging with his knees to the branches.

Another: and he had hold of the crumbling, mossy wood, some of which fell with a quantity of earth.

Another quick, sharp, despairing effort, and—joy! he had seized the fresh stout branch that had been bent down by the loosened stubb.

Another effort, and he would have been on the edge of the shaft, when there was a sharp tug behind, and he felt himself arrested by the brambles that had twisted round one of his legs—a slight tug, but enough to stop him in his perilous position. The tangle of hazel boughs to which his legs were clinging came away with a fierce rush, an avalanche of earth fell, and Philip Hexton was once more swinging to and fro over the awful pit, listening with closed eyes to the rustle and rush of the great rooted-up hazel, as it fell into the pit.

Chapter Seven.

A Journey Underground.

Plash!

One horrible, echoing, weird sound that seemed as if it would never cease to reverberate against the sides of the pit-shaft, and then a silence so terrible that Philip Hexton felt as if all was over.

He unclosed his eyes for a last look towards heaven, and the blue sky was above him; the great hazel stubb had made a clearance; a feeling of hope once more filled his breast. He had hold of a stout, tough bough, and he had only to relieve himself of the clinging bramble to be able to climb up into safety.

But he was weak and exhausted now, and it took a greater effort than he expected before he sank down upon his knees amongst the mossy growth and thanked God for his escape.

A young and healthy man soon recovers from a shock, and before long Philip Hexton was on his way back to his home, with the exultant feeling upon him that the risk he had run was for the benefit of his fellows, for he could see now the way to provide, at a very moderate cost, a second shaft to their own pit.

There it was already made. It was only a question of acquiring some fifty or a hundred acres of worthless land with the old pit workings, and the ridding of those workings from water. They had galleries in their own mine that he knew nearly reached those of the old, and to drive from one to the other was the simplest of things.

The very next day, provided with the old map of the mine, which he had been studying half the night, he descended the shaft with one of the shifts of men, and, providing himself with a lamp, he set off alone to explore some of the old workings which had been given up in consequence of the dread that at any time the ancient mine might be tapped and their own pit flooded by the enormous gathering of water.

It was a long and dreary journey, one which no one saw him undertake, for the men went off at once to their work; and after going down two or three of the long black passages Philip felt a strange sense of hesitation about going farther.

It was not, he told himself, that he was afraid of journeying alone there in the dark; and, armed as he was with one of the best of the Davy-lamps, he had no fear of gas; the choke-damp there was no occasion to mind, as that followed an explosion; but all the same he felt such a hesitation as he had never, even on his first descent, felt before.

“I must be shaken by my adventure,” he said to himself laughing; and he considered for a moment or two whether he

should go back and get one of the overmen for a companion.

He gave up the idea, though, directly, and went on, forcing himself to master the nervous sensation and to do his duty like a man.

There were miles of galleries in the pit, and it was no light task to make a way through mud and water between the crumbling walls. Here and there great patches of the roof had tumbled down, and in places he found that the masses of coal that had been left as pillars had been taken away, and the ceiling of the pit had come down bodily, so that he had to sit down and study his map to find a way round to the part he wanted to reach.

It was strangely depressing work; but Philip Hexton had a big spirit, the strength of mind that has enabled Englishmen to make their nation what it is; and hence no sooner was he stopped by a fall of rock in one place, than he sought out and found a way round to the other side.

Sometimes a clear dry part would enable him to get along pretty quickly, but generally it was very slow travelling; often, where the seam of coal hewn-out had been a thin one, it was in a position bent double.

And now, as he exerted himself, he felt less of the feeling of dread. Once only did it come very strongly, and that was when, after getting by a very narrow, crumbling part of the workings, he heard a heavy fall of rock behind, and he crept cautiously back, feeling sure that the passage by which he had come was stopped up, and that he might be left there to starve, buried alive, without a prospect of being saved.

A reference to his map reassured him, and he went on. But now a fresh doubt assailed him. Suppose his lamp should go out: how would it be possible to get back?

If he had been ready to give way to them there were hundreds of such fear-engendered thoughts ready to oppress him; but he fought against them steadily, and was the master as he plodded on, with his faintly marked shadow, distorted and broken as it fell upon the walls, forming his only companion in his quest.

"Poor mother!" he thought once; "how alarmed she would be if she could see me now!"

"But it must be done," he added, half aloud. "Ours is notoriously a fiery mine. Ah! it is foul here."

For the lamp began to sputter and burn dimly within the gauze for a few minutes, till he reached a more open place, thinking—"If I can get this task done, I shall have made the mine comparatively safe, and who knows but the old workings may not prove, with our modern appliances, well worthy of carrying on?"

He was so elated by these thoughts that the remainder of his dark subterranean journey seemed not one-half as difficult; and at last he seated himself on a block of stone fallen from the roof to consult his map.

"Let me see," he said, half aloud, as, with the map spread upon his knees, he held his lamp so that the dim light might the better fall upon the canvas-backed paper; "I must be about here; and if so, according to this plan the old mine workings might be reached through this gallery, or this, or this."

He ran his finger along the different lines drawn in red ink, and was studiously considering how it would be best to proceed if he could win his father, and, through him, the other proprietors, to his plans, when all at once he started up, listening attentively, for it seemed to him that he could hear a sound as of some one working with pick or bar away ahead of the place where he was seated, and not back in the yielding seams of the pit.

Tap, tap, tap! Yes, there it was plainly enough, and from a part of the pit where there could be no working going on.

What could it be? Nobody would be in that end of the mine. It was completely deserted. He did not believe anyone had been in that part of the great maze for months; there was nothing to bring a pitman there.

"Now if I were a superstitious fellow," said Philip to himself, "and ready to believe in ghosts and goblins, I should run back and spread the news that this part of the pit is haunted by the restless spirit of some poor pitman who lost his life here years ago, and comes back to work. But I don't believe in that sort of story, and I'm going to see what it means."

All the same he felt very much startled; for it seemed so unaccountable for anyone to be there. The men would be in the regular seams. There was nothing to bring them here; and as they toiled at piece-work, they would not lift a pick except to hew out coal. No overman would be here without his knowledge; and try how he would to find some reason for the sound, he was still at fault. The only possibility was that, in some peculiar way the echo of a hewer's pick ran along the silent galleries, to be reverberated from this distant wall.

"Impossible!" he said, doubling up his map and replacing it in his breast, as he rose and took up his lamp.

"It is impossible!" he said again, as *tap, tap, tap*, the regular stroke as of a pick was heard, and with no small feeling of trepidation he went to search out the cause of the unusual sound.

Chapter Eight.

Parks's Mark.

Before he had gone far he became aware that the noise came from the old gallery that he had marked down as being the most likely to lead nearest to the workings of the ancient pit, and, after carefully peering down it, he held his

lamp above his head to gaze in farther. But he could see nothing; and suddenly the noise ceased.

With a quick motion Philip thrust the tall, thin lamp inside his flannel mine-coat and buttoned it up, for the thought suddenly struck him that if anyone was at work there he would be sure to have a light.

It turned out as he expected, for there, upon a ledge of rock about fifty yards ahead, stood a Davy-lamp, shedding its soft dull rays around, so that some fell upon a wall of coal, which glistened in the light as if it had been newly cut.

"It is very strange," thought Philip. "Why should anyone be at work here? It is dangerous, too. The old mine full of water must be close behind."

"Well," he said, "Davy-lamps are not at all ghost-like things, so let us see what it all means;" and going cautiously forward, with his own lamp hidden, he crept near enough to see that there was a heavy iron bar lying upon the flooring of the wide chamber, for the gallery had been opened out here, and beside it a heap of newly-chipped coal, the result of an effort evidently being made to bore through into the ancient pit.

"Why, it is treachery!" exclaimed Philip mentally. "Someone is trying to flood— Ah!"

A tremendous blow fell upon his head, and he dropped to the ground, motionless, stunned as it were in body; but with every faculty of his mind quickened, and, with his eyes half-closed, he saw a dark figure stride across him, a short iron bar in his hand, pick up the lamp and hold it down.

"Yes, I ar'n't made no mistake, Muster Hex'on. I said I'd mak' my mark on yo, and yo've got it this time. How came he here?"

The man stood in a listening attitude for a few moments, and then, apparently satisfied, raised his bar to strike again.

"That first un seems to hev done it," he said with a coarse laugh. "Spying, that's what he was about. Now I'll give them a job."

He set down the lamp once more upon the ledge, picked up the big bar, and began to drive it heavily in the hole he had made in the coal, the great bar going in quite three feet at each stroke, while Philip lay watching him, paralysed still in body, but seeing all that took place.

At the end of half-a-dozen strokes the bar seemed to go through farther, and as the great miner drew it back a little stream of dirty water came trickling through, and Parks stood watching it intently.

"I knowed it wur theer," he muttered; "but it'll never make no head if I don't open it a bit more."

He hesitated for a moment, and then, raising the bar once more, drove it through with all his force.

The effect was very different to what he had anticipated, for he must have dislodged a goodly-sized piece of coal on the other side, and as he snatched back the bar there was a fierce rush of water in a spurt as big as a man's arm, whose flash Philip Hexton just saw, and then the lamp was extinguished.

The noise was so great—such a fierce, hissing roar—that the cry uttered by Ebenezer Parks was half drowned; while, in less time than it takes to tell it, the young deputy felt a sudden shock as a rush of cold water bathed his face and head, acting so magically that he rose quickly, and, with the water rising above his ankles, began to feel his way along the stony wall, as fast as he could, in the direction in which he had come.

The confusion from the blow was rapidly passing away, cleared as it was by a great horror—that of being overtaken and drowned in the flooding mine, and, sometimes striking himself heavily, but always making progress, he waded on.

Still it was slow work, for the water seemed to hinder him, and he had reached a curve where the gallery took a fresh direction when there was a fiercer roar behind, one which betokened that the water was forcing for itself a greater way; and so it proved, for in a very few moments the rushing icy stream was above his knees.

It was very horrible there in the darkness, listening to the gurgling rush of the water, ever increasing in violence; but forgetting self for the moment, Philip wondered where his assailant could be, and then, hearing nothing, he began to think of the men in the pit, and whether they would have time to escape.

All depended, he knew, upon whether the wall of coal between the two mines stood firm where Ebenezer's bar had not struck, and hoping this would be so, but despairing of his own life now, he waded on, the water being far above his knees.

"I shall never find my way in the dark," he groaned, with a chilly feeling of horror creeping over him, and placing his hands above his throbbing breast as if to check the beating of his heart, he uttered a cry of joy, for they came in contact with the lamp.

It was, of course, extinct as he tore it from his breast, but he had matches in his pocket far above where the water had yet reached.

It was a risk, but he must chance the gas. The air caused by the rushing water might have swept it away, and trembling so that he could hardly perform the office, he drew key and matches from his pockets, nearly, in his agitation, dropping the lamp in the rushing stream that swept against his legs.

He saved it, though, and struck a match, which went out directly, and another and another shared its fate. The next

burned brightly, though, and no explosion following, he lit the lamp, trimmed the wick, dropped the match in the water, where it went out with a faint hiss; and then, closing the gauze, he held the feeble Davy above his head.

It was a star of hope, though, to him; and so it must have been to Ebenezer Parks; for as the rays shone out, there came from far behind a wild, despairing yell, and then, as Philip turned towards it, there was a fierce hissing rush, the stream doubled in volume, he was swept against the wall, and it was only by hurrying with it that he was able to keep his feet.

Twice over he essayed to turn, but the effort was vain. It was impossible to battle with it. All he could do was to hold his lamp up so as to guide him from striking against the wall, and go with the rushing stream, that now increased so in depth that he felt that before long he might be compelled to swim.

The hours or more that he passed in that flood of rushing waters seemed afterwards like some terrible confused dream to the young man, for it was long enough before he found himself in a part where the galleries took an upward inclination, and he gained a place where, faint and exhausted, he could rest with the water only about to his knees, and draw out the map, by whose help he at length made out where he was.

Even then he had a long and arduous trial before he managed to wade to the foot of the shaft late at night, to find lights burning and the pumping-engine at its fullest speed, but unable to arrest the steady rise of the water, which, by the next day, had completely drowned the workings, though its progress was sufficiently slow to enable the men to save their lives before it came upon them in the lower seams.

A fortnight elapsed before the pit was once more drained, during which time Philip had been seriously ill, suffering greatly from the shock.

His first inquiry was for Ebenezer Parks, whose body, however, was not found for some time, where it had been forced into a cranny by the stream; and in strange corroboration of the tale Philip Hexton had to tell, his great muscular hand still grasped the big iron bar, round which the muscles were as tense as steel.

Poor wretch! In the gratification of his miserable malice he had done much mischief and had lost his life; but he had hastened Philip Hexton's plan of utilising the shaft of the old mine, which his villainous act had drained, and the result before long was that the old pit property was purchased for a mere song, the galleries fully opened out, and the mine, over which Philip became overseer-in-chief, was acknowledged with its double shaft to be the best-ventilated and safest in the land.

The best proof of which was that for the next ten years there was not a single serious accident; and, as Mrs Hexton declared to her friends, all through the thoughtfulness of her brave boy.

The End.

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*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK SON PHILIP ***

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