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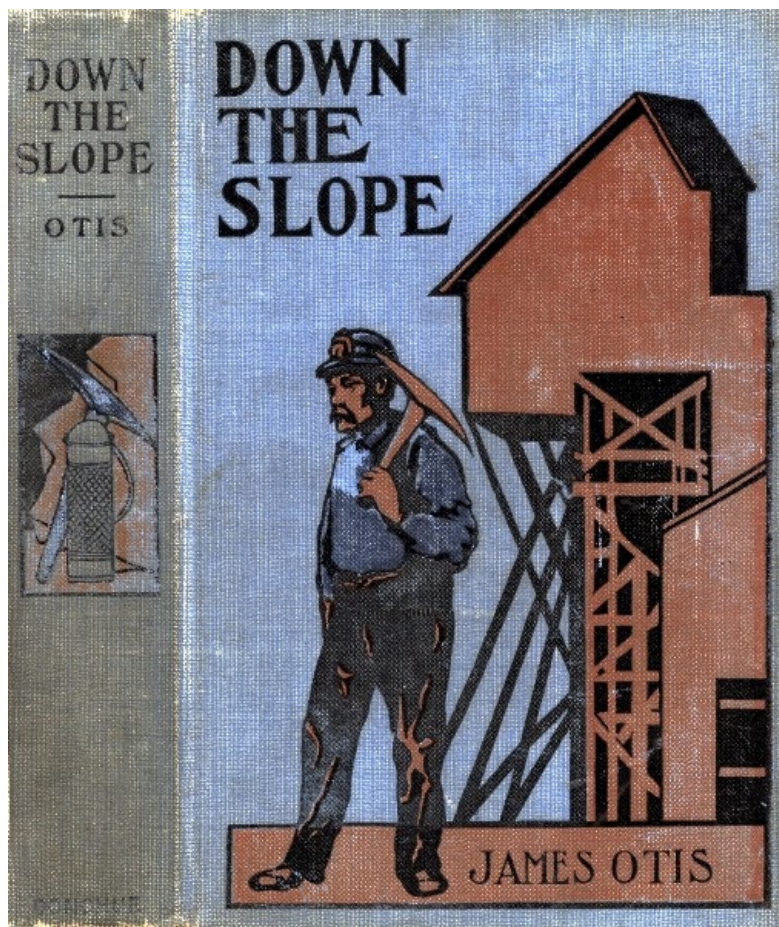
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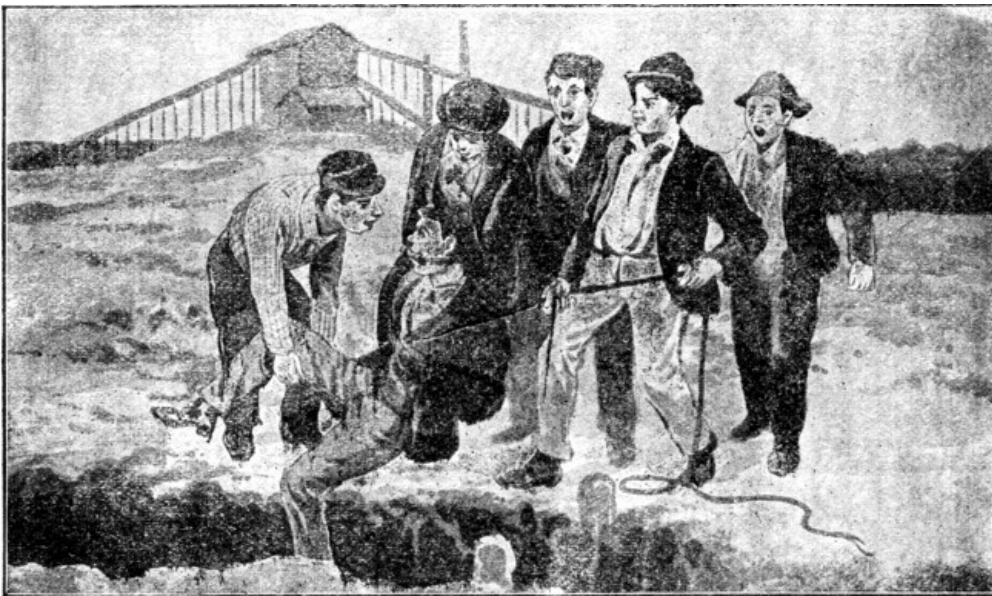
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK DOWN THE SLOPE ***





"Raise him up!" Skip shouted, and in another instant Fred was suspended over the old shaft.

DOWN THE SLOPE

BY

JAMES OTIS

Author of "Telegraph Tom's Venture," "Messenger No. 48," "Toby Tyler," "The Boy Captain," "Silent Peter," etc., etc.

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CONTENTS

[Pg iii]

| | PAGES |
|---------------------------|-------|
| CHAPTER I—THE BREAKER BOY | 7-14 |
| CHAPTER II—THE WARNING | 14-24 |
| CHAPTER III—IN THE SHAFT | 24-33 |
| CHAPTER IV—THE BARRIER | 33-41 |
| CHAPTER V—THE MOB | 41-50 |
| CHAPTER VI—ON DUTY | 51-59 |

| | |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| CHAPTER VII—THE STRUGGLE | 59-66 |
| CHAPTER VIII—THE PURSUIT | 67-75 |
| CHAPTER IX—JOE BRACE | 75-84 |
| CHAPTER X—THE RESCUE | 85-93 |
| CHAPTER XI—BILLINGS AND SKIP | 94-101 |
| CHAPTER XII—A SINGULAR ACCIDENT | 101-110 |
| CHAPTER XIII—BURIED ALIVE | 110-118 |
| CHAPTER XIV—PRECAUTIONS | 118-126 |
| CHAPTER XV—A DISCOVERY | 126-134 |
| CHAPTER XVI—GOOD SAMARITANS | 134-142 |
| CHAPTER XVII—DOWN THE SLOPE | 142-150 |
| CHAPTER XVIII—SHUT DOWN | 150-158 |
| CHAPTER XIX—THE CONSULTATION | 158-165 |
| CHAPTER XX—THE ACCUSED | 165-172 |
| CHAPTER XXI—AMATEUR DETECTIVES | 173-180 |
| CHAPTER XXII—UNEXPECTED NEWS | 180-187 |
| CHAPTER XXIII—A MISADVENTURE | 187-195 |
| CHAPTER XXIV—BILL'S MISHAP | 195-202 |
| CHAPTER XXV—JOE'S INTERVIEW | 203-210 |
| CHAPTER XXVI—TURNING THE TABLES | 210-217 |
| CHAPTER XXVII—AN UNLOOKED-FOR DENIAL | 217-224 |
| CHAPTER XXVIII—OPINIONS | 224-230 |
| CHAPTER XXIX—A QUESTION OF TITLE | 231-237 |
| CHAPTER XXX—A SUIT AT LAW | 237-244 |
| CHAPTER XXXI—SKIP | 244-253 |
| CHAPTER XXXII—ACQUITTED | 253-262 |
| CHAPTER XXXIII—VICTORIOUS | 262-269 |
| CHAPTER XXXIV—THE NEW MINE | 270-273 |

[Pg iv]

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

[Pg v]

| | |
|--|-------------------------------------|
| "Raise him up!" Skip shouted, and in another instant Fred was suspended over the old shaft | <i>Frontispiece</i> |
| Fred set off at full speed, and almost immediately a shout went up from the rioters: "The sneaks are sending for help! Stop that boy!" | 74 |
| "You four are to act as sentinels," said the superintendent. "Study this map and you will hit upon a scheme" | 95 |
| "Please don't drag me off," Skip said, piteously. "I'll never hurt you or anybody else again" | 128 |

CHAPTER I

THE BREAKER BOY



jest moved here, eh?"

"Came last Friday."

"And you are going into the breaker?"

"Yes."

"For thirty-five cents a day?"

"That is all the company pays, and a green hand can't expect to get more."

"Were you ever in a mine before?"

"I never even saw one."

"A trip down the slope will be enough to make you wish such a place in which to earn a living never existed. Why don't you try something else before it is too late?"

"What do you mean by 'too late'?"

"When a fellow is in debt to the company's store he can't afford to be independent, and it is about the same as selling yourself outright for enough to eat and drink."

"I won't get into debt."

"Wait a week, and see if you can say the same thing then."

"I mustn't get trusted. I'm the only one to whom mother can look for support. We hadn't any money with which to go to the city, and so came here. It isn't likely I shall be obliged to stay in the breaker forever, and after a while it will be possible to get a better job. Where are you working?"

[Pg 8]

"I'm Bill Thomas' butty."

"What's that?"

"His helper. He's a miner, and I'll have the same kind of a lay after being with him a while."

"Were you ever in the breaker?"

"I sorted slate from coal most three years, an' got more dust than money; but I'm tough, you see, an' didn't wear out my lungs."

"What's your name?"

"Sam Thorpe; but if you ever want anybody to help you out of a scrape, an' I reckon that'll happen before many days, ask for Bill's butty."

"I am Fred Byram, and mother has hired the new house near the store."

"I'm sorry for you; but as it can't be helped now, keep your eyes peeled, for the boys are a tough lot. When you want a friend come to me. I like your looks, and wish you'd struck most any other place than Farley's, 'cause it's the worst to be found in the Middle Field."

With this not very encouraging remark Sam went toward the mouth of the slope, and the new breaker boy was left to his own devices.

It was six o'clock in the morning. The underground workers were coming singly or in groups to begin the day's work for which each would be paid in accordance with the amount of coal taken out, and no one could afford to remain idle many moments.

[Pg 9]

Fred knew he must report to the breaker boss before seven o'clock, and approached the grimy old building wondering if it would be necessary for him to work three years, as Sam Thorpe had done, before earning more than thirty-five cents per day.

Entering the breaker, which was thickly coated both inside and out with coal-dust, he reported to Donovan, the boss, by saying:

"I have come to work. Here is my ticket."

"Green?"

"Yes, sir."

"Here, Chunky, take this new hand alongside of you, and see that there is no skylarking."

The boy referred to as Chunky made no reply; but looked up from beside the long chute at which he was sitting, as if the task of breaking in a new hand was very welcome. A fat, good-natured fellow he apparently was, and Fred fancied he would be an agreeable task-master.

He, like the others, was curious to know if his companion had been in a mine before, and on receiving the information, remarked sagely:

"You'll be mighty sick of the whole thing before night, but it's safer than down in the galleries."

"What must I do?"

"At seven o'clock the coal will be dumped in at the other end of the chute, an' while it's runnin' past you must pick out the slate."

"Is that all?"

"By the time your hands are cut into mince-meat you'll think it's enough," was the grim reply, and before Fred could speak again the day's labor had begun. The black fragments came through the chute with a roar which was deafening, and the "green hand" was at a loss to distinguish coal from slate.

[Pg 10]

"Take out the dull, grayish stuff," Chunky shouted, as he seized from the moving mass sufficient fragments to serve as specimens, and in a short time Fred began to have a general idea of his duties.

Before the forty minutes "nooning" had come around his hands were cut and bleeding; but the thought of his mother, who looked to him for support, was enough to keep him busily at work, and when the whistle sounded he had most assuredly earned half of the thirty-five cents.

A short rest, a lunch eaten amid the sooty vapor, which caused one to fancy he was gazing through a veil whenever he glanced across the building, and then the fatiguing labor was recommenced, to be ended only at the stroke of six, when miners, buttys, mule drivers and bosses hastened to the surface of the earth once more after having been deprived of sunlight for nearly twelve hours.

Without paying any especial attention to the fact, Fred noticed that although he was among the last to leave the breaker, the majority of the boys followed close behind as he started toward home.

In order to reach the company's store it was necessary to traverse a mirey road on which were no habitations for nearly fifty yards, and when Fred was half this distance from the breaker, a voice from behind shouted:

"Hi! Hold on a bit, you new feller!"

Fred turned to see a dozen of those who had been at work near him, advancing threateningly.

[Pg 11]

"What do you want?" he asked, regretting now that he had not hurried on ahead as Chunky suggested shortly before the whistle sounded.

"We've got a word to say, an' you're wanted very pertic'lar."

"I can't stop now."

"That's too bad, for there's a little business to be settled right away," and the largest of the party stepped so near in front of Fred that it would have been impossible for him to have advanced, except at the risk of an encounter.

"Won't it do just as well in the morning?"

"I'm afraid not."

"But I promised to come straight home."

"You can't go till our 'count has been fixed."

"I don't owe you anything."

"Don't eh?"

"No. I never even saw one of your crowd until I came to work this morning."

"What of that?"

"It shows there can be no account between us."

"You're makin' a big mistake, young feller. Ain't this your first day in the breaker?"

"Of course it is."

"Then what about payin' your footing?"

"My footing?"

"Every feller who comes here has got to make things square with us by standin' treat."

"Well I'm one who can't do it."

"Oh, yes you can," and here the bully looked at his companions, who echoed his words, crowding yet closer around Fred, until it was literally impossible for him to make the slightest movement.

[Pg 12]

"I haven't got a penny, and what I earn is for mother."

"You can get an advance at the store."

"Do you suppose I'll run in debt for the purpose of treating you?"

"That's about the size of it."

"Then you're making a big mistake, for I won't do anything of the kind," and Fred made one desperate attempt to force his way through the crowd.

"Look out for him!" the leader shouted, as he struck Fred a blow on the cheek which would have sent him headlong but for the others who acted as a sort of brace.

The new breaker boy was not disposed to submit tamely, and struck out blindly but vigorously drawing blood from more than one nose before borne to the earth by press of numbers.

While he was thus helpless every fellow who could get near enough dealt him one or more blows, and not until they were tired of the sport did the young ruffians cease.

"Now let up," the leader cried, in a tone of authority. "He's had a dose that shows what we can do, an' will git it ten times as bad to-morrer, if he don't come down with the treat."

The disciplining party ran swiftly toward the settlement when these words had been spoken, probably because a dozen or more miners were approaching, and Fred was left to make his way home as best he could.

[Pg 13]

He had just staggered to his feet when the men arrived upon the scene; but no one paid any particular attention to him, save as one miner remarked with a laugh:

"I reckon here's a lad who didn't know the rules; but it won't take him long to find them out."

Fred was too sore both in mind and body to make any retort, and he limped down the road believing this first attempt to earn a living was already a dismal failure.

He would have kept the story of the attack a secret from his mother, but for the marks of the conflict which could not be hidden, and when questioned represented the affair as of no especial importance.

Mrs. Byram had a fairly good idea of the case, however, when he said despondently:

"I believe it would be better to try some other kind of work. Why can't we go to the city?"

"Because our capital is so limited. To come here it was only necessary to move our furniture three miles, and the promise of needle-work from the superintendent's family assured us sufficient income to meet the absolute cost of living. But you need not go to the breaker again; it may be possible to find employment elsewhere."

"There's little chance of that in this town, mother," Fred replied with a brave attempt at cheerfulness. "I should be worse than a loafer to remain idle while you were working, and by keeping my eyes open that crowd can't do very much mischief."

"Wouldn't it be better to pay your 'footing' as they call it? Once that has been done there can be no excuse for troubling you."

[Pg 14]

"I won't give them the value of a penny, and I'll stick to my job. Perhaps, by flogging the bully I can teach them to let me alone."

"But you musn't fight, Fred," Mrs. Byram said, in alarm.

"It's better to have one regular battle than to get such a drubbing as this every night. If they make any more fuss I shall take care of myself."

Now that the first sense of injury had passed away, Fred felt as if he had been at fault to allow himself to be so easily overcome, and, distasteful as was the work in the breaker, he had fully resolved to remain and assert his rights in a manly way.

CHAPTER II

THE WARNING

On the second morning Fred did not present himself at the dingy old building until nearly time for the whistle to sound, and those whom he had good cause to look upon as enemies were already at their places by the chute.

"I heard some of the fellers served you out last night," Chunky said, much as if such proceedings

were a matter of course.

"They'd better not try it on again," Fred replied, in a tone of determination.

"Are you goin' to fight?"

"I'll protect myself, if nothing more."

"It won't do any good to try."

[Pg 15]

"Why not?"

"Because there are too many of 'em, an' Skip Miller can down any feller in this breaker."

"Who is Skip Miller?"

"The boss of the crowd who laid for you."

"Then I'll settle matters with him, and when he gets the best of me it will be time to pay my footing; but not before."

"He'll chew you all up."

"I ain't so sure of that. Did you know what they were going to do?"

"I had a mighty strong s'picion."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Then I'd got a thumping. I wanted you to hurry out with me?"

By this time the work had begun, and the noise was so great that conversation could be indulged in only at the expense of considerable shouting. Fred's hands, sore from the previous day's labor, were cut anew in many places, and more than one piece of slate was marked with his blood as he threw it among the refuse.

The "gang," as Fred termed his enemies, gave no sign of carrying the threat previously made into execution. The watchful eyes of the breaker boss prevented them from idling, and nothing occurred to arouse the new boy's suspicions until just before the noon-day whistle sounded, when a piece of board, thrown while Donovan was not looking, fell at Fred's feet.

At first he believed the intention was to hit him with the missile; but when the stream of coal ceased to flow through the chute, Chunky said as he picked up the board:

[Pg 16]

"The warnin' has come."

"What do you mean by that?"

For reply Chunky handed his mate the piece of lumber on which was printed in scrawling characters with red chalk:

"PAy OR SkiP.
WE MEAN BiSNEss.
No SNEAkS LoWED HEAR.
ToNiTE iS THE LAST CHANcE.
THE BREAKER REGuLATERs."

"So they call themselves regulators, eh?" Fred said, half to himself, as he deciphered the message after considerable difficulty.

"That's some of Skip's doings. He's started a reg'lar s'ciety, an' fellers what don't join have to step round mighty lively sometimes."

"Do you belong?"

Chunky hesitated an instant as if ashamed of the fact, and then replied:

"It don't pay to keep out, 'cause they run things to suit therselves, an' a feller can't hold his job very long when they're down on him."

"According to that I shan't be here a great while unless this command is obeyed?"

"That's what I'm afraid of. Why not come up with a little treat, an' settle the whole thing that way? You can't do anything by fightin', for there are so many."

Fred hesitated an instant as if considering the matter, and then replied angrily:

"I won't be forced into anything of the kind! If you belong to the gang tell them that I shall protect myself the best I know how, and somebody will get hurt when there's another row."

[Pg 17]

Chunky had an opportunity to repeat the message at once, for Fred had but just ceased speaking when Skip beckoned for him to come to the other side of the building, and a command from the chief of the regulators was not to be disobeyed with impunity.

Fred was watching the movements of his enemies narrowly when Donovan approached on his way to the water casks.

"Have the boys been tryin' to make you pay your footing?" the breaker boss asked.

"Yes, sir, and it looks as if they didn't intend to let me stay very long," Fred replied, as he held up the notification to quit.

"What are you going to do about it?" and the man looked curiously at the boy.

"Stay where I am until they get the upper hand. I can't treat, for I haven't the money, and I may be able to show that the regulators are not the bosses here."

"I like your pluck, my lad, and can, perhaps, give you a lift. Skip shall have a flea in his ear before the whistle sounds again; but, of course, it's none of my business what happens after working hours."

"I don't expect any assistance, sir, and if they down me it can't be helped."

"You've taken a pretty big contract; but between us both I reckon it can be carried out."

Then Donovan continued on, and, looking up, Fred saw that all his enemies had been watching the interview closely.

[Pg 18]

"They may conclude it isn't best to tackle me, if he is going to take a hand," he thought, and at this moment Chunky returned.

"Now you have got yourself in a scrape!"

"How so?"

"Skip and all the fellers saw you talkin' to Donovan, an' they know you showed him the message from the regulators."

"What of that?"

"They don't 'low anything of the kind, an' you've got to take a thumpin', even if you do treat."

"So I'm to get a double dose, eh?"

"That's about the size of it. Skip says you'll be laid up for a week when the s'ciety gets through with you."

"I'm much obliged for the promise; but don't believe quite all he says."

Chunky shook his head as if to intimate that the case was a desperate one, and then the nooning had come to an end. The clouds of coal dust which had but just settled rose again as the machinery was put in motion, and all was activity once more.

Although Fred had spoken so bravely he felt seriously disturbed, and during the remainder of the day his mind was fully occupied with thoughts of how he might successfully resist his enemies.

When night came he had arrived at no satisfactory conclusion, and at the signal to cease work Chunky ran swiftly away thus showing that while he would not join with the society as against his mate, he did not intend to take sides with him.

Donovan's promise of assistance was not a vain one. When Fred emerged from the breaker a few paces behind Chunky he saw the boss waiting for him, and the latter said in a friendly tone:

[Pg 19]

"It don't do you much good to be seen talkin' to me, for both men an' boys hate what are called bosses' pets; but we'll stave off this row till you get used to the ropes, when it's a case of taking care of yourself."

Under the protection of Donovan, Fred walked to his home, feeling a bit ashamed of thus avoiding the meeting with the regulators, and more than one jeering cry did he hear before reaching the house.

"Be careful of yourself now," Donovan said, as they arrived at the cottage. "This won't make the lads any better disposed toward you, an' it isn't safe to move 'round very much in the dark."

"I'll come home alone to-morrow an' have it out."

"Don't be rash. Wait for a chance, an' if Skip gets hurt pretty bad nobody here'll feel sorry."

Then Fred entered the house, and after a bath, a hot supper, during which his mother spoke many encouraging words, and a long consultation to his best course, he felt little fear of the regulators.

Mrs. Byram had good news for her son. The wife of the superintendent had introduced her to several other ladies who promised to give her employment, and the prospect of earning money seemed better than was anticipated when the question of moving to the settlement had been under discussion.

"We shall get along famously," she said, "and, perhaps, it won't be many months before it will be possible to get enough ahead so we can venture to the city. I am going to open an account at the store in your name, for what little cash we had is very nearly exhausted."

[Pg 20]

"When are you going?"

"Now. I shall be busy to-morrow, and you must have a hearty supper."

"I'll go; the store isn't the nicest place possible during the evening."

"But the boys who are watching for you?"

"They won't dare to do anything when the men are around," Fred replied, carelessly, and taking the memorandum which his mother had prepared, he left the house.

The one street of the settlement was almost deserted, for it was yet too early to see the toilers who would spend the short time of rest in the open air near the store, and Fred's business was soon transacted. The desired credit was readily granted, and with his arms filled with packages he started toward home once more.

For the first time in the past twenty-four hours he had forgotten the existence of the regulators, and the fact that Skip Miller with half a dozen companions was waiting for him never came into his mind until a hand was suddenly pressed over his mouth, as a hoarse voice whispered:

"Catch hold his legs an' arms, fellers! Never mind the stuff now."

In a twinkling Fred was lifted from the ground by a boy at each limb, while the one who had spoken kept a firm hold upon his mouth, and in this fashion he was carried swiftly along in the direction of the breaker, as he thought.

[Pg 21]

"We'll have to fetch them bundles so's to make it look as if he fell in," some one said, and a voice, which he recognized as Skip's, replied:

"That's so. You fellers what ain't doing anything pick 'em up."

"Who's got the rope?"

"I have."

"Why not throw him in an' run the chances? It's too bad to lose what cost half a dollar."

"There's time enough to fix that after we've got him to the shaft."

"Hold your tongues, or somebody will hear us!" Skip whispered, angrily, as his companions thus discussed the preliminaries.

Then came a long time of silence broken by the footsteps of the party, or the loud breathing of those who were carrying the burden.

Several times Fred tried to give an alarm; but his mouth was held so firmly that not a sound could escape his lips, and after a while he contented himself with simply trying to form some idea of the direction in which he was being taken.

When the party had carried him for ten or fifteen minutes a halt was made, and then his captors took the precaution of enveloping his head in a coat, which shut out every sound, save the loudly uttered remarks of the regulators.

He heard Skip berating one of the party, because some reference was made to their destination, and then ensued a noisy discussion as to what should be done with him.

"If he don't turn up to-morrer mornin' old Donovan will swear we took him off, an' there'll be a heap of trouble for all hands," one of the boys suggested.

[Pg 22]

"What of that? Nobody can say we did it, an' after he's had one night of it, I reckon he'll be willin' to do as we say."

"But how'll he get out?"

"That's for him to say. We'll show him what it is to go agin our crowd, an' the rest is his business."

Then Fred was borne forward again until it seemed as if fully half a mile had been traversed, when the regulators halted for the second time.

The wrappings were removed from his head, and as nearly as the prisoner could tell he was some distance from the breaker; at the mouth of what appeared to be an abandoned shaft.

"Now, look here," Skip Miller said, as he stood before his prisoner. "You've taken it into your head that us reg'lators don't 'mount to nothin'; but by to-morrer mornin' you'll think different. What we say we mean an' don't you forget it. If you'd been man enough to do like every other feller it would 'a been all right; but instead of that you go babyin' to old Donovan, an' we don't 'low sich funny business."

"What are you going to do now?"

"Show what the reg'lators 'mount to. When you come out of this I reckon you'll be willin' to pay up like a man, an' join us."

"It will have to be a pretty stiff dose to make me do anything of the kind," Fred said, angrily.

"That's jest what this is goin' to be. We're lettin' you off of a poundin' so's to show what can be

done, an' if you say so much as a word to old Donovan we'll pretty near kill you."

[Pg 23]

"I shall talk to whoever I please."

"Not after you come out of this. Don't think we'll allers let you off so cheap, an' at the first show of tellin' what's been done to-night we'll give you another lesson."

Fred realized that it was useless to bandy words with those who held him so completely in their power, and understanding also that he could do nothing to better his condition, held his peace.

Skip showed himself to be an adept in the business of subduing refractory breaker boys, by giving his orders promptly, and in such a manner as would soonest accomplish the work. Under his energetic directions Fred's hands were soon tied behind his back, a gag was fastened in his mouth, and the rope placed under his arms.

"Now raise him up, an' you needn't be careful about lettin' him drop. The sooner he gets to the bottom the quicker we can go back to the store. Put the bundles near the mouth of the shaft, an' in a couple of days somebody will find him."

"It'll go rough with us if he tells who left him here," one of the party suggested.

"There's no danger of that. Before he gets out he'll know what it means to fool with us."

Fred remained passive. He could not believe these boys would dare to do anything very serious. And to attempt resistance would accomplish no possible good.

"Raise him up!" Skip shouted, and in another instant Fred was hanging over what appeared to be a deep hole, to be dropped with a suddenness and force which, for the time being, deprived him of consciousness.

[Pg 24]

While he lay at the bottom of the shaft the regulators placed the parcels taken from the store, in such a manner as to make it appear that he had fallen in by accident, and when this had been done they went swiftly toward the settlement, regardless of whether their victim lived or died.

CHAPTER III

IN THE SHAFT

Mrs. Byram had no suspicion that her son might be exposed to any danger until after he had been absent an hour, and then the remembrance of the threats made by Skip Miller and his friends caused her the deepest anxiety. Fred would not have staid at the store longer than was absolutely necessary, and the fear of foul play had hardly gained possession of her mind before she was on her way to search for him.

The company's clerk had but just finished explaining that the new breaker boy left there with his purchases some time previous, when Donovan entered in time to hear the widow say:

"I do not understand why he should remain away so long, for he must know I would be troubled concerning him."

"Didn't your boy stay in the house after I left him at the gate, Mrs. Byram?" the breaker boss asked.

[Pg 25]

Mrs. Byram explained why Fred ventured out, and the man appeared to be disturbed in mind.

"This is just the time when he oughter kept his nose inside. Them young ruffians are likely to do any mischief."

"Then you believe something serious has happened."

"I didn't say quite that; but it won't do much harm to have a look for him. You go home, an' I'll call there in an hour." Then turning to some of the loungers, he asked, "Has anybody seen Skip Miller lately?"

"You're allers tryin' to make out that he's at the bottom of everything that goes wrong," Skip's father, who entered at this moment, said in a surly tone.

"If he ain't, it's not for lack of willingness. Do you know where he is?"

"Home, where he's been for an hour or more."

Donovan looked hard at the speaker, and Miller retorted:

"If you don't believe me, it won't take long to find out for yourself."

"That's exactly what I'm going to do. Mrs. Byram, I will see you again in less than an hour."

With these words the breaker boss left the store, and Fred's mother walked slowly home, the anxiety in her heart growing more intense each moment.

Two hours passed before Donovan returned and announced his inability to find the missing boy.

"I did think Skip might have had a hand in it," he said; "but I reckon he's innocent this time. I found him near his own home with a crowd of cronies, and according to all accounts he's been there since supper."

[Pg 26]

"But what has become of Fred?" Mrs. Byram asked, preserving a semblance of calmness only after the greatest difficulty.

"I hope nothing serious has happened. The superintendent has been notified, and promises to send men out in search of him at once. It is just possible he went down the slope to see the night shift at work."

There was nothing in these words to afford the distressed mother any relief, and the sorrow which would not be controlled took complete possession of her, as Donovan hurried away to join those who were examining every place where an accident might have occurred.

Meanwhile the subject of all this commotion remained where the regulators had left him. It was a long time before he recovered consciousness, and then several moments were spent in trying to decide where he was and what had happened.

The fragments of conversation heard while the boys were carrying him told that he was in an abandoned shaft, and, unacquainted though he was with mines in general, it did not require much thought to convince him how nearly impossible it would be to escape unaided.

The bonds which fastened his limbs, as well as the gag, had not been tied firmly, and in a short time he was free to begin such an examination of the place as was possible in the profound darkness.

Here and there he could feel the timbers left when the shaft was deserted, and, after groping about some moments, discovered a tunnel-like opening ten or twelve feet across. The roof or top of this place was beyond his reach, and he knew it must be a drift from which all the coal had been taken.

[Pg 27]

"It may lead for miles under the hill, and I would be no better off by following it," he thought. "Unless there is a slope which communicates with it, I'd be in a worse fix than now, because the chances of being lost or suffocated must be about even."

Then in his despair he shouted at the full strength of his lungs, until it was impossible to speak louder than a whisper.

Nothing less than the booming of a cannon could have been heard from the shaft by any one in the settlement, and with the night shift in the working mine there would hardly be any one in the vicinity.

After giving full sway to his grief for half an hour or more, anger replaced sorrow, and he rushed into the tunnel with no other thought than to escape from that particular place.

Stumbling on over decaying timbers, rocks, and mounds of earth which had fallen from the roof, he pushed straight ahead until the decided inclination told that this drift tended upward. There was now reason to believe it might communicate with another which, in turn, was reached by a slope, and hope grew strong once more.

How long he had traveled when the sound of voices caused him to halt it was impossible to form any idea; but it seemed as if several hours elapsed, and the first thought was to shout for help.

"I won't do it," he said, checking himself. "This tunnel may have led me back to the other mine, and if the people ahead are some of the night shift they'll be likely to have considerable sport at my expense."

[Pg 28]

Walking cautiously in the direction of the voices he was suddenly brought to a standstill by an apparently solid wall of earth.

He groped around until there was no question but that he had reached the end of the drift, and when this discovery had been made he found a small aperture which opened into a gallery or chamber where were a dozen men, the lamps in their hats illumining the place sufficiently for Fred to distinguish the party.

He had reached the limit of the abandoned drift, and was looking in upon a portion of the new mine.

Even now he made no appeal for help. The conversation of the men caused him to listen with no thought of his own condition.

"Unless we do the job to-morrow night there's little chance of gettin' through with it all right," one of the party was saying, and another replied with an oath:

"There's no reason why we should wait. To-night would suit me."

"I don't believe in it," a third man said. "What's to be gained by floodin' the mine, an' turnin' ourselves out of a chance to earn a living?"

"You allers was chicken-hearted, Joe Brace. Haven't we put up with enough from the mine owners an' bosses? We work for starvation wages, while they can barrel money."

"Would you say that if you hadn't been thrown out of a job?"

"That's my business. Here's a crowd of us who have sworn to stick together, no matter what happens, an' five have been warned out. Are we goin' peaceable, not liftin' a finger agin them as have got rich while we starved?"

[Pg 29]

"But how are we helpin' ourselves by floodin' the mine?"

"Three or four of sich bosses as Donovan may be in the drift when with one stroke of a pick I let the water into the lower level, and that'll show the others we're men, even if they do treat us like brutes."

"You will drown some of your own mates."

"Them as are on the level must take their chances."

"It's murder, that's what it is, an' I'll have none of it!" Brace cried, as he leaped to his feet, and in another instant the whole party were facing him who dared dispute their right to do wrong.

For some moments our hero could not distinguish a word, so great was the confusion; but when the tumult subsided in a measure two men were holding Brace, while he who appeared to be leader stood before him in a threatening attitude.

"You've sworn to go with the crowd, and know the penalty for traitors."

"I know that I'll blow the whole business if I get the chance. I've got a brother in the lower level; do you think I'll stand by while he is bein' murdered?"

"Better do that than turn agin us. We'll give you one chance; swear to hold your tongue, an' we'll do no more than make sure you can't betray us."

"An' if I don't choose to swear?"

"Then we'll leave you here lashed hand an' foot. When the mine is flooded this drift will be cut off, an' it don't need a lawyer to say what'll happen then."

[Pg 30]

"So to spite them as have done you a bad turn you're willin' to murder me?"

"That's about the size of it."

"Listen to me, Cale Billings. I promised to stand by you fellers when the agreement was to help each other agin the bosses; but now it's murder you mean. I'd rather be on the lower level when the deed is done than have part or parcel with them as are willin' to make widows an' orphans."

"Then we know what to do," Billings cried angrily, as he rushed toward Brace, and for several moments Fred had only a confused idea of what was taking place.

Brace was fighting against the entire party, and, under such circumstances, the struggle could not be prolonged.

When the watcher could next distinguish the occupants of the chamber Brace laid on his back bound hand and foot, while the others were on the point of departure.

Billings remained behind his companions to say:

"We gave you all the chance we could, an' now it's only yourself you've got to thank for what'll happen before forty-eight hours go by."

"I'd die twice over rather than put the stain of blood on my hands."

"Well, you've got the chance to try it once, an' I reckon you'll wish things was different before long. We'll take good care nobody comes this way too soon."

Then the party filed out of the room, one or two glancing back with undisguised pity, and as they passed along the drift the place was wrapped in profound darkness, with nothing to break the silence save the doomed man's heavy breathing.

[Pg 31]

Fred waited until believing the would-be murderers were beyond the sound of his voice, and then he called softly:

"Brace! Brace!"

"Who's there?"

"A breaker boy who came into the mine yesterday."

"Where are you?"

Fred explained to the best of his ability, and added:

"Do you know of any way I can get out of here?"

"No; that part of the mine has been closed a good many years, an' it would take a week to work up through the old slope. Before then the water on the lower level is bound to flood this end of the workings."

"And we shall be drowned."

"I don't see any help for it."

"But we can't stay here and be killed!" Fred cried in an agony of fear.

"It's tough, but there's no way out of it unless——"

"What? Speak quickly, for time mustn't be lost if we're to do anything toward helping ourselves."

"How large a cut is there through the wall where you are standing?"

"It's only a small one—perhaps four or five inches across."

"Couldn't you make it large enough to crawl through?"

"It wouldn't take long if I had a shovel; but without one it will be hard."

[Pg 32]

"Set about it, lad; work is better than idleness when a fellow is in this kind of a scrape."

Fred obeyed instantly, tearing away the earth regardless of the injury done his hands; but making very slow progress. The wall was composed of slate and gravel, and a pick would have been necessary to effect a speedy entrance.

Meanwhile Brace strove to cheer the boy by talking of the possibility that they might yet escape, and hour after hour Fred continued at the task until the moment arrived when it was possible, by dint of much squeezing, to make his way through the aperture.

"Do you think it is near the time when the men are to flood the mine?" he asked, groping around until his outstretched hands touched Brace's prostrate body, when he began feverishly to untie the ropes.

"No, lad, we must have half a dozen hours before us."

"Then we are all right!" Fred cried joyfully. "You know the way out, and Billings' plot can be made known in time to prevent the mischief."

"Don't fool yourself with the idea that matters have been straightened because I'm free," Brace replied, as he rose to his feet when Fred's task had been finished.

"But what is to prevent our leaving here?"

"Did you catch what Billings said when he left?"

"Yes."

"Then there's no need of sayin' anything more. Some of the murderin' crowd will be on guard at the entrance to the drift, and, knowing what we do of their plans, every means will be used to prevent our ever seeing daylight again."

[Pg 33]

"Don't you intend to do anything toward trying to escape?"

"Of course. I'm not quite a fool."

"Shall you go back with me, or try to find the shaft?"

"That would be useless. We will go straight through this drift."

"But if Billings' crowd are watching for you?"

"It's simply a case of fighting for life. There ain't much hope of overpowerin' them; the job will be child's play compared with tryin' to hold our own agin the flood that's sure to come soon."

Brace groped around for something which would serve as a weapon, but finding nothing, he said grimly:

"We'll have to go as we are, lad, an' remember that if we don't get through the drift you'll never see the breaker again."

CHAPTER IV

THE BARRIER

Brace did not so much as ask if Fred was willing to join him in the struggle which must surely ensue, if they met those who intended to work such great injury to the mine. He walked straight on without speaking until five minutes had elapsed, and then said in a whisper:

"It wouldn't be safe for any of that crowd to be found loafin' near the entrance to the drift, so we may expect to run across them before long. If they get the best of me, an' you can slip past while they are doin' it, don't wait, but make the most of your time."

[Pg 34]

"I wouldn't leave you to fight alone."

"Why not? My life don't count for anything when there are so many to be saved. Run if you can, and tell what Billings intends to do. The superintendent is the one who should hear it first, but if the time is short speak to any of the bosses."

Up to this moment Fred had thought only that he and Brace might insure their own safety; but now personal welfare seemed insignificant as compared with what might be done for others.

Following closely behind Brace, that there might be no possibility of an involuntary separation, he walked on in silence until the leader suddenly halted with a cry of dismay.

"What's the matter?" Fred whispered.

"The villains have taken good care we sha'n't escape. The drift has been filled up this side of the doors."

"Can't we dig our way through? They haven't had time to bring much stuff in here."

"More than likely two or three loads of coal have been dumped, and then the doors were fastened. The drift has been worked out, and none of the bosses would come here in time to suspect mischief."

"What can we do?"

"Wait a bit till I make sure what's before us."

Brace clambered upon the barrier, assured himself there was too much to be removed in the limited time at their disposal, and then came back to where Fred was waiting in painful suspense. [Pg 35]

"It must be the old shaft or nothing. Walk fast now for the minutes are going mighty quick."

Alone, Fred would have had difficulty in retracing his steps, but Brace pushed forward as if it was possible to see every foot of the way, and when the chamber was reached immediately began forcing his body through the aperture which had seemed hardly large enough for Fred.

Neither gave any heed to possible injuries, and the man's clothes were in tatters when they emerged on the opposite side of the wall to make their way with all speed along the tunnel.

For a while the inclination of the path told Fred the proper direction was being pursued, and then it seemed as if they traveled an unusually long time over a road which appeared to be perfectly level.

"Are you sure we are right?" he asked at length, seizing Brace by the arm to force him to halt.

"I don't know anything about it. This part of the mine was closed before I ever heard of such a place as Farley's."

"We should have continued going down hill until the shaft was gained."

"Then we are off the track sure; but it can't be helped now, and there is little chance of finding our way back. The air isn't bad, and we'll keep on; it may be there is another slope beside the one about which I have heard."

"We must be on the lower level."

"I reckon we are."

"And it can't be long before Billings will do as he threatened." [Pg 36]

"You're right."

"Then we are certain to be drowned unless we can find a higher drift."

"Yes, an' it'll be a clear case of luck if we strike one. Don't stop to talk now. We must go at full speed while the air is good."

Seizing Fred by the hand, Brace started once more, and for the time being both forgot fatigue in this struggle for life. On with feverish energy they pressed, yet no glimmer of light broke the profound darkness. More than once each fell over the litter of timbers, but only to rise and struggle on again, until finally Brace halted.

"It's no use," he said with a moan. "Each step now is carrying us lower. I remember hearing some of the old hands say the abandoned drifts were a hundred feet or so farther down the hill. We must be considerably below the deepest shaft."

"Have you given up all hope?" Fred asked in a whisper, for while surrounded by the dense blackness the full tones of his voice sounded fearsome.

"Ay, lad, all hope."

"Try once more. There surely is a way out if we could only strike it!"

"We may as well meet the water here. I've been in the mines long enough to know that this runnin' at random is worse than standin' quiet. When a man's time has come there's no use to fight."

Fred could not urge him farther. The numbness of fear was upon him, brought by this sudden

surrender of the man whom he had believed would be able to extricate them from the precarious position, and now he thought only of his mother.

[Pg 37]

How long the two remained there silent and motionless neither ever knew. To Fred it seemed as if hours passed before Brace seized him by the arm as he cried at the full strength of his lungs:

"Hello! Mate! This way!"

Then he ran forward at full speed, dragging Fred with him, and shouting like an insane man all the while until finally the boy could see a tiny spark of light far in the distance.

"It's some one looking for us," Fred cried.

"Whether he's come for us, or is on business of his own, matters little since his light is burning."

Then, as Brace ceased speaking, Fred heard a familiar voice shouting, and an instant later Sam Thorpe had grasped him by the hand.

"Why, it's Bill's butty! What are you doing here?"

"I came to look for the new breaker boy; I thought Skip's crowd had done him some mischief."

"So they did, an' another set of scoundrels would have drowned us all out but for your coming."

"What do you mean?"

"There's no time for talkin' now. How did you get here?"

"By an old slope that I stumbled across the other day. I found Fred's bundles near the shaft, and believed he had been let down there."

"Go on the best you know how; I'll give you a bit of an idea about ourselves while we're walking."

The gleam of the lamp Sam wore in his cap was sufficient to show the way, and by the time the entrance to the slope had been reached the butty boy knew the whole story.

[Pg 38]

"Billings' gang won't be able to do anything till after the day shift go on, an' I think it would be a good idea to let the superintendent know what has happened. Why not stay here till I tell him part of the story?"

"Go ahead," Brace replied. "We'll wait for you."

"Will you tell my mother that I am all right?" Fred asked.

"She shall hear of it first," Sam said, as he stole out into the open air, as if fearful of being seen.

"Why didn't we go with him?" Fred asked when he was alone with Brace.

"Because nobody knows how far the plan to flood the mine may have gone, and by showing ourselves the villains may begin the job too soon to be prevented."

It was yet dark. Instead of having been imprisoned in the tunnels twenty-four hours, as Fred had believed, less than eight were passed there.

That Mr. Wright believed the news Sam brought to be of vital importance was shown by his coming with the boy with the utmost speed, and on entering the shaft he said to Brace:

"Tell me all you know about the plan to flood the mine."

The story was given in detail, and at its conclusion Mr. Wright asked:

"How do you happen to know so much about this thing?"

"Because I belonged to the party till I found they meant murder."

[Pg 39]

"Are you acquainted with all the members?"

"No, sir; wasn't allowed. Billings allers let us understand there was a big crowd, but wouldn't let any besides the officers know about it; he said the men might give themselves away by talkin' if they found who was members."

"Why do they wish to throw all hands out of employment by flooding the mine?"

"Some of the bosses are too hard on 'em, sir, an' a good many think it's like sellin' theirselves to deal at the company store."

"They should have come to me with their grievances; but it is too late to talk of that now, and immediate steps must be taken to prevent the mischief. It won't be policy for you to show yourself until my plans have been perfected, otherwise they would take alarm. The boy can go home, and I want him to be in the breaker this morning as if nothing had happened. Where can you remain in hiding for a few days?"

"I don't know, sir, unless I leave town."

"That will not do, for I may wish to talk with you again."

"He can come with me," Fred said quickly. "We do not know any one here, and there's no danger

of his being discovered."

"It's a good idea. Go with the boy, Brace, and I can let you know when it will be safe to venture out."

"Very well, sir; but don't deal harshly with Billings' crowd. They've tried to do me the most harm one man can work another; but yet, for the sake of their wives an' children, I'd not feel easy in mind if they was turned away without warning."

[Pg 40]

"I promise to be as lenient as is consistent with the safety of others," Mr. Wright replied, as Fred and the miner left the slope, walking rapidly lest they should be observed, and a few moments later Mrs. Byram was clasping to her bosom the son whom she had feared was lost to her forever on this earth.

It was not long that Fred could remain at home. He had promised to go to the breaker, and after he and Brace partook of a hearty meal, at the conclusion of which the latter was shown to a room where there was no chance of his being seen, he started out, with the promise to his mother that he would be very careful.

By some channel of information the news had been spread that the missing boy returned home during the night, and no one paid any particular attention to him as he walked down the street, but on entering the breaker Skip Miller and his friends were decidedly disturbed. The leader of the regulators glanced from Fred to Donovan, as if expecting he would be called upon to give an account of his misdeeds; but Chunky, who had evidently not been let into the secret, greeted his mate as if the latter's return was something he had expected.

"Where was you last night?" he asked.

"I went out near the old shaft," Fred replied, and Skip, who overheard the words, appeared to be very much relieved.

"I thought you'd run away."

"Why should I do anything like that?"

"I dunno, 'cept that you wanted to get clear of the thumpin' that the regulators promised."

[Pg 41]

"I'm not such a fool as that," Fred replied carelessly, and then the outpouring of coal put an end to further conversation.

CHAPTER V

THE MOB

Fred could not prevent himself from glancing now and then in the direction of Skip Miller and his friends during the forenoon, and on each occasion he found one or more of the party gazing at him as if in wonderment. They failed to understand how he succeeded in leaving the shaft, and this surprise was less than that called forth by the fact of his remaining silent regarding their ill-treatment.

One, two, three hours passed much as usual, and then something happened which caused the oldest worker in the mines unbounded astonishment.

The machinery suddenly stopped, and from all the bosses came the orders that every laborer should return home without delay.

No explanations were given, and when the vast army were on the outside they stood in groups around the works discussing the cause of this very strange state of affairs.

"I never knew anything like this to happen at Farley's before," an old miner said.

"And they don't even tell us why we are cheated out of a day's work."

"The engineer says there is nothing the matter with the machinery."

[Pg 42]

"Yes, an' he, like us, has been ordered to go home."

These and a dozen other remarks Fred heard as he left the breaker, and while loitering for an instant to learn if any one suspected the true state of affairs he became conscious that Skip and his friends were regarding him with mingled anger and consternation written on their faces.

"You'd better get out of here, or there may be trouble," Chunky whispered.

"Why?"

"'Cause Skip has got plenty of time now to serve you out, an' he looks like somethin' was goin' to be done."

"He'd better not try any more games. I can take care of myself in the daylight."

"What do you mean? Did he do somethin' last night?"

Before Fred could reply the captain of the regulators came up, and Chunky lost no time in moving away from this very important personage.

"Say," Skip began, as he stepped threateningly in front of Fred, "what's the meanin' of all this?"

"Do you mean the shutting down of the machinery?"

"Of course I do."

"Why should I know anything about it?"

"Don't try to play off innocent to me. You've been blowin' about what the regulators did, an' that's why all hands can suck their thumbs to-day."

"Don't you think that is a foolish idea?" Fred asked, with a feeble effort at a smile. "Do you fancy you, the regulators, or I, are so important that the whole force is laid off because of anything which may have happened between us?"

[Pg 43]

Skip was staggered by this reply, and after thinking the matter over for a moment, he said in a surly tone:

"All I've got to say is that things will be too hot for you in this town, if a word is told about what was done last night."

"You said pretty near the same before throwing me down the shaft."

"Well, I'm sayin' it again, for it stands you in hand to remember it."

"I won't forget."

Skip turned quickly as if the tone offended him, and after glaring fiercely at the breaker boy, walked slowly toward his friends.

"What's in the wind now? Is he making any more threats?"

Looking around quickly Fred saw Sam Thorpe, who had just come up the slope with Bill Thomas.

"Skip is afraid the shutting down has some connection with the doings of the regulators. Isn't it queer to stop the machinery so soon when Mr. Wright was anxious to keep everything a secret?"

"I heard him say that the pumps were out of order. One set got choked this morning, and it wouldn't be safe for the miners to stay in the lower level till they were repaired."

Sam winked meaningly as if he thought the matter had been arranged very skillfully; but Fred was yet at a loss to understand how anything could be gained by this move.

"Why were all hands thrown out?"

[Pg 44]

"There are some general repairs to be made, and it was better to do the whole at the same time."

"Then there's no reason why Brace should hide any longer."

"He mustn't so much as show his nose. Come over by the slope and watch Billings and his crowd. They are in a peck of trouble, expecting that Brace will be found, and since no one is allowed to enter the mine matters begin to look tough for them."

Fred followed his friend and saw those who had intended to cause a terrible disaster clustered around the mouth of the slope in a feverish state of excitement.

"This is a nice way to treat honest men," Billings was saying as the two approached. "We work for starvation wages, an' then get laid off whenever the bosses like, without so much as a notice. It's time we did something to show we're men."

"I'm told the pumps are choked," an old miner said, "an' if that's the case Mr. Wright oughter shut down. Farley's never has had a very good name; but one or two stoppages like this'll show it's worked on the square."

"What a fool you are!" Billings cried angrily. "Haven't you got sense enough to see that this thing has been done so's we'll run deeper in debt at the store, an' have to submit to a cut down when Wright gets ready to put the screws on?"

Several of the bystanders loudly expressed their belief in the correctness of Billings' theory, and instantly the greatest excitement prevailed. The group increased in numbers each moment, and Billings took upon himself the office of spokesman.

[Pg 45]

One proposed they march in a body to the superintendent's house and demand that the machinery be started again. Another insisted on forcing their way into the mine to ascertain the true cause of the stoppage, and in this last speaker Fred recognized one of the men who had helped make Joe Brace a prisoner.

"They want to find him before Mr. Wright orders an examination," he whispered to Sam, and the latter replied:

"In less than an hour they'll have force enough to do as they please. It's time we were out of this;

you go home to tell Joe, and I'll see Mr. Wright if possible."

Fred was all the more willing to follow this advice because Skip and his party were in the immediate vicinity, and the lawlessness of the men might render them bold enough to administer the promised flogging then and there.

The streets of the little town were crowded with knots of miners, some of whom seemed to think the superintendent had acted for their good, while others were indulging in the most extravagant threats.

Mrs. Byram was standing in the doorway when her son arrived, and it could readily be seen by her face how relieved she was to have him with her once more.

"You mustn't leave the house again to-day," she said in a tremulous voice. "Go up stairs and tell Mr. Brace what has happened."

The miner was impatient to learn the cause of the excitement, for he could hear the hum of voices on the street; but did not care to look out of the window for fear of being seen.

[Pg 46]

Fred's story was not a long one, and he had to repeat it several times before Brace was satisfied.

"I s'pose Wright knows his own business best; but it looks mighty dangerous to shut down so sudden."

"Perhaps it was the only course to pursue," Fred suggested. "Billings' crowd may have been so near carrying their plot into operation that there was no time for anything different."

"That might be; but take my word for it, there's going to be trouble at Farley's before this fuss is settled."

"Do you think Billings would dare to force his way into the mine?"

"He'd dare do anything with men enough at his back."

"Suppose they got in and didn't find you?"

"I ain't thinkin' of myself, for it would be easy to get out of town."

"If they have an idea you've escaped from the drift all hands will be on the watch, knowing you could expose their plot."

"Everything is correct so long as they don't find out where I am, an' when it's time to move I'll agree to give 'em the slip. Go down stairs so you can see if the trouble is about to begin."

Before Fred could obey, Sam Thorpe burst into the room.

"There's a regular mob on the way to Mr. Wright's house. They threaten to burn it if the works are not opened in an hour."

"Where is the superintendent?" Brace asked.

[Pg 47]

"In the mine I think; he's not at home, for I just came from there."

"Is Billings leadin' them?"

"Yes."

"How many of the company's men are on guard at the slope?"

"About a dozen."

"Who are they?"

Sam repeated the names, and Brace said musingly:

"There are one or two that I'm doubtful of. They've been too thick lately with Billings."

"It can't be helped now, for Mr. Wright wouldn't dare show himself long enough to make any change."

At this moment a loud cry from the street caused the boys to run quickly down the stairs, and Brace ventured to look out from between the folds of the curtain.

The mob, in a spirit of bravado and to gain recruits, were parading the streets before making their demands, and had halted in front of the company's store that Billings might harangue those near by. He was dilating upon the wrongs inflicted on honest workingmen, and calling for everyone to join in the struggle for their rights, when, to the astonishment of all, Mr. Wright appeared, coming from the direction of the slope.

The superintendent would have passed the mob and entered the store, but that the men barred his way, forcing him to halt directly in front of Mrs. Byram's home.

"We was lookin' for you," Billings said insolently, as he stepped close to Mr. Wright.

"Well, now that you have found me speak quickly, for there is very much that I must do before night."

[Pg 48]

"Open the works!" a voice shouted.

"Give us a chance at the bosses!"

"Tell us what's the matter. Why are we thrown out of a job?"

"Hold on!" Billings cried, "I'll do the talking."

It was several moments before the tumult ceased sufficiently for the leader to make himself understood, and meanwhile the superintendent stepped on the threshold as Mrs. Byram opened the door.

"In the first place," Billings began, "we want to know why the works have been shut down?"

"Because the pumps in the lower level are choked, and there is every danger that portion will be flooded."

"But why are us miners barred out?"

"It is evident someone has been trying to work mischief, and I do not care to run the risk of allowing the same party free access to the place until all the damage is repaired."

"Do you mean to accuse us of tryin to drown each other?" one of the throng asked.

"I shall make no accusations until everything can be proven; but meanwhile all must remain out of the works that the guilty parties may not be able to do worse mischief."

"That is only a trick to keep us idle so the store bills put us more completely in your power," Billings cried insolently.

"You know the company must lose a great deal of money by taking the men out."

It was impossible for Mr. Wright to make himself heard further. The miners began to speak, each one for himself, and little could be distinguished save the threats to burn the houses belonging to the officers of the works, if the machinery was not started immediately.

[Pg 49]

After this threat had been made the men grew more bold, and before those in the cottage had time to screen themselves a shower of stones were flung at the superintendent, who barely succeeded in protecting himself by jumping behind the door.

Fred and Sam, the latter of whom had an ugly cut on the cheek, closed the door quickly, bolting and barricading it with the furniture nearest at hand, and the riot had begun.

The angry men pelted the house with such missiles as could be most easily procured, and during two or three minutes it seemed as if the building must be wrecked.

Mr. Wright would have run into the street as the only way by which the widow's property could be saved; but Fred and Sam prevented him by force, and Brace, who came down stairs at the first alarm, said decidedly:

"You mustn't think of such a thing. Your life would be taken."

"It is cowardly to remain here."

"It is foolhardy to face, single handed, two or three hundred brutes like those who are yelling."

"But the widow's property?"

"The building belongs to the company, and you can easily pay her for what may be destroyed."

During this brief conversation the front windows had been shattered, and the mob appeared to be on the point of carrying the place by storm when a voice cried:

[Pg 50]

"I ain't here to fight agin women who are in the same box with ourselves. What's to prevent our smashin' the windows of his own house?"

"That's the way to talk," another replied. "Come on; we'll attend to his case later."

As if by magic the mob vanished; but the hoots and yells told of the direction in which they had gone.

"Something must be done at once, or there is no knowing where this thing will end. Fred, you and Sam get some boards up at these windows, and I'll learn how many of the men can be trusted to stand by us. Keep out of sight a while longer Brace."

Mr. Wright left the building by the rear entrance, the boys watching until he disappeared within the company's store, and then Sam proceeded to obey the orders.

Nearly every pane of glass in the front of the house had been broken, and there was not lumber enough to close more than one.

"We shall have to go to the yard for boards; do you dare to try it, Fred?"

"Why not? Skip's crowd are most likely with the men."

Mrs. Byram was afraid to have her son leave the house at such a time; but Joe Brace made light

of her fears, and she gave a reluctant consent.

"We sha'nt be away more than half an hour, and the mob will pay no attention to us while they have so much mischief on hand," Fred said as he followed Sam.

CHAPTER VI

[Pg 51]

ON DUTY

In order to reach the yard where the lumber was to be found it was necessary that the boys should pass near the store, and at a point where Mr. Wright's house could be seen plainly. The mob which now surrounded it was in full view, and the angry shouts, mingled with breaking glass, came to their ears with great distinctness.

"It doesn't seem right for us to stay here when we might be of some service there," Fred said as he pointed in the direction of the building.

"I don't know what we could do if we were on the spot. It isn't likely those men would stop because we asked them to do so, and, so far as I can judge, it is very much better to stay at a respectful distance."

"And let them destroy the buildings?"

"What can you do to prevent it?"

"Nothing that I know of, and yet it is wicked to let this thing be done without some protest."

"Mr. Wright would attend to that matter if a protest would amount to anything. Our duty is to protect your mother, and that must be attended to before anything else."

"I realize that fact fully; but——"

At this moment Mr. Wright called from the rear of the store:

"Boys, come here!"

Obedying the summons they were led to a rear room where were assembled the principal officers of the mine, all looking more or less frightened, and the superintendent said as they entered:

[Pg 52]

"Is there anything to prevent your doing as I wish during the next few hours."

"Not that I know of, sir," Fred replied. "We were about to fasten up the broken windows at home; but that is of little consequence in case you require our services."

"The force of men on guard at the slope is too small if the rioters try to effect an entrance. It is in the highest degree important that Billings' crowd be prevented from getting in, until all our arrangements have been made. Will you go on duty there until troops can be summoned?"

"We are willing to do everything in our power."

"Then arm yourselves with these guns."

Mr. Wright pointed to a number of muskets as he spoke, and Sam did not delay in selecting a weapon.

"I must tell mother where I have gone or she will be worried," Fred said, as he started toward the door.

"I will call upon her at once, and you need not delay."

"How long are we likely to remain on duty?"

"Only until troops arrive. We have telegraphed to the governor, and a company should be here within the next twenty-four hours."

"It isn't probable the sentinels will take our word for it that you have sent us."

"Here is a line to Donovan, and you had better start at once, for there's no saying how soon the rioters may get tired of destroying dwellings. Tell Donovan that we hope to send him a larger force soon."

[Pg 53]

The boys felt very much like soldiers as they marched toward the slope, each armed with a gun and half a dozen cartridges, and the tumult which could be heard distinctly, heightened the illusion.

"They have set fire to some building," Sam said, as he pointed to a column of smoke which rose from the direction of the superintendent's home. "If that kind of work has begun there's little chance of its being ended while Billings' crowd hold the town."

"I ought to have staid with mother. There's no reason why I should help fight the company's quarrels while she may be in danger."

"You could be of no assistance, and it is better to be out of the way, for Skip and his gang will not remain quiet while it is possible to do mischief."

"At the same time I should be with her," Fred replied; but making no motion to return.

Upon arriving at the entrance to the slope they were stopped by a sentinel who cried as he leveled his gun:

"Halt! What do you want?"

"We have been sent by Mr. Wright with a note to Donovan," Sam replied.

"Stay where you are, and I will call him."

"This looks like fighting," Sam said, as the sentinel shouted for the breaker boss. "If they are afraid to let the boys come nearer than hailing distance, what'll be done when the mob get here?"

"If the soldiers arrive things will be worse than they are now," Fred said with a sigh, and then Donovan interrupted the mournful conversation by calling as he came up the slope:

[Pg 54]

"Oh, it's you, eh? Well, get in here quick. I thought Mr. Wright had sent some one to help us."

"So he has," and Sam handed the breaker boss the superintendent's letter. "We're to go on duty here till help arrives in the shape of soldiers."

"I s'pose you two will count for one man; but we need a good many more by the looks of things. Go into the first level an' stay there till you're wanted."

Obedying these instructions the boys found a dozen men lounging about the chamber, some lying on the empty trucks, and others moving to and fro restlessly; but all well armed.

Each one was most eager to know what was being done in the village, and the story had but just been told when the first alarm came.

"Get up to the mouth of the slope," Donovan shouted from above. "There's a small crowd comin' this way, an' it's best to be prepared for 'em."

The command was promptly obeyed, and all watched the score of men who were approaching. Instead of nearing the sentinels they turned off to the left before arriving within hailing distance, and one of the party said in a tone of satisfaction:

"That's all right; they're only lookin' around to see if our eyes are open."

"They are going in the direction of the shaft into which Skip's crowd threw me," Fred whispered to Sam.

"Yes."

"And in that way it would be possible to get into this portion of the mine."

"I s'pose so; but they ain't likely to make such a long trip as that."

[Pg 55]

"Why not, if by so doing the lower level could be flooded without any risk to themselves?"

"Now don't get frightened, Fred, there isn't one chance in a hundred that any of the crowd know about the old gallery."

"But if they do all of us might easily be driven out by the water."

"Since it troubles you so much, speak to Donovan. He's the boss, and will know if anything should be done."

"You tell him."

"Not much; I'm not going to be laughed at."

Fred hesitated only a moment; he believed that it was of the utmost importance this possible means of entering the mine should be guarded, and calling Donovan aside told him of his escape from the shaft; but refrained from mentioning Joe Brace's name.

"I reckon you're more frightened than hurt, lad; but at the same time I don't want to run any risks. Since Sam Thorpe knows the way through, take him an' start. One of you could keep a hundred from comin' in at such a small hole as you tell about."

"Are we to stay there?"

"Half an hour'll be long enough; if they don't show theirselves by then we'll know there's nothin' to be feared from that quarter."

Fred repeated to Sam what Donovan had said, and the orders were not received in a cheerful spirit.

"That's all you get for bein' scared. It ain't any joke to travel through the lower level, an' we can count on stayin' there till midnight."

"It's better than being flooded out."

[Pg 56]

"I'm not so sure of that."

"Then you won't go?"

"Of course I will. Do you think I'm such a fool as to act dead against orders. Come on, an' let's get through with it as soon as possible."

By using an empty car, allowing it to run down the grade by its own weight, they were soon at the heavy doors which marked the termination of the first level. Here a halt was made, because even the boys whose duties it was to open the barriers were absent, and from this point the remainder of the journey was made on foot.

At the lower level five miners were found repairing the pumps, and the boys were forced once more to tell what had occurred in the village.

"Men what want to work don't go round kickin' up sich a row as this," one of the party said, as Fred and Sam passed on. "Give some of that Billings' crowd a chance an' the slope never'd be opened agin."

"There's a miner who won't join the mob," Fred said.

"Yes; but for every man like that a dozen can be found to fight against their own interests."

Now the boys no longer walked side by side. Sam led the way, watching narrowly the lamp in his companion's cap to discover the first signs of fire-damp, and guarding well the flame which served to show him the proper course.

"Be careful of your matches," he said warningly. "They may be worth a good deal before we get back from this wild goose chase."

"How much farther must we go?"

[Pg 57]

"Half an hour of fast traveling should bring us to where you found the tunnel choked with coal, an' I don't reckon you count on tryin' to get any farther."

"We couldn't do it, no matter how much we might want to."

"Oh, yes; when the doors are opened that pile will come down mighty quick; but while it stays as it is the passage is blocked better than if a dozen men were on guard."

Another time of silence, during which the boys walked rapidly, and then Sam uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"Some one has been working here. Half the coal is pulled away, an' it won't be much of a job to get into the chamber."

"Who could have done it?"

"Perhaps Billings' gang worked a spell after the order to quit was given?"

"What could they have gained by reaching Joe again?"

"Taken him through the old drift to the shaft. But let's work our way over this pile, an' then start back before our oil gives out."

Ten minutes of sharp labor and the boys were in the chamber where Brace had been left to die, Sam throwing himself on the hard floor, as he said:

"We'll take a breathin' spell before leaving. You see now there was no use in comin'."

"So it seems; but I couldn't help thinking some of that crowd which passed the slope knew how to get here."

"It ain't possible—Hark! What was that?"

[Pg 58]

A low hum as of conversation could be heard from the other side of the wall, and Sam sprang to the aperture made by Fred and Joe Brace.

"I'll never yip again about you're being scared," he whispered after one glance. "Here come the whole crowd, an' we're in a fix."

"They won't dare to crawl through, if we threaten to shoot."

"Let's first find out exactly what they are here for. It may be they are only looking for Joe."

Standing either side the aperture the boys watched the approach of the men whose movements were revealed by the miner's lamp each carried.

It was impossible to distinguish the conversation until the party was very near the break in the wall, and then one shouted:

"Hello Joe! How are you?"

"We've come to pull you out of this scrape," another said, after waiting a few seconds for a reply.

Then a lamp was pushed through, Fred and Sam crouching close against the wall to avoid

observation, and its owner cried in a tone of astonishment:

"He isn't here! The place is empty!"

A deep silence reigned for a moment, and then some one said in an angry tone.

"It ain't hard to understand the whole thing now. He slipped the ropes, an' come out this way. Wright has heard the story, an' that's why the works were shut down so suddenly."

"But what's become of him? He ain't in the town."

"Of course he is, an' hidin' somewhere. Jim, you run back an' tell Billings so's he can hunt the sneak out." [Pg 59]

"Are you goin' on alone?"

"Why not? Them fools are guardin' the slope, an' we can flood the place before they so much as think any one has got in behind them. Tell the boys we'll be back by sunset."

Sam touched Fred, to warn him that the time for action had arrived, and, slight as was the movement, it caught the attention of the man on the opposite side.

"Hold on," he cried. "There's somebody in here, an' we must know who it is."

Before he could thrust his lamp through, Sam shouted:

"Stand back, or there'll be trouble. Two of us are here, both armed, and we shall fire at the first one who so much as shows the tip of his nose."

CHAPTER VII

THE STRUGGLE

Recognizing at once that the voice they had just heard did not belong to the man for whom they were looking the rioters remained silent with surprise, and during this short interval Sam brought the butt of his gun to the floor with unnecessary force in order that there might be no question about his being armed.

"Who is inside?" one of the party finally asked, and Sam replied:

"It does not make any difference so long as you don't attempt to come through." [Pg 60]

"We shall do it just the same, an' it'll be so much the worse for you if a finger is raised to stop us."

"There's no need of very much talk. We're here to keep you out. At the first movement both will shoot, and we've got ammunition to hold the place 'till the others come."

This bold assertion caused the rioters no little uneasiness, as could be told from the fact that the entire party retreated down the drift, where they apparently began a consultation as to the best course to be pursued under the circumstances.

"Come on this side," Sam whispered. "If we stand opposite each other and are obliged to shoot we shall get the worst of it."

"Do you really mean to kill them?" Fred asked as he changed his position.

"I intend to hit whoever comes through if I can, an' they'll have to run the risk of the killin' part."

"If we could only send word to Donovan."

"Well, we can't, an' it looks as if we might have to stay here a long while, unless they get the best of us. Nobody will think of coming to look for us for a good many hours, an' that's why I said we were in a fix."

Neither of the boys cared to prolong the conversation. Their situation was desperate, and to state it in words seemed like making it worse, but, as Fred afterward said, "they kept up a terrible thinking," until the rioters began operations by approaching the aperture once more, keeping close to the wall on either side to prevent giving the defenders an opportunity of using their weapons.

"See here," the spokesman began, "we've come to give you a chance of actin' square. You know who we are, an' that what we do will help all hands who work here. Let us through peaceably, an' we'll allers be your friends, but if we're obliged to fight for it there'll be nothin' left of you." [Pg 61]

"We'll take our chances rather than have such as you call us friends; but it strikes me that a fight, with all the weapons on our side, is too big a contract for you to tackle."

"Put out your lamps, boys, an' we'll show these fools what can be done."

In an instant the tunnel was plunged in profound darkness, and the lights worn by the boys served to reveal their whereabouts clearly.

Both realized how great would be the disadvantages under such circumstances, and in the least possible time the tiny flames were extinguished.

Even while this was being done the rioters attempted to effect an entrance; but, without exposing himself to a blow, Sam discharged his weapon, paying little regard to accuracy of aim.

The noise of the report echoed and reëchoed through the passages, and the chamber was filled with smoke, during which time Fred fancied he saw a form leaning half through the aperture, and he also fired.

"That makes two cartridges, an' now we've only got ten left," Sam said in a half whisper. "At this rate we can't keep the battle goin' a great while, an' when the thing is ended we shall have to take whatever they choose to give."

"Donovan may send some one before the ammunition is exhausted."

[Pg 62]

"He won't think of such a thing for a good many hours yet. Could you find your way back to where the men are at work on the pumps?"

"And leave you alone?"

"One of us must go, or else these fellows will soon be where a great amount of mischief can be done."

"I am willing to do whatever you think best."

"Then go, and tell whoever you meet, of the pickle I am in. I'll stay because I'll most likely make a better fist at fighting than you."

"Do you want the cartridges?"

"Yes, and the gun."

Fred placed the weapon against the wall near his companion, and turned to go.

"Don't light your lamp until you are so far away that the flame can't be seen, for it won't do to let them know we have divided forces."

A silent handshake and Sam was alone.

"It's goin' to be a tough job, an' most likely I'll get the worst of it," he said to himself, as he leaned toward the aperture in a listening attitude.

Five minutes passed, and then came a shower of missiles, causing a choking dust to arise; but doing no further injury. Immediately afterward the boy fancied another attempt was being made to crawl through, and he discharged both weapons in rapid succession.

"Now we've got him!" a voice shouted, and before Sam could reload the guns two or three men were in the chamber.

He crouched in the further corner hoping to slip the cartridges in the barrel, while they should be hunting for him; but one of the party ignited a match, and an instant later he was held as if by bands of iron.

[Pg 63]

"Light your lamps, an' be lively about it, for there's another one here!"

Sam made one violent effort to release himself; but in vain. When the chamber was illuminated he saw a crowd of men peering in every direction for Fred.

"It's Bill Thomas' butty," one of the party said in surprise. "I didn't know he was a bosses' pet."

"Neither will he be very long. Where's the other fellow?" and Sam's captor tried to choke the answer from him.

"If he don't speak quick strangle him. We can't spend much time on a kid," some one suggested, and the question was repeated.

Sam knew that the men were in no humor to be trifled with, and there was little doubt but the strangling would follow unless he obeyed. It was possible to delay the explanations for a few seconds, and thus give Fred so much more time to reach the lower level.

With this view he coughed and struggled after the vice-like pressure upon his throat was removed, to make it appear as if it was only with the greatest difficulty he could breathe, and fully a moment was thus gained when his captor kicked him two or three times as he said:

"None of that shamming. Speak quick, or I'll give you something to cough for."

"The fellow who was with me went back to the slope."

"How long ago?"

"When we first knew you were here."

[Pg 64]

"That's a lie, for we heard you talking."

"What makes you ask any questions if you know better than I?"

"When did he leave?"

"I told you before. Of course he waited long enough to find out how many there were of you."

At least five minutes had passed from the time Sam was first questioned, and this must have given Fred a safe start.

"Go after him, Zack, and take Jake with you," the spokesman said, sharply. "Travel the best you know how, for everything depends on overtakin' him."

The two men started at full speed, and the leader asked Sam:

"Where is Joe Brace?"

"Brace?" Sam repeated, as if in bewilderment, "Why he didn't come with us."

"Wasn't he in this place when you got here?"

"Of course not. I'm most certain I saw him in the village just after the works were shut down."

There was a ring of truth in the boy's tones which could not be mistaken, and the rioters appeared satisfied.

"Abe, go an' tell Billings that Brace got out of here in time to warn Wright, an' let him know what we've struck. Don't waste any time now."

When the messenger had departed the leader beckoned to another member of the party, and said as he pointed to Sam:

"Take care of him. The whole thing would soon be up if he should get away."

"What'll I do with the cub?" the man asked in a surly tone.

[Pg 65]

"Anything so that you keep him safe. A thump on the head will help straighten matters, if he tries to kick up a row."

"Where are you going?"

"We'll foller up Zack an' Jake, an' if they catch the boy there'll be nothin' to prevent our finishin' the business we came for."

After a brief consultation, which was carried on in such low tones that Sam could not distinguish a word, the men started down the drift, leaving the prisoner and his captor alone.

Sam knew the man was named Bart Skinner, and that he was an intimate friend of Billings'. He had the reputation of being quarrelsome and intemperate, and was exactly the sort of person one would expect to see among such a party as were now committing lawless deeds.

"I don't count on wastin' much time with you," Bart said when the footsteps of his companions had died away in the distance. "I'll leave you in a safe place pervidin' you behave; but let me hear one yip, an' I'll try the weight of my fist. Come along."

No attempt had been made to fetter Sam. The rioters understood that it was impossible for him to escape, and probably looked upon it as a clear waste of labor.

When Bart spoke he seized the boy by each arm, forcing him through the aperture, and then retaining his hold as he followed. Once in the tunnel the two pressed on at a rapid gait toward the shaft, Sam being obliged to walk a few paces in advance, until they arrived at a point where a tunnel had been run at right angles with the drift; but which was shut off by stout wooden doors.

[Pg 66]

"We'll stop here a bit," Bart said, as he tried to unfasten the rusty bolts which had not been used for many years.

Believing that he might as well accept his capture with a good grace instead of sulking over it, Sam did what he could to assist in opening the doors.

When the task was finally accomplished Bart motioned for the boy to enter first, and after assuring himself by the flame of his lamp that the air was pure, he obeyed.

"Go on a bit, an' see if it is a drift, or only a stable."

"They've exhausted the vein after following it about thirty feet," Sam replied, as he walked the full length, and when on the point of turning to retrace his steps the doors were closed with a clang, while from the outside could be heard the mocking voice of Bart as he shoved the bolts into their sockets:

"It's deep enough for what I want to use it. You'll do no mischief while here, an' I reckon the bosses will hunt a long time before findin' you."

Then Sam heard the sound of rapidly retreating footsteps, and thought to himself as he vainly shook the timbers:

"If those fellows overtook Fred I'm likely to stay here till the mine is flooded."

THE PURSUIT

When Fred left Sam to defend the breach in the wall he fully realized the necessity of giving the alarm quickly, and did not stop to light his lamp until after scrambling over the barrier of coal.

Once this had been done he ran at his best pace, guided by the wooden tracks on which the cars were hauled, until he was obliged to halt from sheer lack of breath. A dull sound in the rear caused him to push on again very quickly, for he believed Sam had found it necessary to discharge his weapons.

On making the second halt a few moments later, he detected a certain scurrying noise which at first he fancied might have been caused by the rats; but immediately came the voice of a man, and he knew the rioters were pursuing him.

"I'll get a pretty heavy dose if they catch me," he muttered, hurrying once more, and when the journey was half finished it became apparent that the pursuers were gaining upon him.

The lives of others beside his own might be sacrificed, if he did not win the race, and he bent all his energies to the undertaking. Once he stumbled, almost fell; but luckily recovered his balance, and darted on, forced to run upon the ties because the space either side was so narrow.

Nearer and nearer came the men until he could hear their heavy breathing, and one of them shouted:

"Halt, or we'll shoot!"

[Pg 68]

Knowing that they might have gotten possession of his gun he had reason to believe the threat would be carried into execution; but he said to himself:

"It's better to be killed by a bullet than take what they choose to give," and the command only served to quicken his pace.

Minute after minute passed; no shot was fired, his breath came in quick gasps, and it seemed impossible to continue the flight many seconds longer. The pursuers were now within a few yards, and nothing could be seen ahead. Whether the lower level was close at hand or a mile away he could not decide; but in his despair he shouted for help.

"Pick up some chunks of slate an' see if you can't hit him. At this rate we shall soon have to turn back."

One of the men stopped long enough to gather an armful of fragments, and as he continued the pursuit threw them with murderous intent at the fugitive.

Two passed very near the almost exhausted boy's head; but none inflicted any injury, and he shouted again and again for those who were working at the pumps.

At the very moment when Fred lost all hope a tiny ray of light appeared from out the gloom, and he cried for help once more; then fell headlong to the ground.

When he next realized anything he was surrounded by miners, who had evidently been running, and one asked, impatiently:

"Can you tell us what happened, lad, an' how them sneaks managed to get in here?"

"Have they gone back?"

[Pg 69]

"Indeed they have; we chased them the matter of half a mile, an' then concluded it was time we got the story from you, for it might not have been safe to pass the first drift."

In a few words Fred told his story, adding as it was ended:

"There is a big crowd of them, and all hands are bent on flooding the mine."

"We don't care to have them drown us out like rats, so I reckon there'll have to be some fightin' done before that little game is played."

"But what about Sam?"

"They've got hold of him for sure; but he'll have to take his chances with the crowd, for we can't help him now."

"They'll kill him!"

"I don't reckon there's much chance of that, lad; but if there was we couldn't do a thing. I'd go farther than most anybody, for he was my butty, an' a right good boy; but he's in the hole to stay 'till the company get the upper hand of them as would kill their best friends to injure the bosses."

Fred knew it was Bill Thomas who spoke in such a tone of utter helplessness, and there could be no doubt as to the correctness of his statements.

"I'd go back alone if I had the gun."

"Then it's lucky you left it behind. Best go up the slope an' tell Donovan what has happened here, so's he can send men to the old shaft. Say to him that we'll be through in a couple of hours more, an' want him to start the pumps, for we're workin' in four feet of water."

[Pg 70]

After stationing one of their number as guard the miners resumed their labor, and Fred started toward the slope, bent on inducing Donovan to take some steps for the relief of Sam.

Wearied by the previous exertions he made but slow progress, and when he reached the breaker at least half an hour had elapsed.

Those who had been left to guard the mine were on duty in positions where their bodies would be sheltered in case of an attack with fire-arms, and in a group outside were forty or fifty of the rioters.

"Bill Thomas wants to know if you will start the pumps? They are working in four feet of water," Fred said, as he approached Donovan.

"It can't be done now if the whole level is flooded. These fellows have made two rushes, and are gettin' ready for another."

"Don't you suppose this is to prevent you from discovering that a portion of the rioters are getting in through the old shaft?" and Fred told of what had occurred in the drift.

"That's jest the size of it; but what can be done? We can't spare a man from here."

"There are surely more at the store who would help us."

"Very likely; but they won't come while this crowd is here."

"If Mr. Wright knew what was going on he could send a party to the shaft."

"Yes, if he knew it."

"Why not send him word?"

"How?"

[Pg 71]

This was a question. Fred did not answer, and Donovan continued:

"There's no chance by which any one could get from here to the store, while that gang of murderers keep watch over all our movements."

"It is nearly night. In an hour it will be too dark for them to see what is going on."

"Who will take the risk of trying to slip past them?"

"I will."

"You'll be in a worse box than Sam is, if they catch you."

"Something must be done, and since you can't spare anybody to go to the poor fellow's assistance I'm ready to take my chances while trying to help him."

Donovan did not reply until after looking carefully around as if calculating the probabilities of success, and then he said:

"I've a mind to let you attempt it. If the soldiers don't arrive before morning, and Billings' crowd are coming through the old shaft as you say, we must have help soon, or give up the fight. There is a chance you will get past all right, and I'm certain we can expect no one to come unless we say it is impossible to hold out longer."

"I am ready to go."

"Very well; wait until it is dark, an' then you may make a try for it."

It would have pleased Fred better, if he could have been actively employed at once, for the knowledge that Sam was in the power of the rioters troubled him more than personal danger would have done; but nothing remained save to wait as Donovan said, and he tried to be patient.

[Pg 72]

From the men on guard he learned that Mr. Wright's house had been attacked; but the mob contented themselves with destroying the windows and setting fire to the stable. The building itself yet remained intact, and there was reason to believe no more outrages, except such as might be committed near the mine, would be committed.

"Them as are standin' in with Billings don't really know what they want, except as he tells them," Fred's informant said, "an' that's what makes things of this kind dangerous. If the men understood exactly the cause of such rows, there'd be little trouble."

"But since they don't, what will be the result of this one?" Fred asked.

"That's more'n I can tell. The mob may quiet down, an' then again they may grow worse, so there's no sayin' what'll happen. Anyhow, you don't want to take many chances on your way to the store."

"I've got to help Sam."

"Right you are; but at the same time you ain't called on to take too big risks. Don't start unless things look favorable for gettin' through all right, 'cause Cale Billings ain't a nice sort of a man to meet when he's on the top of the heap."

"Sam is in his power."

"How do you know?"

"It is only reasonable to suppose so."

"Then all the more cause for you to keep away from him. I'd like to have some one to see the boss; but I haven't got the nerve to send a boy instead of goin' myself."

[Pg 73]

Since this was a direct reflection upon Donovan, Fred refrained from making any reply, and the conversation ceased.

Twice before dark the rioters made a demonstration in front of the slope, as if bent on effecting an entrance, and each time Fred fancied more men were sent in the direction of the old shaft.

It was not for him to make any suggestions, however, and with a heavy heart he watched the maneuvers, believing that each moment saw Sam in more peril.

A messenger was sent to the miners in the lower level telling them that the pumps could not be started, and urging all hands to hold the drift against the rioters; but that was everything which could be done under the circumstances, and the most vulnerable point was virtually left unguarded.

When night came the lawless party built several fires between the slope and the shaft, very much as if they wished to show that they were on guard, and Donovan motioned to Fred as he walked a few paces down the drift.

"I didn't want the others to hear what I said, for it's just as well they shouldn't know what a scrape we're in. If you can get to the store, tell Mr. Wright that he mustn't wait for the soldiers; there's no question but Bill Thomas' party have got their hands full keepin' back them as come in by the shaft, and it can't be long before we'll be snowed under. It's about twenty to one now, an' in case of a rush the matter would be settled mighty quick."

[Pg 74]

"If I can leave the mouth of the slope without being seen there'll be no trouble."



Fred set off at full speed, and almost immediately a shout went up from the rioters: "The sneaks are sending for help! Stop that boy!"

"Half a dozen of us will go out a short bit, an' you shall follow on behind. There ought to be a chance of slippin' off, an' if there isn't we'll have to give it up, for I'm not willin' you should take too big risks."

Fred threw off his coat and vest that he might be in good condition for running, and then as the men marched out of the slope he crouched in the rear.

The rioters made no demonstration; but stood ready to repel an attack, watching closely all the maneuvers, and Donovan whispered to the boy:

"It won't do to try it, lad. They are scattered around in such a way that you couldn't get a dozen yards before bein' seen."

"I'm going to try it."

"Don't, lad, don't," several said quickly, and, fearing he might be forcibly detained, Fred started.

He went straight back from the slope, bending low in the vain hope of escaping observation, and having gained a distance of an hundred feet set off at full speed, forced to run in a half circle to

reach the road.

To those who were watching it seemed as if hardly a second elapsed before a great shout went up from the rioters.

"The sneaks are sendin' for help!"

"Stop that boy!"

"Don't let him get away!"

These and a dozen other orders were given at the same time, and those rioters who were nearest Fred began the pursuit.

[Pg 75]

"He'll never reach the store," Donovan said sadly, as he led the way back to the slope when Fred was swallowed up by the darkness. "Even if these fellows don't overtake him there are plenty between here and there who'll hear the alarm."

CHAPTER IX

JOE BRACE

During the first five minutes after he was locked in the short drift, Sam Thorpe gave himself up to unreasoning anger. He threw himself again and again upon the timbers as if believing it would be possible to force them apart, and shouted at the full strength of his lungs until he was literally unable to speak louder than a whisper.

Then recognizing the uselessness of such proceedings, he sat down to think over the matter calmly.

"If Fred succeeded in giving the alarm, I'm not in very much danger of being drowned out," he said to himself; "but if he was caught I can count on dying in about two hours."

With this mental speech came the assurance that he had yet a hundred and twenty minutes in which to fight for life, and he resolved not to waste a single second.

The lamp in his cap gave sufficient light for a thorough examination of his prison, and it was soon made. A solid wall of earth and slate surrounded him, the only outlet was through the doors, which were of planks and thickly studded with nails that they might be strong enough to resist a heavy pressure of water.

[Pg 76]

His only weapon was a stout pocket knife; but even with a saw he could not have cut his way through.

The hinges were next examined. They were fastened to large joists which in turn had been set firmly into the strata of slate.

The only weak point he could find was where the two doors came together, and the flat bolt was exposed. Its entire width and about an inch of its length could be seen thickly covered with rust, and here Sam decided to direct his efforts.

"There isn't much chance I can cut it through in two hours," he said; "but it's better to work than lay still thinking of what may happen."

Breaking the stoutest blade of his knife he began with the jagged surface to scratch at the iron. While cutting through the rust his progress was reasonable rapid; but on firm metal was very much like filing a boiler plate with a pin.

Then the blade of his knife was worn smooth, and he broke off another piece, repeating the operation until the steel had been used to the hilt.

The bolt was cut nearly half through; but as he judged, two hours must have passed.

"If they succeed in flooding the mine I shall still be a prisoner when the water comes," he muttered, and at that moment he heard the sound of approaching footsteps.

Two or more had come from the direction of the shaft, and halted near the door.

[Pg 77]

"It's no use to try and fight our way into the drift through the hole," he heard one of the newcomers say, and recognized the voice as that of Cale Billings.

"Are you goin' to give up beat!"

"Not much. Inside of an hour we'll have fifty men here, and while the fools think we are trying to get in by the slope a tunnel can be made from one of the smaller cuttings."

"What good will that do?"

"If I ain't mistaken we shall come out on the second level where it'll be no more than child's play to get the best of both crowds."

"But suppose Wright has sent for soldiers? I heard he telegraphed to the governor."

"We'll be in possession of the mine, an' I reckon they'll be willin' to make terms with us, for a regiment couldn' drive us out."

"Well, what are you stoppin' here for?"

"I want to see where that boy is. We mustn't lose him yet awhile."

"He's in here."

"An' I reckon he'll stay till we want him," Billings replied with a laugh, after apparently examining the bolt.

Then the two men passed on, and Sam began his slow task again. Hope was strong in his breast, for he knew from the conversation that Fred had succeeded in warning the miners.

He used the small blade, and it wore away so quickly that there could be no chance it would last to complete the work.

"If I could get a purchase on the door it might be broken open now the bolt is cut so much," he said, looking around once more. [Pg 78]

Near the uprights was an extra piece of joist standing on end as if forming a portion of the side.

The floor of the cutting was full of irregularities where the slate had been broken or taken out, and this gave him the opportunity to get the required purchase.

With one end of the joist pressed firmly against a slight elevation, and the other on the doors just over the bolt, he clambered up until near the top, when all his weight and strength were brought into play.

Once, twice, he swayed up and down, and then inch by inch the metal yielded until the heavy timbers swung outward, and he was free so far as liberty of movement in the drift was concerned.

At the moment when he emerged there was no one in the passage, and he hurriedly re-closed the doors that his escape might not be discovered by those who should pass.

After some difficulty he succeeded in pushing the broken piece of iron into the sockets in such a manner that a casual observer would hardly notice anything wrong, and then, extinguishing the light in his cap, he went swiftly toward the shaft, arriving there just as half a dozen men were on the point of descending.

Crouching against the wall at one corner the new-comers failed to notice him; but it was impossible to ascend the rope ladder which had been let down, without attracting attention, because of the numbers who continued to arrive at irregular intervals.

During an hour he waited, shrouded from view by the gloom, and then came the desired opportunity. [Pg 79]

Two men returned from the further end of the drift, and ascended the ladder.

"I'll follow them and run the risk of being recognized," he said to himself, and suiting the action to the words he climbed the network of rope immediately behind the second rioter.

It was twilight when he arrived at the surface, and Billings' forces were building a row of fires directly in front of the slope.

To start toward the village immediately would be to take too many chances of detection, and Sam loitered on the outskirts of the crowd watching for the desired opportunity, which came when Fred left the slope to carry Donovan's message to Mr. Wright.

Instantly the alarm was given Sam started in pursuit, accompanied by a dozen others, and only by outstripping the rioters could he hope to make his escape.

Fred ran as he had never done before, with the howling mob at his heels, and foremost among them was Sam. Two men were in advance of the escaping prisoner; but by an apparent misstep while he ran alongside the second, the rioter was overturned, and but one remained; the others being so far in the rear as not to count in the chase.

Fred glanced over his shoulder now and then; but the darkness prevented him from recognizing his friend until the latter deliberately threw himself in front of the pursuer, and a tumble was the result.

"Keep on it's me—Sam!" the butty boy shouted, as he scrambled to his feet before the man had fully recovered his senses, and with a cry of glad surprise, Fred asked: [Pg 80]

"How did you get away?"

"It's too long a story to tell now when we need all our breath. Are you trying to reach home?"

"No; the store."

"Then you know what Billings' crowd are intendin' to do."

"Yes, and help is needed at once."

Sam made no reply. Both the men he had over-thrown were on their feet again, and, with a dozen others, were close in the rear, making every effort to overtake the fugitives.

The race was virtually won, however, unless other rioters were met on the road. The boys yet had thirty or forty yards the advantage, and before this could be overcome they were within sight of the store, from which, attracted by the shouts, came Mr. Wright and a number of employees.

All of these latter were armed, and the pursuers halted at a respectful distance, while the boys dashed into the building breathless and nearly exhausted.

It was several moments before Fred could repeat the message Donovan had sent, and this was hardly done when a message from the governor arrived, stating that no troops could be sent until the following day.

"I'm afraid those at the mine will have to take care of themselves," Mr. Wright said, when he learned of the condition of affairs there. "If we should leave here, or even divide our force, the store as well as the offices might be sacked."

[Pg 81]

"But the mine will be flooded if Billings succeeds with the tunnel."

"It can't be helped now. We should need, at least, fifty men to effect an entrance, and eighteen is the full number who can be trusted."

"Those who are there may be drowned."

"There is no danger of that since all hands are on the alert for the first signs of trouble."

"Then Sam and I may as well go home."

"It would be a good idea to tell Brace that he must try to get here unobserved. The men already believe he is in town, and I am afraid they may discover his hiding place, when there's bound to be mischief done."

Disheartened, because after incurring all the danger no real good had been done, Fred motioned to Sam, and left the store.

The streets of the village presented an unusual appearance. Nearly every house was open and lighted as if for a general illumination, while the sidewalks were crowded with throngs of excited women and children.

"This would be a good time for Skip to pay you off," Sam said, as they walked swiftly along. "While so much is goin' on they could do pretty near as they pleased without fear of being stopped."

"What he might do seems to be of little consequence compared with the danger which threatens the poor fellows at the mine. If the lower level should be flooded while they were guarding the drift there's every chance all would be drowned."

"It don't do to think of such things when there's nothing which can be done to help them. It might be worse, an' there's some comfort in that."

[Pg 82]

"I fail to see anything very cheering in such an idea," Fred replied, and then the two were at Mrs. Byram's home.

The door was locked; but the lightest of taps sufficed to attract the widow's attention, and the visitor received no less warm a reception than did the son.

Brace was so impatient to learn what had been done by the rioters that he descended the stairs immediately upon hearing the boys' voices, and while Mrs. Byram prepared supper, Fred and Sam gave an account of their own adventures, as well as all which was known concerning the mob.

"So I'm to sneak over to the store, eh?" the miner asked, as the recital was concluded.

"That was what Mr. Wright said."

"I'll do nothin' of the kind."

"Why not?"

"Because I've had enough of hidin' like a fellow who had done somethin' wrong."

"But it isn't safe to show yourself."

"I'll take the chances, an' see what Billings' gang can do."

"Don't think of such a thing," Mrs. Byram cried in alarm. "You might be killed."

"A fellow who has worked a matter of half a dozen years at Farley's can't be knocked out so easy."

"Are you going into the street?"

"Yes, an' to the mine if I take the notion."

"What could you do alone against two or three hundred men?"

"Show that there is one fellow who ain't afraid of the whole murderin' gang."

[Pg 83]

"That would be the height of foolishness."

"I can't help it," was the dogged reply, and Brace rose to his feet as if to leave the house.

Both Sam and Fred sprang up to detain him; but before a word could be spoken by either, angry shouts and cries were heard in the distance.

"They are up to fresh mischief," Sam exclaimed, as he cautiously pulled back the curtains to look out.

"There are a dozen of the rioters on the sidewalk," he cried, "and they are evidently watching us."

Brace ran to Sam's side, and the instant he showed himself some of the men shouted:

"Here's the traitor! We've got him caged!"

"String him up!"

"Yank him out so's the bosses can see how we treat spies!"

These cries were echoed by the body of men who were approaching on a run, and Mrs. Byram said, as she drew Brace from the window:

"They have learned you are here, and in their mad excitement murder may be committed."

Then came from the street as if to give emphasis to her words:

"Hang him! Hang him! He's worse than the bosses!"

"You must go to the store now," Sam cried.

"What's the good? They will get in there as easily as here."

"Mr. Wright and his men are well armed and can protect you."

"There has been no shootin' done yet, an' I'll not be the cause of the first bullet. It is better to give myself up at once."

[Pg 84]

"You shall not," and Sam clasped the miner around the waist. "Try the back door; it will be possible to give them the slip if you hurry."

Brace hesitated a moment as if unwilling to display anything which might be mistaken for cowardice, and then Fred and Sam literally forced him toward the door.

"While you run I will attract the attention of the men," Mrs. Byram said, as she showed herself at the window, and the miner sprang out at the very instant when half a dozen of the rioters entered the gate.

"Tryin' to give us the slip, eh?" one of the party cried, as all rushed forward.

It was too late for Brace to return; in a twinkling the men had surrounded him. Fred and Sam saw a short but sharp struggle, and before they could so much as make a move toward going to his assistance he was overpowered.

Attracted by the cries of their companions, those at the front of the house came around swiftly, and Brace was half carried, half forced into the street.

Mrs. Byram tried to plead with the mob; but they pushed her aside without ceremony as they shouted:

"We'll show them at the store how we deal with spies and traitors."

"We've got the rope and the sneak, now we only need two or three of the bosses to fix the thing up brown."

"Do you suppose they really mean to hang him?" Fred asked in a tone of awe, and Sam replied sadly:

"I'm afraid they will. Billings always was down on him, and the men are so excited as to hardly know what they are about, so anything is possible."

CHAPTER X

[Pg 85]

THE RESCUE

The capture of Brace seemed to inflame the passions of the mob, and not even while the buildings were being sacked was the town in such a state of excitement.

By the time the prisoner had reached the vacant lot in front of the store it appeared as if every man, woman, and child in the village were on the street.

Sam and Fred felt impelled to follow the howling, shrieking mob, although it was not probable they could aid the unfortunate man, and both pressed as near as possible.

"Billings' gang haven't got possession of the mine yet," Sam whispered.

"How do you know?"

"Because if that had happened we would see Bill Thomas or Donovan around here somewhere."

"Perhaps they have been made prisoners."

"It isn't likely. Even if they couldn't hold their own it would be possible to retreat in good order, armed as they were."

"Don't you suppose Mr. Wright will try to do something if these fellows really mean to hang Brace?"

"They are bound to help him; but I don't see what can be done against so many."

Owing to the crowd around him it was impossible for the boys to see the prisoner. The men swayed to and fro as if fighting among themselves, and after a time the reason of these movements was made plain.

[Pg 86]

Two long pieces of timber had been lashed together at one end, and set up like the letter V inverted. These were held in place by some of the mob, and drove through the fastenings at the top was a long rope.

Billings was on hand acting as master of ceremonies, and when this portion of the work had been finished, he shouted:

"Half a dozen of you take hold of the rope, an' when I count three, string him up."

In an agony of apprehension Fred looked toward the store. No one appeared at the door; it seemed as if the bosses had abandoned Joe Brace.

"Stand ready, boys!" Billings shouted. "We'll soon show 'em how we serve out spies."

There was a moment of painful silence, during which more than one of the mob acted as if frightened because of the terrible crime about to be committed, and then an old miner cried:

"Hold on! This thing has gone far enough!"

"What do you mean?" Billings asked angrily.

"Just this: I joined your crowd to stand up for my rights not to commit murder. There's been mischief done already, an' the most of us will be sorry when we've had time to think the matter over."

"Hold your tongue and go home like the rest of the old women."

"I'll stay where I am, an' you'll be the one to go home if the boys take my advice."

Then continuing, the old man reminded the throng that he had worked at Farley's longer than the majority could remember. He spoke of the fact, that until this day, there had been no mob rule; intimated that they were blindly following one in whom very few ever reposed confidence, and asked if they were willing to hang a friend simply because Billings commanded it.

[Pg 87]

The speech was a long one, and before twenty words were spoken as many determined-looking men gathered around Brace to prevent any harm from being done.

"Don't listen to the old fool," Billings cried, in a voice hoarse with rage; but now very few paid any attention to him, and, when the prisoner's friend finished his appeal there was no danger a human life would be taken.

Some of those who had been most eager to drag Brace away unloosened his bonds, and at least a hundred stood ready to defend him.

At this juncture Mr. Wright came from the store, and the mob were in the proper frame of mind to listen.

He explained the true condition of affairs, told exactly why the works had been shut down, and finished by promising to let the matter be forgotten, regardless of the amount of property destroyed, in case the mob should disperse.

"And if we go home, what then?" Billings asked, sneeringly. "We'll starve to please you, eh?"

"Those who attempted to flood the mine will not starve at Farley's, for all in the plot must leave. Not one of that party can work here; but the others shall be treated as before."

"So we're to be driven out?"

"Certainly. It isn't probable any honest miner would care to work with those who may succeed in drowning their fellows simply to gratify a spite against the officers of the company."

[Pg 88]

"It will take more than you to drive us away."

"I can at least prevent you from entering the mine, and that I shall do even if it is necessary to station guards entirely around the property. Are you willing to go home now, men, with the assurance that work shall be resumed in the morning."

"Ay, that we are, an' glad of the chance. It was out of the fryin'-pan into the fire when we left one set of bosses to take up with Cale Billings an' his cronies," a miner shouted and immediately the mob dispersed, leaving the leaders standing in the lot, evidently consulting as to how their lost power might be regained.

When Brace was at liberty he joined Sam and Fred, and the three walked to the latter's home, neither speaking until they were inside.

"Do you think the strike is really over?" Mrs. Byram asked, after Fred told her of what had occurred.

"It is so far as the majority of the miners are concerned," Brace replied; "but there's no telling what Billings may contrive to do between now and morning."

"I suppose those men are still in the mine trying to overpower Donovan's party."

"Most likely; but now that Wright has got the upper hand there's little chance they'll be allowed to stay very long."

Despite the excitement on every hand the occupants of Mrs. Byram's cottage were glad to retire at the first opportunity, and before the tumult in the street had died away they sought the needed repose. It had been decided that Brace should remain for a while, since it might be dangerous to meet Billings and his friends while they were smarting under the sting of defeat.

[Pg 89]

At the usual hour next morning the whistle sounded, summoning the miners to work, and every one responded save those who had been warned to leave the town.

Mr. Wright was at the entrance to the slope, and had a pleasant greeting for each man and boy, causing more than one to look ashamed because of the part taken in the wanton destruction of his property.

Joe Brace and Sam went into the drift, leaving Fred with Chunky, and that young fellow said, as he seated himself at the chute:

"Things have been pretty lively 'round here, eh?"

"I should say so. Were you out with the regulators?"

"I saw 'em once or twice."

"If you'll take my advice you'll leave that crowd. Skip Miller's as bad as Billings."

"Don't speak so loud; he's lookin' over this way, an' may make things hot for you if much is said."

"If he didn't do anything yesterday I guess he ain't dangerous."

"He couldn't find you."

"Then he was lookin' for me?"

"That's what I heard some of the fellers say."

"I should think he'd seen enough of such business; but if he hasn't I'll have to take care of myself."

"Be careful," Chunky whispered. "He an' some of the other fellers think you are more of a spy than Joe Brace was."

"And they mean to flog me for it?"

[Pg 90]

"Skip says you told Mr. Wright about their droppin' you in the shaft."

"Hadn't I the right to? Do you suppose I'll let them try to kill me, and never open my mouth about it?"

"Well, it ain't safe, for he's got a big crowd."

"Then he hasn't had enough of the riot?"

"It ain't that; but he says the regulators have got to stand up for their rights, an' you haven't paid your footin' yet."

"And I don't intend to. If any of them try to make me it'll go hard with them."

At this point the machinery was started, the stream of coal and slate began to flow through the chute, and the breaker boys were forced to attend to their work.

Several times during the morning Donovan spoke to Fred as he passed, and at twelve o'clock, when all hands were indulging in the forty minutes "nooning," and Chunky had crossed over to speak with Skip, the breaker boss ate his lunch by the new boy's side.

"You didn't come back again last night," he said.

"No, sir. After Brace got away from the mob he and Sam went home with me. We didn't think you'd need us when the trouble was nearly settled."

"Neither did we. As soon as the men found their senses Mr. Wright brought a lot of them up here, an' we soon got rid of Billings' friends."

"Had they begun to dig a tunnel?"

"Bless you, yes, an' were within a dozen feet of Bill Thomas' party when we found them. If the row had lasted two hours longer we couldn't be workin' here to-day, an' some of the boys would be under water."

[Pg 91]

"Do you think the whole matter is finished?"

"Yes, so far as the majority of the men are concerned; but Billings swears he won't be driven out of town, an' he may manage to do more mischief."

"Why don't Mr. Wright have him arrested?"

"Because he gave his word that nothin' should be done to them as went home peaceably, an' he couldn't jump on Billings without bringing all hands into the scrape. 'Cordin' to my way of thinkin' we've got off cheap."

"Was Mr. Wright's house damaged very much?"

"It'll take a good many hundred dollars to put it in the same condition it was before; but money doesn't count when there's been no blood spilled."

"Do you think there is any chance the men will try to hurt Brace now?"

"That's hard to say. You're in as much danger as he is, for they know that you and Sam stood in with us, an' it's just possible some dirty trick will be played. You an' Bill Thomas' butty are to stop at the office to-night; Mr. Wright wants to see you."

"What for?"

"He'll have to explain that. It's time to go to work again; be careful of yourself."

Donovan walked away as the whistle sounded, and Chunky came back looking very stern.

"You'll get into more trouble by standin' in with the bosses," he said, in what sounded like a threatening tone.

[Pg 92]

"Does Skip Miller think he can say who I shall talk with?"

"Whether he does or not none of the fellers like bosses' pets."

"Even if I was a 'pet,' as you call it, I can't see how it concerns any one but myself; almost anything is better than being a regulator."

"I've told you what the fellers think, an' that ends it; look out for yourself after this."

"I can't accuse you of ever looking out for me, not even when a hint might have saved me from a pounding."

Chunky made no reply, and Fred understood that, although the riot was ended, his position in the community had not been bettered. One sample of mob rule evidently pleased the regulators, and they were prepared to assert their alleged rights more strongly than ever.

When the day's work was finished Joe Brace and Sam came for Fred, and he walked out of the breaker in their company, while Skip and his adherents stood near the building ready to take advantage of the first opportunity for mischief.

"Don't think we shan't get a whack at you," the leader cried. "Them fellers won't allers be 'round, an' when our time does come things'll be worse than they was in the shaft."

"If I ever hear of your touchin' Fred I'll take a hand in the row myself," Brace said threateningly.

"Oh, yes, you will," Skip replied with a leer, and then led his followers down the road, each one making some insulting remark as he passed.

"I'll straighten that fellow out," Joe said angrily. "He's got the will to do most anything, an' we must take him down a peg before it'll be safe for you to move around."

[Pg 93]

"Don't say anything to them, for it will only make matters worse. I'll see to it that they don't get another chance at me. Sam, Mr. Wright wants to see us at the store. Will you wait for us, Joe?"

"Indeed, I will. Till things get settled I want to keep my eye on both you boys."

The superintendent was in his office, at one end of the building, when the party entered, and he beckoned them to join him.

"Don't hang back, Brace, for I wish to see you as well. I want to take your butty away, and give you Fred instead. How would you like that?"

"First class, sir."

"I wish to have a few whom I can trust, on the lower level. I don't ask for any spying: but expect to be informed if there is any serious mischief brewing. There may yet be some who will aid Billings to gain his revenge. Sam is to remain with Thomas; but will work near you."

"Very well, sir," and Brace rose to go, thinking the interview was at an end; but Mr. Wright detained him.

"The most important matter is concerning the old shaft and drifts, from which points very much mischief might be done. Sit down while we talk of it."

At this moment Skip Miller entered unobserved by those in the office, and, seeing the occupants of the little room, made his way behind a pile of goods where he could hear very much of what the superintendent said.

CHAPTER XI

[Pg 94]

BILLINGS AND SKIP

Joe Brace did not appear to think there was much to fear from the late rioters, so far as the possibility of their making an entrance through the old shaft was concerned.

"This end of the gallery is pretty well filled up already," he said, "an' with a few loads of slate it can be shut off entirely, more especially after the doors are barred."

"It is not from that portion of the mine that I apprehend any trouble. Look here," and Mr. Wright spread on the desk before him a plan of the workings. "At this point you can see that an old drift runs parallel with, and not more than three yards from our lower cut. The veins probably come together farther on."

"It wouldn't take a man very long to work his way through," Joe said, reflectively.

"And not knowing where an attempt may be made, it will be very difficult to prevent mischief."

"Unless the old shaft should be guarded."

"To do that we should be obliged to station men entirely around our works, for here is the abandoned slope, and farther down the hill two or three places where an entrance could be effected."

"But Billings an' his crowd don't know all this."

"Possibly not; yet there are many of the older men who could tell the story."

Joe shook his head in perplexity.



"You four are to act as sentinels," said the Superintendent. "Study this map and you will hit upon a scheme."

"I am not warranted in hiring a large force of men as guards," Mr. Wright continued, "and we must do that from the inside. You and Thomas, with these boys as helpers, shall work on the lower level, and I will take care that none but true men are near by."

[Pg 95]

"How will that mend matters?"

"You four are to act as sentinels. It makes little difference how many loads you take out, for the

company will pay day wages."

"Even then I don't see how we can do anything."

"You and Thomas must form some plan. Study this map, and I am confident you will hit upon a scheme."

"Is there any chance that the drift's choked with gas?"

"Very little."

Joe was thoroughly puzzled, and after several moments of silence Mr. Wright said:

"Get your supper now, and then talk the matter over with Thomas."

At this intimation that the interview was at an end, the miner left the office followed by the two boys, and when they were out of the store Skip Miller came from his hiding place without having been seen by the superintendent or his clerks.

The leader of the regulators lounged carelessly toward the door until satisfied no one was paying any particular attention to him, when he stepped briskly out, and walked rapidly to a groggery situated at the farther end of the town.

Here, as he had anticipated, was Cale Billings and a select party of friends, all of whom were discussing their late defeat. [Pg 96]

Skip did not care to state the reason for his coming in the presence of the entire party, and waited patiently in one corner of the room until it should be possible to beckon the leader out of doors.

"Wright may think we're whipped," Billings was saying; "but that's where he makes a big mistake. He can't drive us out of this town, no matter how much he may blow, an' it won't be many days before we'll show what's what."

"There's little chance for us the way things look now," one of the party said, with a laugh.

"How do you know? The folks 'round here have seen what I can do, an' they'll soon find out that there's a good deal of fight left."

As he said this Billings looked first at one and then another to note the effect of his bold words, and in doing so chanced to see Skip, who immediately made a series of what he intended should be mysterious gestures.

"What's the matter with you?" the man asked, angrily; but instead of replying, Skip placed his finger on his lips and quickly left the room.

It was several moments before the leader understood he was wanted, and when this fact dawned upon him he followed, meeting the boy a few yards from the entrance.

"Was you cuttin' up them monkey shines for me?" he asked in a surly tone.

"Of course."

"Well, what's wanted?"

[Pg 97]

"You jest said as how you'd like to get square with the company."

"S'posen I did? Does that concern you?"

"P'raps I heard somethin' 'round to the store you'd want to know."

"Say, if you've got anything to tell, out with it, for I can't fool away my time with you."

"First I've got a trade to make."

"Talk quick."

"Do you know the new breaker boy? The one what's so thick with Wright an' Joe Brace?"

"Yes."

"I want to get square with him, an' if you'll help me do it I'll tell what I heard a lot of 'em saying."

"Was it anything I'd like to know?"

"It'll show jest how you can get the best of the whole crowd."

"Then I'll do what I can, an' be glad of the chance, 'cause I've got a little score to settle with him myself."

Skip no longer hesitated; but repeated in detail all he had heard while hiding in the store, Billings listening with closest attention.

"That's the best piece of news I've heard for a year, my boy," the latter said, "an' you sha'n't be the loser by tellin' me. If you've got the nerve to do a little work after everything is ready, both the breaker boss an' this new feller shall be where they can't help themselves."

The leader of the regulators felt exceedingly proud that the rioter should ask him to participate in the plot, and promised, without the least show of hesitation, to do anything which might be required of him.

[Pg 98]

"How long before you'll be ready?" he asked.

"It may be a week; but you drop in here for a minute every evenin' so's I can talk about the thing if the plans don't work. There's no use to be in a hurry over sich a job as this."

"I'll show up reg'lar," Skip cried gleefully, and then, as Billings re-entered the groggery, he hurried away to tell the good news to some of his chums.

During this plotting Joe Brace and Bill Thomas were at Fred's home discussing the best means of following Mr. Wright's instructions. The plan of the works was studied carefully; but in it was found no solution to the problem, and when they retired that evening nothing definite had been decided upon.

The night shift went to work as usual, and but for the evidences of wanton destruction a stranger would hardly have mistrusted that Farley's had lately been a scene of rioting.

On the following morning Fred passed through the breaker to speak to Donovan before entering the slope, and Skip Miller displayed the greatest excitement on seeing him.

"I don't know how it could have happened," the breaker boss said, "for I haven't told even my own wife that you was to be Joe's butty; but these young villains know all about it. I've heard Skip tellin' his cronies, an' I'm sure they're up to some mischief. Be careful, an' don't go outside alone, leastways, not till the business of the riot has blown over."

"I'll look to it that they haven't a chance to do much harm," Fred replied, laughingly, as he passed on to learn the first duties of a miner.

[Pg 99]

Joe, Bill, and Sam accompanied Fred to his new working place, and the former said as they were being let down the incline:

"I hear Billings swears he won't leave town."

"I passed him on my way home last night," Bill added, "and he warned me agin keepin' Sam as my butty."

"Why?"

"He says he is a spy, hand in glove with you, an' that all who work with them as give information to the bosses will catch it rough."

Bill Thomas laughed as he said this; but Joe looked serious.

"I don't like this way of working. The lower level is bad enough without thinkin' all the time that somebody is tryin' to do a fellow up."

"Nonsense. Barkin' dogs don't often bite, an' so long as we know he means mischief there ain't much chance of trouble. The thing to be figgered out is, how're we goin' to fix this job?"

Again the two men discussed the situation, walking along the drift with the plans before them, while the boys were forced to be content with listening to the conversation.

It was finally decided that they should work here and there along the entire cut, trusting that it would be possible to hear if any one began to dig on the opposite side.

"It's a case of keepin' quiet an' listenin' for suspicious sounds," Bill said. "We won't try to get out coal to-day, an', perhaps, by night Mr. Wright will have a better plan."

[Pg 100]

"By watchin' Billings we could get some kind of an idea as to when he was likely to begin operations."

"Donovan promised to see to that part of it."

"Then we'll kinder lay 'round till we get the hang of the place. You boys go on to the end of the drift an' come back. Don't make any noise."

The forenoon was spent in what was little more than patrol duty, and when Mr. Wright came below he approved of their plans. Nothing better was suggested, and until night-fall all four paced to and fro, the other miners having been withdrawn from the drift.

When evening came Skip did not wait to see if Fred came out; but hurried off to the groggery where he was made happy by Billings' extreme friendliness.

"The leader of the mob arose immediately upon seeing him, and led the way outside, saying when they were some distance from the building:

"I've been thinkin' over what you told me, an' am certain we can work this thing all right."

"When?"

"In a day or two. If you could manage to get hold of that paper the job might be done in a jiffy."

"But Joe an' Bill have got it."

"S'posen they have. A smart lad like you oughter find some way to get at it, an' it would be worth your while to try."

"It couldn't be done."

"P'raps not by you; but I know of some, no older than you, who'd have it before morning. Of course, I don't blame a boy for not tryin' when he hasn't the nerve——"

[Pg 101]

"See here," Skip cried, impatiently, "haven't I showed grit enough to do most anything?"

"If you have, prove it by gettin' hold of that paper."

"I can't see what you want it for?"

"Because it shows us all the levels. With it we can tell jest where to begin work."

"I'll make a try for it anyhow; but I can't figger any way to get at it."

"Watch for a chance. They won't keep it in their hands all the time, and, by knockin' off work now an' then, loafin' 'round near where they are, you'll soon have your hands on it."

"You won't go back on me if I get into trouble?"

"Don't worry about that; I never shake a friend."

With this assurance Skip walked away feeling very happy because of the manner in which Billings spoke; but sadly perplexed as to the best course to accomplish the desired end.

CHAPTER XII

A SINGULAR ACCIDENT

Two trustworthy men had been selected from the night shift to keep guard on the lower level during the time between sunset and sunrise, and about an hour before the relieving whistle sounded, not having heard any suspicious noises, they lounged down toward the slope where the miners were at work.

Here, paying but little attention to what was going on around them, they conversed with the laborers, or smoked pipes as black as their faces, in order to while away the moments which must elapse before the labor was ended.

[Pg 102]

Men were passing and re-passing on every hand, and in the darkness no one saw a small figure, in whose cap the lamp was not lighted, run swiftly from the foot of the slope up the drift where the sentinels should have been.

On either side of the passage shallow cuttings had been made that the miners might step aside to avoid the cars as they were drawn to and fro. Into one of these the figure with the unlighted cap glided, and, crouching in the farthest corner was screened from view unless a careful search should be made.

When the day shift came on duty Chunky reported to the breaker boss that Skip Miller could not come to work on this day.

"Why not?" Donovan asked sharply.

"'Cause he's got to do somethin' at home. He told me to tell you."

"When did you see him?"

"Last night."

"Where?"

"Over by Taylor's."

"What were you doin' at that grogshop?"

"Nothin'. I was jest walkin' around, an' met him."

"Look here, Chunky, it will be best for you to keep away from that place. No decent man or boy would go there, an' I'd be sorry to know you trained with the regulators. I've got my eye on them fellers, an' when trade is dull they'll be the first to get their walkin' papers."

[Pg 103]

"If father don't care what I do, it ain't any business of yours, so long as I work from whistle to whistle."

"That's very true; but I shall make it my business to see what your father has to say about it."

This threat had the effect of checking the almost insolent air Chunky had begun to display, and he went to his place at the chute very meekly.

While this brief conversation was being held Joe and Bill, with their helpers, entered the lower level where the careless sentinels reported matters as being quiet.

"We haven't heard more'n a rat since you left," one of them said. "I don't believe Billings has got the nerve to try any funny business, an' in this case Mr. Wright is more frightened than hurt."

"That's a good fault, matey," Bill replied gravely. "It's better to have half a dozen of us nosin' around for a week or two, than run the risk of what Cale an' his friends may do."

"Oh, I ain't kickin'; but it don't seem reasonable they could get into the old drift, for it must be choked with gas."

"By findin' that out we might save a good deal of work," Joe replied, quickly. "It wouldn't take long to cut through where the wall is thinnest."

"You're right mate, an' we'll get at it now. Boys, go over to the blacksmith's for four shovels," Bill added as he pulled the plans from his pocket.

Sam and Fred obeyed, and while they were absent the two men studied the drawing for at least the hundredth time.

Save for those who were seated on a block of coal poring over the paper, the drift was deserted, and the one who had secreted himself in the cutting crept silently forward until it was possible to see what the miners were doing.

[Pg 104]

As a matter of course this party was Skip Miller, and he said to himself, with a chuckle of satisfaction:

"With all day before me it'll be queer if I can't get what Billings wants."

When Sam and Fred returned Bill had decided at which point the excavation should be made, and he said, designating a spot hardly more than a dozen yards from where Skip was hidden:

"If the plan is co'rect this oughter be our place. We'll try it anyhow. You boys tell one of the drivers to bring up a car, for we don't want to choke the drift with dirt."

Then Bill stuck his pick in the wall, which was made up of earth and slate. Skip, who sat directly opposite, had a full view of all that was done.

When the car had been brought into position Bill told Sam and Fred to shovel into it what he and Joe threw from the cutting, and soon all four were working industriously.

Before the time for "nooning" arrived it became necessary to shore up the top of the tunnel lest the mass of earth should fall and bury the laborers, and when this was done both the men entered the excavation, which was now twelve feet in length.

In this confined space the air was oppressively warm, and the miners threw off their blouses, leaving them in the drift near the entrance.

Skip knew that in the pocket of the one worn by Bill was the paper he had been instructed to steal, and he watched eagerly for an opportunity to creep up unobserved.

[Pg 105]

While Sam and Fred were at work it was impossible to do this; but the car had been nearly filled, and in a short time it would be necessary to get another.

The men could no longer throw the dirt from where they were working to the entrance, and Fred had been ordered to stand midway the cutting that he might pass it on to Sam.

"I'll run this car down, an' get another if you'll give me a lift at starting it," Sam finally shouted, and Fred came out.

The incline was sufficient to carry the rude vehicle to the switches at the foot of the slope after it was once set in motion, and, using a crowbar as a lever, this was soon accomplished.

Sam ran behind it a few paces, and then clambered up to the brake where he could control the movements of the heavy load.

Fred watched him until the tiny flame in his cap was lost to view in the distance, and then he returned to the tunnel, unconscious that Skip had glided from his hiding-place to follow closely behind.

It was necessary the leader of the regulators should work with the utmost celerity, for if Fred turned he would distinguish the dark form even in the gloom.

Skip had already formed a plan.

He crept close behind the boy whom he hated, until the latter entered the tunnel. Then stooping he picked up the crowbar, and raised it for a blow. In this position he waited until Fred was in the middle of the tunnel clambering over the pile of dirt to get at his shovel.

[Pg 106]

The time had come.

Swinging the heavy bar once around he struck the bottom of the joist which supported the shoring over head, and the heavy timbers, put up insecurely because they were to be used but temporarily, fell with a crash.

The jar disturbed the earth at the top, and large masses fell, completely filling the entrance, burying alive those who were on the inside.

"That settles them, I reckon," Skip cried, gleefully, as, unmindful of the blinding dust, he sprang toward Bill's blouse.

To find the plan of the mine was but the work of a moment, and then, with the precious document thrust in the bosom of his shirt, he started at full speed toward the entrance to the slope.

The crash of the timbers and earth was by no means an unusual sound in the mine, where heavy masses of coal were constantly being detached by blasts, and the leader of the regulators had good reason to believe it would be unnoticed. His only care was to avoid Sam, in case he should return sooner than might be expected, and to this end he darted from one cutting to another, until having reached a point from which, at the proper moment, he could gain the slope.

Here he remained partially screened from view until the empty car, which Sam was to send to the new cutting, had passed on its way up the drift.

Now he listened intently, and in a few moments came the cry:

"A break! A break, and three men buried! Help on the lower level!"

[Pg 107]

Those who were near enough to hear this appeal sent the alarm from drift to drift up the slope, until the entire mine seemed to be ringing with the words:

"Help is needed on the lower level!"

In view of all that happened, together with the knowledge that if any attack was made by the Billings' gang it would be on the lower level, every workman ran with all speed to the bottom of the slope, and among the foremost was Mr. Wright.

"What has happened?" he asked of a blacksmith, who was darting toward the chamber in which the tools were stored.

"Bill Thomas, Joe Brace, and a butty are buried in a cutting the fools were makin' up there a piece."

"Go back," Mr. Wright cried to the swarm of men which came down the slope like a living stream. "Not more than twelve can work to advantage, and we have that number here."

"But we want to do our share," an old miner replied.

"You shall have a chance if we do not find them soon. It is not safe to have so many here at once."

All hands understood the reason for this caution, and as the crowd turned to ascend Skip Miller slipped from his hiding place and joined them. He did not fear detection while every one was in such a state of excitement, and even if he should be recognized it would be only natural for him to have followed the men at the first alarm.

It was necessary, however, that he should avoid Donovan, and with the utmost caution he emerged from the slope, running as fast as his legs would carry him on reaching the open air.

[Pg 108]

Not until Taylor's groggery was near at hand did he slacken speed, and then, assuming as best he could an air of composure, he opened the door cautiously to peep in.

Cale Billings was the only customer, and on seeing Skip, he cried:

"Come in, lad. I reckon you're here to see me."

Struggling hard to prevent his heavy breathing from being observed by the proprietor, the leader of the regulators entered, and whispered:

"There's been an accident on the lower level, an' two or three shut in."

"Explosion?"

"The top of the cuttin' fell in, an' it won't be a easy job to dig em out."

"Was you there?"

Sam nodded his head in a triumphant manner.

"You're a lad after my own heart," Billings said, approvingly, as he extended a huge, grimy hand for the boy to shake. "If half the men here had your spunk Wright wouldn't have got the best of us so easy. Did you fix that thing I told you about?"

Skip nodded his head, and again Billings shook his hand.

"That's what I call business. Let's have it."

The leader of the regulators was about to draw the dearly-earned document from his pocket when the proprietor of the place interfered.

"None of that," he said sharply. "There's somethin' goin' on what ain't straight, an' I won't have it in my shop."

[Pg 109]

"Do you mean to go back on a friend?" Billings asked in an injured tone.

"Not a bit of it; but the company are lookin' after you mighty sharp, Cale, an' I don't want to get in trouble. There's plenty room out of doors."

"All right, the shop belongs to you; but it may be the losin' of a good customer," and Billings walked out with Skip close at his heels.

"Now give me the paper."

When the document was delivered the man glanced at it to make sure it was the one wanted, and then said in a fatherly tone:

"I reckon you've fixed things to suit yourself if the new breaker boy was in the cuttin' when the roof fell."

"They're diggin' for him now; but I'm goin' to get the worst of this job."

"How so?"

"Taylor will blow the whole thing, an' then Wright will know it was me."

"Ain't I here to protect yer?"

"Yes; but——"

"Don't worry, my son. Go into the breaker as if nothin' had happened."

"I can't 'cause I sent word I wouldn't come to-day."

"Then keep out of sight till night, and meet me on the railroad track after dark. We'll have this job mighty nigh done before morning."

Billings was walking toward the slope, and not daring to follow him any farther, Skip ran swiftly in the opposite direction, wondering where he could hide until sunset. For the first time he began to fear the consequences of his cruel deed, and the thought that the officers of the law might soon be in search of him was by no means reassuring.

[Pg 110]

He sought the shelter of the thicket farther up the hill where a view of the slope could be had, and there he waited, expecting each moment to see lifeless bodies brought from the mine.

CHAPTER XIII

BURIED ALIVE

At the moment when Skip Miller knocked away the joist which supported the timbers at the top of the tunnel, Fred had stooped to pick up his shovel, and this position saved him from being instantly killed.

One end of the shoring plank was yet held by the upright placed in the center of the cutting, and it remained at an angle, although pinning him down, while the earth covered him completely.

For a moment he was at a loss to know what had happened, and then he heard, as if from afar off, Joe calling him by name.

"Here I am under the timber," he replied.

"Are you hurt much?"

"I think not; but I shall stifle to death if the dirt isn't taken away soon."

"It ain't a sure thing that you won't stifle even then," he heard Bill say sharply. "Take hold, mate, an' let's get him from beneath while we have a chance to breathe."

[Pg 111]

Then the grating of the shovels was distinguished, and pound by pound the weight was removed until nothing save the timber held him down.

"Can you get out now?" Joe asked, and his voice sounded strangely indistinct.

"Not till the joist is pulled away."

"When that is done it's safe to say tons of the roof will follow," Bill muttered, and Joe asked:

"Does it hurt you much, lad?"

"The edges are cutting into my back terribly."

"Grin an' bear it as long as you can. Our only chance for life is to break through the wall into the old tunnel; but if that timber is taken away it's good-bye for all hands."

"Then don't bother about me. It's better one died than three."

There was no reply to this. The men were digging at the barrier of earth with feverish energy, and each instant respiration became more difficult. The slight amount of air which filtered through the bank of slate and sand was no more than sufficient for one pair of lungs.

The darkness was profound. The lamps had been extinguished by the shock, and five minutes later it was impossible to re-light them. The oxygen had become so nearly exhausted that a match would not burn.

Fred bit his lips to prevent an outcry. The huge timber was crushing him slowly but surely, and the pain was intense.

Each instant the blows of the men grew fainter. Strength and even the power of movement was rapidly succumbing to the noxious vapor.

[Pg 112]

Joe was the first to give up, and as the pick fell from his nerveless hands he said faintly:

"It's all over, lads. We might as well pull the timber from Fred, and die at the same moment."

"Don't weaken, mate," Bill said, imploringly. "Who knows but we're within a few inches of the other drift."

"Even if that's true, the chances are we'll be stifled by the gas."

"The alarm may be given in time to save us from the entrance."

"Sam can't have come back yet, an' before any one knows what has happened we shall be dead."

Joe had lost all courage and the apathy of despair was upon him. His words robbed Fred of the last hope, and as it fled consciousness deserted him.

Bill delivered a few more feeble blows with the pick, and then he in turn sank to the ground.

The hand of death was very nearly upon them, and the agonies of dissolution already passed.

Within a few feet of where the unconscious men lay, willing hands were working at the obstruction. No more than three could labor at once, but these were relieved every two minutes, in order that their energy might not be impaired by weariness, and meanwhile others shoveled the slate and earth into cars, that the drift might be kept clear.

Mr. Wright personally assisted in the labor, and it was he who began the cheering which ensued when an aperture was made in the barrier.

"At it with a will, boys," he shouted, "but be careful about removing the timber, for some of the poor fellows may be beneath it."

[Pg 113]

The foul air rushing out nearly overcame the laborers, but the eager rescuers heeded not their own peril, and the moment finally came when the unconscious ones were fully exposed to view.

"Pass out the men, and then dig beneath the boy; he must be released in that manner, otherwise we may all share their fate," and Mr. Wright shoveled the earth carefully away from Fred, while the others carried Joe and Bill into the drift.

From his place of concealment on the hillside Skip Miller saw a party of men come out of the slope bearing an ominous looking burden.

"One of them is dead," he whispered to himself, as his face paled.

Then came another party, and a few seconds later the third, each carrying a similar load, marched down the road leading to the village.

The sight nearly overpowered Skip; he shook as if in an ague fit, and after staring at the sad spectacle until the men had passed from view, he turned and ran through the grove, believing the officers were close upon him.

The news that two miners and a boy had probably been killed spread through the village rapidly, and Cale Billings was in Taylor's groggery when one of the late rioters brought the intelligence.

"It's a wonder they don't accuse us of havin' somethin' to do with the accident," the newcomer added, and the proprietor said sternly:

"I don't want to drive customers away, but if any who come here have had a hand in murder, they'd better not show their heads 'round this place again."

[Pg 114]

Billings looked disturbed, but made no reply. Although having had no direct share in the crime, he knew he was really an accomplice, and the knowledge that Taylor might inform against him was by no means pleasant.

It was eight o'clock in the evening when Skip ventured to come down from the hillside, and he looked like a boy who had been very ill. Even at this late hour he did not dare to walk through the village, but skulked around the outskirts until he saw Chunky, whom he hailed in a whisper.

"Where have you been?" Fred's chute mate asked in surprise.

"I had some work on the other side of the hill."

"Have you been there all day?"

"Yes. Jest got back. Are those fellows dead!"

Ordinarily Chunky was not quick to arrive at conclusions, but now he asked in a suspicious tone:

"How did you know anything about it if you've jest got back?"

"Oh, I heard from some of the fellows."

"Who?"

"Never mind," and Skip spoke sharply.

"Did they all get killed?"

"None of 'em; but the doctor says Fred won't be over it for three or four days. Joe an' Bill are both in bed, though they'll be out in the morning."

"Does Wright know who did it?"

"Did what?"

"Why, knock—whatever was done."

"I thought the roof of a cuttin' fell in 'cause it wasn't shored up enough."

[Pg 115]

"I s'pose that was the reason," Skip replied in a nervous way.

"It seems to me you know more about this thing than anybody else."

"You'd better not say that again," and Skip stepped forward a few paces with clenched fists.

"You can get the best of me, so I'll have to hold my tongue; but I reckon I've had all I want of the regulators. Tryin' to kill a feller who never did much of anything to you is a mean trick."

"Shut up or I'll knock your head off. You can't back out of our s'ciety, an' if you ever say I tried to kill anybody I'll pound you till there won't be an inch of skin left."

Chunky did not wait to hear more. He started at full speed toward his own home, and Skip was more alarmed than before.

"Now I'm in a worse scrape than ever, for he's jest fool enough to tell what he knows, an' then there will be trouble. I'd better go to meet Billings, an' perhaps he can help me out."

He could reach the rendezvous without going through the village, and greatly to his relief the leader of the rioters was waiting to receive him.

"Now this is somethin' like business," and Billings patted the boy on the head.

Skip stepped back; the touch of the man's hand now, when through him he had gotten into so much trouble, was disagreeable.

"What am I to do?" he asked fiercely.

"Help me finish what you've begun."

[Pg 116]

"I won't do it. They'll have me arrested, an' you must get me through the scrape."

"So I will after I've served the company out. We'll go off somewhere together."

"And I'm to leave home?"

"There's nothin' for it if Wright gets the idea that you knocked the timber away."

"If he doesn't know it already there are them who will tell him. Chunky thinks I did somethin' to help the thing along."

"He does, eh?" and now Billings began to look disturbed. "Is he likely to go to any of the bosses?"

"He might tell some one else who would do it."

"That's true. What with him an' Taylor, things begin to seem kinder scarey for me."

"I'm in worse trouble."

"You're right, an' that shows we two must keep together."

"But I don't want to leave home."

"You can't help yourself. Once in the scrape, it's bad to back out."

Skip had good evidence that the way of the transgressor is hard. He felt a decided repugnance to becoming Billings' constant companion, but he dared not go home, and it seemed as if there was no other course left open.

"It won't do to stay here very long, for folks might see us, and it wouldn't be hard to guess we were up to mischief. Will you go with me, or take the chances of bein' arrested?"

"I'll have to do what you say," Skip replied with a groan, and Billings started straight across the hill toward the abandoned shaft. [Pg 117]

"Where are you going?"

"We'll hide for a while. It ain't safe to loaf 'round here much longer. Here's a dollar. Go to Taylor's an' get somethin' to eat. Tell him I want cooked food, 'cause I'm bound on a tramp."

"I don't dare show up there."

"Move on, or I'll break every bone in your body! You've got to toe the mark now if you don't want to go to jail."

Billings used the tone of a master, and Skip understood that his crime had brought him to slavery of the most degrading kind.

The grogery was filled with men when he arrived, and in the number he found safety. All were excitedly discussing the accident, some intimating that Billings had a hand in it, and no one paid any particular attention to the frightened boy who crept cautiously in, as if to avoid being seen.

"Wants grub, eh?" Taylor asked, when Skip made known his errand. "What's he up to? Afraid they'll nab him for what was done to-day?"

"I don't know."

"Now, look here, Skip Miller, I ain't got any too much love for you, but it don't seem right to let a boy go on as you've begun. Go home now, an' leave Billings to take care of his own business."

"If I don't carry back the stuff he'll say I stole his money."

"Well, take the grub, an' then get back as soon as you know how." [Pg 118]

"All right," Skip replied meekly.

"If you're not home in half an hour I'll see your father to-night."

"I wish I dared to go," Skip said to himself as he hurried away with the bundle. "Workin' in the breaker ain't a marker to what it'll be runnin' around with Cale Billings."

CHAPTER XIV

PRECAUTIONS

Not until two days had elapsed were the victims of the "accident" able to leave their rooms, and then they met Sam and Mr. Wright at Mrs. Byram's home.

"We'll be ready for work in the morning," Bill said in reply to the superintendent's inquiries. "What troubles me is that I've lost the plan of the old mine. It was in my blouse when the timber fell, an'——"

"How that joist could have got away without some one to help it is what worries me," Joe interrupted. "I set it, an' know the weight from above could not have any effect."

"There is no chance of foul play. The level has been guarded night and day, therefore, unless our trusted men are at fault, it was purely an accident."

"I'm not sayin' it wasn't; but yet the whole business looks queer," and with this remark Joe dismissed the subject from his mind.

Mr. Wright had come to learn when the guardians of the level would be ready to return to duty, and Bill's answer sufficed. [Pg 119]

"The men who have been there during the past twenty-four hours shall be given other work in the morning, and once more I can rely on you. Thus far nothing suspicious has been seen or heard," he said, "and I begin to believe Billings has given up his thoughts of revenge. The only strange thing is that Miller's boy has disappeared, and his father can think of no reason why he should run away."

"Farley's won't be the loser if he never comes back," Joe replied. "That boy is a bad one, an' it wouldn't take much to make me believe he an' Billings are firm friends."

"There is no necessity of talking about him; we are not afraid of boys. The question is whether we are warranted in guarding the lower level much longer."

"That's for you to say, sir. We had rather be at our regular work."

"Well, we'll try it a day or two more. Perhaps you'd better break through into the old drift, and then we shall know whether it is possible for evil-disposed persons to find a hiding place there."

This closed the interview so far as Mr. Wright was concerned, and on his leaving the house the others discussed the work to be done the following day; but Skip Miller's disappearance had little

place in the conversation.

Bill mourned the loss of the plan, which was supposed to be the only guide to the old mine, but Joe did not think it was of such very great importance.

"All we care to know is whether the air's foul, an', of course, the best way is to finish the tunnel which came so near finishin' us. That work can be done without any guide."

[Pg 120]

"But we may want to follow up the drift, which will be a long job if we have to go on blindly."

"There's no use fussin' over what can't be helped. The paper got trampled into the dirt, most likely, otherwise them as have been lookin' would 'a found it before this."

"I don't feel like givin' over the search so easy; s'pose we four have a reg'lar hunt in the morning?"

"Sam and I will go now," Fred said. "We shall feel better for a little exercise after being cooped up in the house so long."

"Very well. Take a turn at it this afternoon, an' if you don't succeed Joe an' I'll try to-night."

The boys set off without delay, but they were a long while reaching the slope, for every person on the street thought it necessary to congratulate them upon having escaped a terrible death, and at the breaker Donovan delayed the search by making minute inquiries as to the condition of affairs in the drift just prior to the accident.

"Any one would think from all these questions that you believed somebody was responsible for the trouble," Sam said with a laugh.

"P'rhaps I do. Billings an' Skip Miller disappeared on the same day, an' that looks suspicious to me, though Mr. Wright won't listen to anything of the kind."

"It's a big satisfaction to know they have left," Fred added, "and we have gotten rid of them cheaply. Do you know where they went?"

[Pg 121]

"Out of the village somewhere; Harvey saw them walking up the track."

"Then we can reckon that there'll be no more mischief done for a while. Come on, Fred, let's get down the slope."

The boys left the breaker without noticing that Chunky was trying to attract their attention, and were soon in the lower level making a systematic search.

Shoveling over the loose dirt along the track, they continued on until the cutting which had so nearly been a grave for Fred was passed, and then Sam said as he halted:

"It's no use to hunt here. It couldn't have got up this way."

"The draught may have carried it quite a distance."

"There isn't air enough stirrin' to move it a foot; but it won't do much harm to look."

They were nearly at the chamber where Sam was taken prisoner before Fred abandoned the hunt, and as he turned to retrace his steps both came to a sudden halt.

As if from beneath their feet arose a muffled cry of distress.

The boys looked at each other in alarm, and as they stood motionless the mysterious sound was repeated.

"What can it mean?" Fred asked in a whisper.

"That's more'n I can tell. There's no drift below this."

"That was surely a human being, and in trouble of some kind."

"Perhaps the cry comes from the end of the drift which has been closed."

[Pg 122]

"It sounds under the ground right here," and Fred stamped with his foot just as the noise was heard for the third time.

"There's no question about it's being a man. Come on; let's bring some of the miners to help find him."

The boys ran down the drift at full speed, and half an hour later returned with two of the miners.

"It was right here that we heard it," Sam said, as he pointed to the shovels they had left behind, in order to mark the spot.

The party listened intently, but no sound save their own breathing could be distinguished.

"I thought you'd been frightened about nothing," one of the miners said with a laugh. "You might as well tell us the mine was haunted as to give out such a yarn. I'll guarantee that nothin' larger'n a mouse could hide here."

"But we surely heard a cry," Fred insisted.

"And it seemed to come from beneath our feet."

"Nonsense. It's foolish to make such talk when we know the thing's impossible," and the men turned away as if angry at having been brought so far on a useless errand.

"We know whether——"

Sam ceased speaking very suddenly, for at that moment the sound of distress came with great distinctness.

The men looked around, each trying to hide his fear, and then a regular search was begun.

The noise could not have come from the old drift, and the level was examined thoroughly, but without success.

[Pg 123]

"It beats me," one of the miners said at length. "I'm sure there's nothing beneath here but the solid earth."

"Let the boys tell Wright," the other suggested, and his companion assented.

"We'll hang around here till he comes or you get back; but don't stay very long, for I don't like the looks of things."

"Why not?"

"It may be a warnin' for some of us. I've heard tell of such."

Fred laughed heartily, and the man replied impatiently:

"When you've been in a mine as long as I have, you won't think there's any fun to be made of warnin's. Before the explosion of fire damp in the old workings, I've been told the miners heard all kinds of queer noises."

"Go on," the second man said fretfully, "an' don't waste time chinnin' here when p'rhaps we oughter be gettin' out to save our lives."

The boys started, feeling a trifle disturbed because of the unexplainable cries, and arrived at the store as the whistle sounded for the night shift to begin work.

The superintendent was surprised by the information brought, and insisted, as had the miners, that the sounds could not have been made by a human being.

"I will go down the slope at once, however," he said, and the boys accompanied him on what proved to be a useless errand.

Every portion of the lower level was searched. A party descended the old shaft, traversing the abandoned passages to the chamber connecting with the new portion of the workings, but nowhere could be seen any signs of life.

[Pg 124]

Joe and Bill, alarmed because the boys had not returned, came to look for them in time to join the exploring parties, and the latter was decidedly uneasy when Mr. Wright ordered the useless labor to be stopped.

He, in common with several others, believed the mysterious noises to be warnings, and there was every evidence of a panic until Mr. Wright spoke at considerable length on the subject, intimating that the cries were due to natural causes.

Then those who were off duty went home, and among them were Joe, Bill, and their helpers.

These last discussed the subject without arriving at any definite conclusion when the time to separate arrived.

On the following morning work was resumed in the cutting. The loose earth having been cleared away, a reasonably solid roof was put up, and once more the tunneling operations were pushed forward vigorously.

All hands were on the alert for a repetition of the mysterious cries, but nothing was heard save the noise of the picks and shovels, with now and then a muffled crash as fragments of the vein were detached by blasts.

During the "nooning" lunch was eaten in the cutting, and while they were sitting quiet a singular vibration of the earth could be felt.

"It seems as if some one was digging directly beneath us," Fred said, when the little party ceased eating to gaze at each other in surprise.

[Pg 125]

"Most likely there's a line of slate just under our feet, an' brings the sound from the other drift," Joe replied promptly.

"That's about the size of it," Bill added; but the boys noticed that both the men listened from time to time as if in great perplexity.

The peculiar tapping continued without interruption, and before the time of rest had more than half expired Joe said, as he arose to his feet:

"Come on, lads. We're close to the old drift, an' after that's been opened we'll have another look around, for I want to find out what these queer noises mean."

Each one worked with the utmost rapidity, and when another hour had been spent Bill's pick broke through the barrier of earth.

"That ends the job, an' now to see how the air is."

The miner had hardly ceased speaking when a huge volume of gas burst through the aperture, nearly suffocating the party and extinguishing the lamps instantly.

"Jump to it lively, boys!" Joe cried hoarsely, as he began shoveling back the earth. "When you can't work any longer get a breath of fresh air in the drift."

There was every danger that the lower level might be so filled with the noxious vapor as to cause an explosion, and both men and boys labored manfully.

All were working blindly, but the general direction of the aperture was known, and the greater portion of the earth could be thrown with a fair degree of accuracy.

Ten minutes passed and the flow of foul air was partially checked. Twice had each person been forced to retreat to the main drift, and Fred was about to go for the third time when it seemed as if the flooring of dirt gave way beneath his feet.

[Pg 126]

Half suffocated by the gas, and overwhelmed by the falling fragments, he hardly realized what had occurred until finding himself in what was unmistakably another and yet lower tunnel or drift.

CHAPTER XV

A DISCOVERY

After the first alarm passed away, Fred understood that he had fallen but a few yards, and the earth which covered him represented only a very small portion of the upper tunnel's floor.

Scrambling to his feet he fancied for a moment that the sound of scurrying footsteps could be heard, and while listening, Joe said:

"Hello! Are you hurt?"

"Not a bit."

"Where are you?"

"It seems like a regular cutting, and the air is pure."

"Light your lamp an' look around."

Obedying this command, Fred found his suspicions correct, and so reported.

"Can you get back?"

"Not unless you pull me up."

"We'll attend to that in a minute."

The rush of air from below had so far checked the gas, now partially shut off, that the men could also light the lamps in their caps, and the remainder of the task was quickly accomplished.

[Pg 127]

With a couple of timbers as braces the aperture to the old mine was closed securely, and then the attention of the men was turned to the boy.

"Look out down there!" Bill shouted. "I'm goin' to drop a couple of joists so's we can come back."

"Let them go."

"Now drag 'em out of the way, an' we'll follow."

When this had been done the men and Sam descended, all completely mystified by this new discovery.

"Here's somethin' that I reckon Mr. Wright didn't know about," Bill said, as he surveyed the scene, and then he added with great emphasis as a sudden thought occurred to him. "Now we can come pretty nigh guessing what them noises meant. Some one has been tryin' to get into the other level, an' when a big hole was made Fred put an end to the work by fallin' through."

This could be told by the mound of earth a short distance away, as well as by the marks of a pick around the edges of the aperture; but further proof was found in the shape of a shovel which Sam stumbled over.

"This belongs to the company," he cried, pointing to the brand.

"Yes, an' a blind man can figger who's been here. Cale Billings didn't leave town as he tried to make folks believe."

"Then let's have him. This cuttin' can't be so long but that we'll get all over it before sunset," Joe cried, as he wrenched the shovel handle from the iron work to serve as a weapon.

[Pg 128]

"I thought I heard somebody running in that direction when I first fell," Fred said, pointing toward the quarter in which it was reasonable to suppose the old shaft might be found.

Joe led the way, the others following close behind until, when half a mile had been traversed, they arrived at two slopes or inclined tunnels, running at right angles from the level.

"It won't do to pass these," Bill cried. "We'll take one, while the boys search out the other."

He darted into the right-hand opening as he spoke; but returned before Joe could join him, saying:

"That was a false cutting. It only runs a dozen yards, an' there's nothin' in it. Sam, you an' Fred look into the other one while we keep on."

The idea of coming upon Cale Billings while they were unarmed was not a pleasant idea for the boys; but they would have braved considerably greater danger rather than show signs of fear, and both obeyed promptly.

This slope ran at an inclination of nearly forty-five degrees for about fifty yards when it turned sharply to the right, terminating in a small chamber where the vein had probably come to an end.

As Sam and Fred entered the place a figure darted from one corner and attempted to rush past them; but the flight was checked very suddenly.

"Why it's Skip Miller!" Sam cried, as he lowered his lamp that the rays might fall upon the prisoner's face.

"Yes, it's me," Skip said, piteously. "Please don't drag me off."



"Please don't drag me off," Skip said, piteously. "I'll never hurt you or anybody else again."

"How did you come here?"

[Pg 129]

"With Billings; he made me do jest what he said, an' I didn't dare to show up in town."

"Why not?"

"'Cause I knew Mr. Wright would have me 'rested on account of pretty nigh killin' you."

"What?" Fred cried, in surprise. "Then it wasn't an accident?"

Skip literally groveled on the ground in his fear. He understood now that his share in that business had not been known until he himself betrayed the fact.

"Don't lug me off," he screamed. "I'd have to go to jail."

"You wouldn't so long as we kept the thing a secret," Fred replied, with a feeling of mingled pity and contempt because of the abject terror displayed. "We must take you with us; but needn't tell about your villainy."

"Then father would just about beat me to death for runnin' away. Why not let me stay here? I'll never hurt you or anybody else again."

Although Skip had tried to kill them, the boys felt a certain sense of aversion to dragging him away while he pleaded so piteously, and in order to gain time in which to think the matter over,

Sam said:

"Tell us how you got into the lower level."

In a faltering voice Skip gave a truthful account of all his movements on that particular day.

"Have you been here ever since?"

"Yes."

"And Billings, too?"

"He went out twice for whisky an' some water."

[Pg 130]

"What have you been doing?"

"Billings made me dig an' shovel all day, an' most of the night."

"Trying to get into the lower level, eh?"

"Yes, an' when I got played out he pretty near pounded my head off."

"I reckon we heard you yelling. Where is Billings now?"

"He ran ahead of me when the earth began to cave in, an' that's the last I've seen of him. Say, it won't hurt you a bit to let me stay here, an' I'll do the square thing if I ever get out of the scrape."

"You'd starve to death."

"I'd rather take the chances of that than go to jail, or let father get hold of me."

"But what good will it be to stay here?" Fred asked. "Hiding won't mend matters, and you'll have to come out some time."

"That may be; but I don't want to go now," and once more Skip fell on his knees in front of those whom he had wronged.

"What do you think about it, Fred?" Sam asked, in a whisper.

"I don't like to yank him out, no matter what he tried to do to me."

"Nor I."

"Then why not let him stay? He'll get punishment enough by hiding here alone in the darkness with nothing to eat."

"But we shall have to give him a little grub. We can't think he's hungry when we're got plenty."

"I'll agree to whatever you say."

[Pg 131]

Sam was silent for a moment, and then turning to the kneeling boy, he asked:

"Could you find your way out of here?"

"I might if I had a lamp; but the oil has all been burned in mine."

"How long do you count on staying?"

"Jest as many days as I can."

"Well, see here, we're going off, an' leave you to take the dose in your own way; but it's on the agreement that you try to be a decent fellow after gettin' out."

"I'll promise anything, an' won't so much as say the name regulators agin."

"If it's possible, Fred an' I'll bring you some grub; but you mustn't count on it."

"Don't take any risks," Skip replied, humbly. "I can live on wind a couple of days if that villain of a Billings don't come back."

"You needn't worry about that. If he went up the drift Bill an' Joe will most likely nab him. Come, Fred, we mustn't stay any longer, or they'll think something is wrong."

As the boys turned to go Skip tried to thank them for the mercy shown; but did not make a great success at it. He had been literally trembling with fear, and now his gratitude rendered him almost incapable of speech.

"That's all right, Skip. We'll see whether you mean it or not after you get out."

"I'll be square as a brick if I ever get through with this scrape," he replied, and then as the boys turned the angle of the slope he was hidden from view in the darkness.

[Pg 132]

"I don't know as we're actin' very sensible," Sam said, slowly, when they were in the drift once more; "but it's better than draggin' the poor beggar off to be arrested."

"A good idea, Sam, and I'm sure Skip will be a decent fellow after this. We must try to get back here to-night with food and oil."

"Unless Joe and Bill keep us at work we'll have plenty of time, for—hello! Here they come now!"

The two miners could be seen in the distance, or, rather, the light of their lamps was visible, and when they were within speaking distance, Fred asked:

"Did you find him?"

"No; we've followed up the drift as far as we dared, an' are now goin' back to see if any of the day crew know these old works. Where did that slope lead to?"

"It ends about fifty yards from here."

"Didn't see anything of the villains, eh?"

"Billings isn't there, that's certain," Fred replied after a brief hesitation.

The men did not appear to notice the equivocal answer, and Bill suggested that they return to the workings without further delay.

"We'll have a guard set at the shaft, so he can't give us the slip in that way, an' if any of the boys know these drifts it won't be a long job to smoke him out."

"He may get off before we can reach the top of the slope," Fred suggested, hoping by this means to prevent the conversation from reverting to their long delay.

[Pg 133]

"Then so much the better, lad," Bill replied, in a tone of satisfaction. "All we want is to be rid of such trash, an' if he leaves town that's enough."

If at this moment either of the party had turned it would not have been difficult to distinguish even in the gloom the form of Cale Billings, as he followed ready to work further mischief, or escape as might be most convenient.

Unsuspecting of the nearness of their enemy, the little party continued on to the hole through which Fred had fallen, and as they clambered up the joists the leader of the rioters muttered:

"Don't think you can smoke me out so easy. I'll leave my mark on this mine before bein' run down, or know the reason why."

Neither Sam nor Fred gave so much as a passing thought to the man who was responsible for all the damage which had been done; they were so engrossed with the desire to aid Skip without being discovered by those who might call him to an account for his crime that all else seemed as trifles.

"I'll tell mother, and she will cook for us what may be needed," Fred whispered, after they were in the lower level walking rapidly toward the slope.

"That part of it don't trouble me so much as how we're to come back to the mine without bein' seen by some of the men," Sam replied, and, turning sharply Bill asked:

"What are you fellers chinnin' about?"

"There's no harm in talkin', eh?" and Sam assumed an air of impudence such as the men had never seen before.

[Pg 134]

"I don't reckon there is, lad; but seein' as how we've hung together so long, it wasn't strange to ask."

"I didn't mean to be too fresh, Bill," Sam replied, understanding that he had spoken in a disagreeable manner. "Fred and I were only figuring about coming back to make sure Billings didn't get into the level while you were outside."

"That part of it can be fixed easy. Joe shall go to the store while I see if anybody here knows about the old drift, and with three on guard I don't reckon he can do much mischief."

"Then you can stay with him while I run home for some provisions," Fred whispered, and during this conversation Cale Billings was clambering up the joist which led to the last level.

CHAPTER XVI

GOOD SAMARITANS

Knowing that Joe and Bill were in Mr. Wright's confidence Donovan had no hesitation about placing guards as desired, and immediately after they ascended from the slope every exit was closely watched.

"Now you boys can see we've fixed things in proper shape," Bill said, in a tone of triumph. "Do whatever you choose until to-morrow, an' Joe an' me'll attend to Mr. Billings' case."

"But he might get into the lower level by the same way we did," Sam ventured to suggest.

"There are plenty below to take care of that."

[Pg 135]

"Then there's no reason why we should come back?"

"Not unless you want to see the game played out."

"We'll run down to Fred's house, and then have a look at the place where he went through."

"Suit yourselves about that," was the careless reply, as Bill started toward the store to confer with the superintendent.

"Now is our chance," Sam whispered. "It won't take us more than ten minutes to run over to your house, and we can get back before Bill comes."

Fred started at a rapid pace, and by the time the miners had finished telling their story to Mr. Wright, Mrs. Byram knew of the interview with Skip.

"Of course I will give you some food," she said, readily. "It may prove to be the best possible thing for him that he should be so thoroughly frightened. Can you carry oil enough in a bottle?"

"As much as will be needed until to-morrow. It won't do any harm if he scrapes along on short rations for a while," Sam replied, with a laugh. "The only thing is to get him something before Joe and Bill go back."

A generous package of food, a small quantity of oil, the whole in a paper parcel, and the good samaritans started for the slope once more, noting with satisfaction as they passed that the miners had not yet left the store.

No particular attention was paid to them as they entered the slope, and screening the package as much as possible from view, the boys went with all speed to the repentant regulator's hiding place.

[Pg 136]

So far as could be seen, the cutting through which Fred had fallen remained as when they ascended, and after letting themselves down this the task was well nigh accomplished.

Skip was most extravagant in his demonstrations of gratitude when they entered the chamber and displayed the supplies.

"It'll take me a mighty long while to straighten this thing up; but I'll do it somehow," he said, and Sam replied, roughly:

"We'll talk about that later. Jest now there's a chance others will find out where you are, for Joe and Bill have gone after men to help search for Billings."

"Then they didn't find him?"

"No."

"I reckon he has gone to Taylor's."

"That won't do him much good unless he walks out of town, for now it is known he's near by, all hands are bound to hunt him down."

"Then they'll be sure to find me."

"We'll hold on in the old drift till they get back, and try to prevent them from coming up here by saying we've searched this slope," Fred said, after a moment's thought. "That's the only way I know of to keep the secret."

"It won't do any harm to make the attempt," Sam added. "Don't light your lamp, and keep perfectly quiet."

Skip retreated once more to the farther corner of the chamber, and the boys walked slowly down to the drift, halting a short distance from the mouth of the slope as Sam picked up a shovel.

[Pg 137]

"Here's another tool belonging to the company. It must have been thrown away by Billings or Skip when you dropped on their heads."

"Keep it to show we've been hunting; it can't be long now before the men come, and we'll need some good excuse for loafing here."

"Let's sit down till we hear them. I'm tired enough to want a rest."

Seated on the decaying timbers of the car track the boys discussed in whispers the possibility of aiding Skip to escape from his unenviable position, with never a thought of the deed with which Billings was to crown his villainous career.

The leader of the mob had immediately begun to look about for a chance to wreak his vengeance on the company, when Joe and Bill with their helpers left the level, and he was yet at the farther end of the passage when the boys returned with supplies for Skip.

Their desire to avoid attracting the attention of the workmen caused them to move noiselessly, consequently he was ignorant of the fact that they were in the mine.

It was hardly five minutes after they descended to the old drift when he came back to the cutting, and the odor of gas brought him to a stop.

"Them fools broke through after all," he said, examining the earth piled up at one end, "and I reckon they found out it wasn't safe to work much farther on that course."

One of the shovels was standing against the side of the excavation, and with this he dug a portion of the dirt from the hole made by Bill's pick.

[Pg 138]

The foul air rushed through with such force as to nearly suffocate him; but instead of being disappointed he appeared overjoyed.

"I couldn't a' fixed things better in a week's solid work, an' I'll take the chances of gettin' out."

Enlarging the aperture by pushing the earth through between the braces while he covered his mouth and nose with his blouse, he crept back to the drift, unfastened his cap-lamp, removed the safety screen, and placed the light in the passage after raising the wick a trifle.

Just as these preparations had been completed the faint sound of the whistle could be heard from above.

"It's astonishin' what luck I'm having," he muttered. "I can get out while the day shift are leavin', an' ten minutes will be enough to fill this level so full of gas that no power can prevent an explosion."

The air was heavy with the noxious vapor as he went rapidly toward the slope up which crowds of miners were passing, and as some of the men loitered behind the others it became necessary he should hide in the drift to escape detection.

"Why don't the fools move faster," he said, in a hoarse whisper. "It can't be many seconds before the thing comes, an' there'll be no chance for me. There'd be a lynchin' sure if I should show up jest ahead of an explosion."

Big drops of perspiration stood on his brow as he realized that the trap he had set for others might close upon himself, and for an instant he resolved to run back and extinguish the lamp.

"It won't do," he said, half turning and then moving nearer the slope. "There's gas enough in the drift to choke me before I'd get ten yards. Why don't the idiots move faster!"

[Pg 139]

Only the absolute conviction that he would be lynched if caught at such a time prevented Billings from rushing out.

Each second the vapor became denser, and he wondered why the miners did not perceive it.

The catastrophe must be very near at hand, and he was exposed to the greatest danger.

When it seemed as if an hour had passed, the last man went up the slope, and he started at full speed to gain a higher level.

The incline was almost reached; half a dozen steps more and he would be partially sheltered by the jutting point of slate.

"Luck is still with me," he cried, so loud that those above must have heard him, and at that instant the earth seemed to rock to and fro; there was a flash of blinding light, and the air was filled with flying fragments.

Where had been the lower level was now an apparently solid mass of earth, coal, and slate, covering the body of him who had wreaked his vengeance upon the company.

Joe and Bill were returning from the store when the noise of the explosion was heard, and they, as well as everyone in the vicinity, knew from sad experience what had occurred.

"We're responsible for this!" Bill cried, his face paling. "The gas has burst through from the old drift."

"Thank God it came when most of the poor fellows were quittin' work," and Joe started on a run, followed by every person in the village.

[Pg 140]

At the mouth of the slope a vast crowd had gathered. Women were calling their husbands and children by name, and as each learned her loved ones were safe, shouts of joy mingled with the wailings of those whose cries remained unanswered.

Even after Mr. Wright arrived the utmost confusion prevailed. All knew it would be certain death to make a descent, while the deadly vapor was so dense, and a second explosion might be expected at any moment.

Bill and Joe stood near the mouth of the slope ready to respond to the first call for volunteers, when Mrs. Byram came up.

"Where is Fred?" she asked, with a brave attempt controlling her fears.

"He went to your house with Sam, so there's no need to worry about them."

"They were not there more than ten minutes."

"Then both are in the crowd somewhere, for they wouldn't go down the slope till we got back."

The almost distracted mother had no thought of keeping Skip's secret at such a time, and when the two miners heard her story all hope for the safety of the boys fled.

"They must have been in the old drift underneath the explodin' gas," Joe exclaimed, involuntarily.

"It isn't sure the trouble began where we think," Bill said, quickly, with a warning glance at his companion. "I've known of men who were shut in a drift for a week, an' then brought out none the worse for wear, so don't despair, Mrs. Byram."

[Pg 141]

"But why isn't something done to aid them?"

"We shall set to work the very minute it is safe to venture into the next level. Go home, an' Joe or I will bring you the first news."

"Do you think I could remain there knowing my boy is dying, or—or—dead?"

The women near by endeavored to console the sorrowing mother with words of encouragement they themselves believed to be false, and Bill whispered to his mate:

"There's a mighty slim show for the poor lads, an' it's through helpin' him as tried to murder 'em that they've been caught."

Mr. Wright was doing his utmost to ascertain how many were yet in the mine, and after a long while succeeded in learning that at least a dozen men had been overpowered while some distance up the slope.

Those who reached the surface told of a number whom they had seen fall, and some were certain one or two did not have time to gain the slope.

"Who will go with me?" the superintendent asked, as a car was made ready. "I don't want the married men to volunteer, for they are needed at home, and none of us may come back alive."

"Then why not stay here yourself?" a woman cried. "Your wife an' children need you as much as ours need their fathers."

"Because it is my duty," was the calm reply. "Now who will come? I only want two."

"Then the car is full," Bill said, as he and Joe took their places in the box-like vehicle. "We're willin' to go alone, if you'll stay behind."

[Pg 142]

"No man shall encounter dangers from which I shrink. Lower away slowly, boys," he added to those who were fastening a rope to the car, "and keep a sharp look-out for our signals."

"An' it was his house my Jim helped try to burn!" the woman who had spoken before said in a whisper.

"Make haste," Mr. Wright cried, impatiently. "Remember that every second is precious."

The miners crowded around the car to shake its brave occupants by the hand as if they were never to return, and it was absolutely necessary to push them away in order that the terrible journey might be begun.

With their safety lamps held so that the condition of the air might be ascertained at each stage of the descent, the men slowly disappeared from view, and at the mouth of the slope the crowd surged to and fro in painful suspense; but not a sound could be heard, save as some wife or mother gave vent to a sob of distress.

CHAPTER XVII

DOWN THE SLOPE

During the time that Billings was making his preparations for the last act of his life, Sam and Fred remained seated a short distance from the cut which led to Skip's hiding place.

Both were listening intently for the first sound which should betoken the coming of the miners, and the falling earth which was displaced by Billings' feet as he worked in the cutting attracted their attention.

[Pg 143]

"There's some one in the tunnel we made," Sam whispered. "Let's creep up and find out who it is."

"That won't do, for there's no chance Billings would come back if he once got out, and we should arouse suspicions."

Despite this warning Sam advanced a short distance, and on becoming convinced that the tunnel really had an occupant rejoined Fred, as he whispered:

"We'd better sneak further along. I reckon somebody is on guard up there, and we musn't be seen so far down."

He had held the shovel during this excursion, and still retained it as they walked noiselessly along the drift until arriving at the mouth of the short slope.

Here the two halted at the moment when the confined gas, ignited by the open lamp, burst its bonds, and the shock sent them headlong up the incline.

Huge masses of earth were detached on every hand, except directly in the narrow way leading to Skip's hiding place, and on scrambling to their feet a solid wall shut them out from the drift.

"What was that?" Fred cried in alarm, as he assured himself his lamp was uninjured.

"An explosion, an' we're penned in here to starve to death," Sam replied, in a trembling voice.

"Can't we dig through this bank and reach the hole in the roof?"

"There is no longer any lower level, as we knew it, and unless we could make a new drift there'd be no use working."

"But this part of the mine seems to be all right."

[Pg 144]

"Yes, unless there's another explosion I reckon we can stay here 'til—"

"Till what?"

"We shall starve to death after a while."

This mournful conversation was interrupted by Skip, who came running down the slope with the most abject fear written on every feature of his face.

Familiar as he was with the mine he had no need to ask for the cause of the noise, and understood as well as Sam the little hope there was for life.

"Are you shut in, too?" he cried.

"We're here," Sam replied, grimly.

"An' you'd been outside if I hadn't wanted to stay rather than take a flogging."

"You're right, Skip, but this ain't the time to find fault. All three are in the same box, an' we might as well be friendly."

"Won't they try to get us out?" Fred asked, faintly.

"Nobody knows where we are," Skip replied, bitterly.

"We told mother about you, and she'll be sure to repeat it to Joe and Bill now we're in such danger."

Skip's face brightened for an instant, and then he said, in a despairing tone:

"They don't know where this place is. Billings is certain the oldest miners never heard of the drift; he thinks it was made years before the workings were opened at Farley's."

"Joe and Bill have been down here."

"Even they wouldn't know where to start in. How long will the air hold out, Sam?"

[Pg 145]

"I don't know, but there's no need of usin' it any faster than's necessary. We'll put out two of the lamps; one is enough, an' we may be mighty glad to drink the oil."

Fred was very nearly incapable of action. The knowledge that his companions had lost hope literally dazed him, and he could not even follow Sam's suggestion.

Two of the lamps were extinguished, and since Fred was the only one retaining the means of dispelling the darkness, Sam and Skip forced him on ahead as they went still further into the tunnel where the air would be more pure.

"This is the only point from which we may expect aid," Sam said, "an' seein' that we can do nothin' it's better to stay here."

"Won't Joe and Bill try to help us?" Fred asked.

"They'll try, but whether it'll be possible to do anything is another matter."

"Can't we begin to dig? We've got one shovel."

"Neither of us knows in which direction to start, an' when workin' more food would be needed, therefore, to keep alive as long as possible we'd better stay quiet."

Skip threw himself on the floor close to the end of the cutting, as if reconciled to whatever might happen, and Sam sat down beside him.

"Do you think there is any chance that we can get out of here?" Fred asked after a long silence, and Sam replied, gravely:

"We may as well look the matter straight in the face. It's possible they can strike us without much trouble, but that ain't likely."

[Pg 146]

During half an hour the boys remained silent and motionless, as if each was trying to reconcile himself to the terrible doom which threatened, and then Fred said, with a feeble attempt at cheerfulness:

"It must be near supper time. Suppose we have one square meal?"

"Because a man knows he's slowly drowning there's no reason why he should try to keep his head under water more than is necessary," Sam replied, sternly.

"What do you mean?"

"We are not suffering with hunger now, but soon will be, so it's wise to wait till grub is absolutely needed to keep us alive."

"Then let's do something; this sitting still thinking of what is to come seems worse than the reality can ever be."

"Very well, we've got a shovel; we'll decide in which direction it's best to dig, an' begin operations."

"There surely is a chance of striking another drift."

"Yes, there's a chance," Sam replied, as if the conversation wearied him. "Each one shall say which course he thinks most likely to bring us out."

Skip wished to continue up the slope, arguing that each inch gained would carry them so much nearer the surface, while Fred believed it best to work through the mass of earth that had fallen, because there a pick would not be necessary.

"We'd better try Skip's plan," Sam finally said. "By making our way along the old drift a chamber of gas might be struck, when all hands would be suffocated. Come on, and I'll start it."

[Pg 147]

He wielded the shovel until tired, the others carrying the earth back to the foot of the slope in their hats, and then Fred tried his hand at the labor.

In this manner each did a certain amount of the work, but at the expense of no slight suffering. In the confined space it was very warm, and this exercise brought with it an intense thirst, which, of course, could not be quenched.

Skip drank a little oil now and then, but Fred could not force himself to taste the ill-smelling stuff.

There was no way by which the passage of time could be measured. When all were sleepy they laid down to rest, and on awakening a small quantity of food was dealt out. After the scanty meal had been eaten they continued what every one now believed was useless labor, ceasing only when the desire for slumber became overpowering again.

Reckoning these periods of work and rest as days and nights, seventy-two hours had elapsed when the supply of food was exhausted, and they realized that the final struggle was at hand.

The air remained reasonably pure, probably because a vent had been left somewhere in the choked drift, but there were moments when the odor of gas was perceptible, thus causing Sam to believe efforts were still being made to reach them by those on the outside.

But little work was done when the food had been consumed. Now and then one or the other would use the shovel in a listless way for a few moments at a time, but each had become so weak that any prolonged exertion was out of the question.

[Pg 148]

They slept as much as possible, and refrained from discussing the terrible situation. Fred no longer listened for the sounds which would tell that help was near at hand, and the odor of the oil did not prevent him now from taking his share when the scanty allowance was doled out.

Finally the hour came when the last drop had been drunk. The tiny flame of the lamp seemed to have been the only link which connected them with the outer world, and then without any means of dispelling the profound darkness the bitterness of death came upon them.

Fred was the first to sink into a stupor from which he awakened only at rare intervals. Then Skip yielded to despair, and Sam was virtually alone.

All three were half sitting, half lying in the excavation they had made, and the moments passed unheeded. To Fred it seemed as if he had been unconscious for many days when he became aware that Sam was shouting wildly.

In a dazed way he raised his head, and after a while understood that his companion was saying in an incoherent tone:

"They're coming! They're coming!"

"Who? Who?" Skip asked, feebly, trying in vain to rise to his feet.

"The miners! Can't you hear the sound of their picks?"

When they could bring themselves to understand the meaning of Sam's words both the sufferers were revived by the excitement sufficiently to stagger to an upright position, but as only at intervals was the cheering sound heard, fatigue soon overpowered them again, and once more Sam alone remained conscious.

[Pg 149]

He made every effort to preserve all his faculties, and after another long, painful time of suspense he was rewarded by hearing a faint hail.

"Hello! lads, are you near?"

"Yes! yes! In the end of a short slope."

"How many are there?"

"Three."

"All well?"

"Two are pretty near gone. Hurry as fast as possible."

"Don't fret, lad, we're workin' the best we know how, an' have been these four days, though not allers on the right track."

Then from time to time the laborers shouted in order that they might not deviate from the right course, and Sam answered each call at the full strength of his lungs, which at the best was faint.

Nearer and nearer came the sound of shovels and picks until the trembling of the wall told that life, liberty, and food were near at hand.

Sam remained leaning close against the barrier that he might hear every hail, until he saw the face of a man appear from amid a shower of falling earth, and then, knowing the rescue was accomplished he lost consciousness.

Around the mouth of the shaft stood a great crowd when the inanimate boys were brought out. During the nights as well as days this throng remained waiting to see those known to be in the half-ruined mine. These anxious watchers, sympathizing with the three grief-stricken mothers, had left their posts only so long as was absolutely necessary, and had seen each lifeless body as it was sent to the surface, the last coming from the slope being the mangled remains of Cale Billings.

[Pg 150]

Each morning the newspapers had printed long articles regarding the disaster at Farley's, and in the list of those known to be dead were four names, the number of victims sacrificed that Billings might avenge a fancied wrong.

With the rescue of the boys the work was finished, and in the rear of the bearers all the watchers and laborers followed to the village, remaining in the streets until word was sent that no injuries had been sustained.

Then, perhaps for the first time, came the question of what was to be done now that Farley's was in such a condition as to preclude any possibility that the works could be opened for several months.

"It's a hard look-out for all of us," one old miner said to a mate, "but thank God that villain of a Billings has no more than four lives to answer for."

CHAPTER XVIII

SHUT DOWN

Food and rest were all that was needed to restore the boys who had been rescued to their normal condition once more, and since the works were necessarily shut down they had ample opportunity for the latter remedy.

Fred learned from his mother that Bill and Joe had remained foremost among the laborers nearly every moment of the time they were imprisoned in the drift; but the full story of the rescue was not told until on the second day, when Joe called.

[Pg 151]

"It looked pretty blue one spell," the latter said in reply to Fred's questions. "The first attempt to get down the slope was a failure. When we reached the upper level all three were so nearly overcome by the foul air that Mr. Wright could hardly make the signal for the car to be pulled back. Late at night we tried it agin, an' brought out the four poor fellows who were caught on the slope. Next mornin' Billings' body was found, an' then it wasn't hard to tell what caused the trouble."

"Did you spend any time there looking for us?"

"No, for Bill and me calculated that if you hadn't got to Skip before the explosion come it would be a month's work to find the bodies. We went down the old shaft, an' began from there, workin' at guess till both of us began to believe we'd gone wrong. If Sam hadn't yelled jest as he did the gang would have started in from the old drift that runs to the chamber."

"In that case we wouldn't have been found in time."

"You're right; but seein' as we did find you all secure, there's no use speculatin' about the other side of the matter."

"Have you seen Skip?"

"He was down to the store this mornin' tellin' what he knew of Billings' movements, for the

coroner is investigatin' the affair."

"And Sam?"

[Pg 152]

"He's lively as a cricket, an' counts on comin' here this afternoon."

"How long will it be before the works can be opened again?"

"Two or three months for the whole gang, but some can begin in half that time, I reckon. It's goin' to be rough on them as haven't anything laid by for a rainy day."

"And mother and I can be counted among those," Fred said, with a sigh.

"Don't worry about that my son," Mrs. Byram replied cheerily. "It is sufficient for me that your life has been spared, and I am certain we shall be able to provide for the future, but you are not to go into the mine again. The four terrible days spent at the slope, fearing each instant that the rescuing party would reach the drift too late, caused me to resolve that you should not be exposed to any more such dangers."

"But it don't stand to reason he'll have another experience like the last," Joe said, promptly. "He's already gone through more'n the majority of us fellers, an' lightning don't often strike twice in the same place."

Mrs. Byram shook her head to signify that the decision was final, but before she could add words to the gesture Mr. Wright knocked at the door.

"I have come to make some arrangements with Fred about working in the store," he said, as his summons was answered, and entering, continued, after a nod to the invalid and Joe, "we shall need more help there for a while, and will pay three dollars per week."

[Pg 153]

There could be no hesitation about accepting the proposition, and before the superintendent left it was decided Fred should begin next morning, provided he felt sufficiently strong.

"Sam Thorpe is to work with you," Mr. Wright said as he turned to leave the house, "and I expect good service from my new clerks."

"I'll go bail that you get it," Joe said, with a laugh, "an' now, if it ain't askin' too much, I'd like to know what chance there is for the rest of us."

"We can use about a hundred men, among whom will be you and Bill. The pumps have been choked so long that it will be some time before even the upper level can be put into working shape, but employment shall be given to all at the earliest possible moment."

Then Mr. Wright returned to the office, and during the remainder of the day Fred had quite as many callers as could be entertained in the little house.

Among these were Sam and Skip, and the latter renewed the promises made in the mine.

"I've backed out from the Regulators, an' while the shut down lasts am goin' to see what I can do in the way of workin' the garden. Father's let me off from a floggin' if I go straight after this."

On the following morning Fred was at his new place of business at a very early hour, and both he and Sam found plenty with which to occupy their time until sunset, when they were at liberty to do as they chose.

During the next week nothing of particular interest to the young clerks transpired.

At the mine the largest force, which could be worked to advantage, was employed, and those who were forced to remain idle were given credit for food and rent.

[Pg 154]

When the labor had become systematized to such a degree as to allow the superintendent a little leisure, and while Fred was copying some letters in the private office, Mr. Wright watching him several moments in silence, asked:

"Do you never expect to do anything but work in a mine, Fred?"

"Oh, yes, sir; if mother and I can get some money laid by I want to go to the city."

"What will you do there?"

"I don't know, sir, but there should be plenty of chances for a fellow who is willing to work."

"There are, but since it may be some time before you are in a condition to leave here, why not make yourself familiar with this branch of mining?"

"How could that be done, sir?"

"By hard study. You may use any of my books, and after getting a smattering of the business you might decide to take up civil engineering, a profession which would suit you admirably."

"If I only could."

"There is nothing to prevent. Here is a work which you can understand, and after mastering its contents I'll guarantee you're ready to hold your own against any engineer's assistant in the middle field."

On that very day Fred began his studies, and Sam joined him with the understanding that not less than two hours of each evening should be devoted to the work.

Both the boys were astonished at discovering how little they really knew about mining, even though well acquainted with many of the details, and rapid progress was made during the fortnight that followed. [Pg 155]

"If you keep on at this rate we'll be lookin' for new buttys," Bill said one evening when the students had explained to him the principles of hydraulics.

"You won't need any for some time, and then, perhaps, we shall have learned how ignorant we are, and give up in despair."

"There'll be a good many called for to-morrow. The upper level is in workin' order, an' a hundred men are to be put on in the morning."

This was, indeed, good news. The inhabitants of Farley's had been anxiously awaiting the day when it would be possible to earn something toward the household expenses, and this first evidence that the works were really to be opened caused a great amount of pleasurable excitement.

Nearly every one in the village was at the mouth of the slope to see the workmen go in, and there Sam and Fred met Skip.

"Mr. Donovan has promised to take me into the breaker as soon as there is any coal to come out," he said, gleefully, "an' my garden is lookin' fine."

"I don't reckon you've sold many vegetables yet," Sam replied, laughingly.

"The plants are only just up, an' the stuff will be late; but the first that is ripe I'm going to send you fellers, an' Bill and Joe."

The miners entered, while the spectators cheered loudly, and then the idle ones dispersed, well content to know their time would soon come. [Pg 156]

Skip returned to his garden, while Sam and Fred resumed their duties at the store, but were interrupted an hour later by Mr. Wright, who said:

"It is important that a message be delivered in Blacktown before noon, and there will be no train until late this afternoon. Do you boys feel in trim for a ten mile tramp across the mountain?"

"Yes, sir, an' double the distance if necessary," Sam replied, promptly.

"Very well; wrap up some crackers and cheese while I write a letter."

Ten minutes later the two were on their way with no slight task before them, for it would be necessary to travel over a rough country the entire distance, since the journey by the road around the mountain could not be performed in a day.

It was an agreeable change after having been confined to the store so long, and they trudged on merrily, resolved to return in a more leisurely fashion because Mr. Wright had said no more work would be required of them until morning.

In three hours the message had been delivered, and they were on their way home.

Little time was spent in the valley, but on ascending the mountain once more a halt was made for lunch.

They were midway between Blacktown and Farley's. Not a dwelling could be seen in either direction, and the boys speculated as to what the country looked like before coal was found in the vicinity.

"I wonder what caused the first man to come here lookin' for it?" Sam said, musingly. [Pg 157]

"Most likely some one well up in geology was hunting for specimens, and found an out-cropping vein."

"It must have been a mighty pleasant surprise."

"And one that I would like to experience. Just fancy poking around in this way till you struck what could be easily turned into gold."

As he spoke Fred dug up the earth here and there with a stick, playing the part, as he supposed, of the first discoverer, and at the same time slowly ascending the mountain.

"Hold on; don't leave so soon. I'm just getting ready to rest in proper style."

Fred turned around to return when he struck his toe against what appeared to be a projecting rock, and fell headlong.

"That's what you get for tryin' your hand at prospecting," Sam said, with a laugh, and Fred arose to his feet with a rueful look on his face, which caused his companion yet more mirth.

"It may be sport for you, but I don't see anything so funny about knocking all the skin off—Hello! What a queer looking rock I tumbled over!"

He had turned, and was gazing at the projecting point, a fragment of which was broken, when Sam came up to learn the cause of his companion's astonishment.

"Why, it looks like coal!" he exclaimed, taking a piece from the ground to examine it more closely, and an instant later Fred was startled by hearing him shout, "It is coal! The vein at Farley's must run straight through the hill!"

[Pg 158]

"Then this belongs to the company."

"Not a bit of it. The one who owns the land can work here, and if we could raise money enough to buy ten or fifteen acres on this side of the hill, Byram and Thorpe would be mighty rich fellows."

CHAPTER XIX

THE CONSULTATION

It is not to be wondered at that the boys were in a perfect fever of excitement because of their startling discovery.

They uncovered the spurs of pure coal sufficiently to learn that it was a true vein, and, judging from the indications, there could be no question but it extended over a large area just below the surface.

"Is it as good as that taken out at Farley's?" Fred asked, when they ceased digging for a moment.

"I can't see any difference. Why, you and I alone could mine enough to make us pretty near rich, for there's neither shaft nor slope to be made."

"Do you suppose this land is valuable?"

"For farming purposes it isn't worth a cent, and unless the owner knows what is here it could be bought for a song."

"What is the price of a song according to that estimate?"

"Well, say a thousand dollars for a hundred acres."

"But you wouldn't need as much in order to get at this vein."

[Pg 159]

"Buildings would be necessary after a while, an' you'd want a track to get the coal into market."

"Don't you suppose we could manage to get a thousand dollars?"

"If you count on doin' it by workin' at Farley's, it would take about a thousand years. All the money I can earn has to be used by the family now that father isn't working."

"But can we do nothin'?"

"It does seem kinder tough to find a fortune, and not be able to take advantage of it, but I can't figure out how we can turn it to account."

"Let's fill our pockets with these pieces, and tell Mr. Wright what we've struck."

"Yes, an' before to-morrow night he'd own this whole tract. It would be wiser to see what Bill an' Joe think about the chances of raisin' money."

"Very well, we'll talk with them. It won't do to leave this uncovered, an' I'm in a hurry to get back."

The earth was scraped, and above this the boys strewed branches and leaves until one might have searched a long while without discovering the secret.

Then, walking at their best pace, the successful prospectors continued on toward Farley's, trying in vain to suppress their excitement.

Those whom they wished to consult were at the mine, and without even stopping to tell Mrs. Byram of their discovery they went directly to the slope.

Bill and Joe were in the second level, at some distance from the other workmen when the boys arrived.

"What do you think of that?" Fred asked, excitedly, as he held out one of his specimens.

[Pg 160]

Bill, supposing he was to see a rare sight, brought his cap-lamp close to the object for a second, and then said angrily:

"Haven't you boys got anything better to do than bring coal in here for us to look at? We see enough of that stuff without luggin' it around in our pockets."

"But this didn't come from Farley's."

"Well, s'posin it didn't, what of that?" and Bill threw the coal far down the drift.

"Not much, except that Sam and I found a vein three miles from any settlement."

"What?" both the miners cried in the same breath, and Bill ran to pick up what he had thrown away so contemptuously.

Fred began and Sam ended the story of the "find," and while they were talking Bill turned the specimen over and over, saying when they concluded:

"If as good coal as that shows at the surface it must be a big vein."

"It is, but how can we take advantage of the discovery? Sam thinks the land could be bought for a thousand dollars."

"Then you must buy it."

"How could we raise so much money?"

"People don't allers pay cash for what they buy. You might get it for two or three hundred dollars down, with a mortgage for the balance."

"Even then I don't see how it can be done."

"Nor I jest now, but we'll figure the thing out to-night at your house. Joe an' me will be there after supper. Don't tell anyone except your mother, 'nd when you boys are rich I speak for the job of breaker boss." [Pg 161]

Then Bill and Joe, hardly less excited than their younger companions, resumed the interrupted labor, and the amateur prospectors went to tell the wonderful news to Mrs. Byram.

Fred's mother was not as elated as the boys thought the occasion demanded, but when the miners arrived, and appeared to be so sanguine that the discovery would be of great pecuniary benefit to those who made it she became greatly interested.

The main question was how to raise the necessary money with which to purchase the land, and this had not been answered when the party broke up at a late hour.

"We'll figger it out somehow," Bill said as the visitors arose to depart. "It's been sprung so sudden like that we haven't had time. Joe an' me will learn who owns the land first, an' then some of us'll get a bright idee."

With these cheering words the meeting was adjourned, and Sam and Fred went to bed to dream of becoming millionaires through the accident which befell the latter as he fell over the spur of coal.

Next morning, however, they awoke to the fact that the day's provisions depended upon their labors in the store, and as this was also the first step toward earning sufficient money with which to buy the land, both were on hand at an unusually early hour.

"I want you to go over to Blacktown bank," Mr. Wright said to Sam when he entered the building. "The train leaves in half an hour, and since you can return by the same conveyance there is no reason why I should give two boys a holiday, as I did yesterday." [Pg 162]

"I will be ready in time, sir," Sam replied, and Fred whispered:

"Why not walk home, and see if anybody has been fooling around the spur we found."

"That's jest what I'll do, providin' it is possible to get back before the train is due. There can't be any kickin' if I'm here an hour or two ahead of time."

A package of papers and a bank book was given to Sam by the cashier, who said, warningly:

"Here are two thousand dollars in checks, and you are to bring back eight hundred dollars in change. Be careful what you do, and come home on the first train after the business has been done."

"I don't reckon any one would kick if I walked instead of waitin' until afternoon for the cars," Sam said as he took the documents.

"It isn't very safe to come across the mountains with so much cash; but I don't suppose there is any danger," the man replied, and Sam glanced meaningly at Fred as he left the building.

"I wish I hadn't said anything to him about looking at the vein," Fred muttered to himself as his companion disappeared from view. "It would be better if he came directly back without thinking of what will never bring us in a cent of money."

It was too late now, however, to regret the words which had been spoken, and Fred found plenty with which to busy himself during the remainder of the day.

At noon a telegram came for Mr. Wright, and in response to what was probably an imperative summons, he started for the city on the next train; the one on which Sam would have returned had he not determined to walk across the mountain. [Pg 163]

An hour passed, and yet the messenger was absent.

"That boy has had time to travel twice the distance from Blacktown here," the cashier said

impatiently to Fred, and the latter could make no reply, but he in turn was growing very anxious.

"How would it do for me to go and meet him?" he asked finally.

"That is foolish talk," was the petulant reply. "If he doesn't come soon it will be best to send a sheriff's officer."

This remark was well calculated to make Fred yet more nervous. Not for a moment did he believe Sam would do anything dishonest, and yet he should have been back, even in case he had walked home, several hours before.

It was after sunset when the messenger finally made his appearance, and Fred was about to greet him with words of jest, but the expression on Sam's face caused him decided alarm.

"What is the matter?" he asked, anxiously.

"I have been robbed," was the reply, in a hoarse whisper.

"How?"

"I don't know. Coming across the mountain I laid down on the land we wanted to buy, an' I fell asleep. When I awakened the money was gone, an' that is all I know about it."

"Money gone, eh?" the bookkeeper cried. "What did you want to buy land for?"

[Pg 164]

"That has nothing to do with the loss of the cash," Sam replied as he looked the man full in the face. "I lost the package which was given me at the bank, and have been hunting for it since noon."

"It will make considerable difference, as you'll find out before this thing is cleared up," and the cashier moved toward the door as if to prevent the boy from leaving the building. "Why not tell the truth, and say you stole the money?"

"Because I didn't do anything of the kind."

"Tell that to the marines, for you can't make me believe it. Thieves don't loaf around the mountain."

"They must have done so in this case, for I walked nearly back to Blacktown, and should have found the package if it had fallen from my pocket."

"Then where is it?"

"I don't know."

"Fred, go for a constable."

The cashier yet remained by the door, and now he held it open a few inches that his order might be obeyed.

"Please don't do a thing like that," Fred cried, while Sam stood near the desk pale as death, but every action breathing defiance.

"Do you think I'll let a boy steal eight hundred dollars, and do nothing toward recovering it?"

"Wait until Mr. Wright comes back and see what he thinks."

"And in the meantime he or his accomplice will have had plenty of time in which to carry the cash beyond our reach."

"But I am sure that what he tells is the truth."

[Pg 165]

"I don't believe a word of it. Such a thing never happened before, and the thief sha'nt go free now if I can prevent it."

Fred was about to plead yet further for his friend, but the cashier checked him by saying:

"Another word in his behalf and I shall believe you know something of this very mysterious robbery. Will you go for the constable?"

"No, I won't move a step from this place until Mr. Wright comes back."

This show of friendship was not sufficient to save Sam from the ignominy of an arrest. The cashier had hardly ceased speaking when one of the miners made an attempt to enter the store, and the angry official sent him for the guardian of the peace.

"You'll have a chance to go back to Blacktown, and it may be that you will find the money on the way," he said, in a tone of irony.

Sam made no reply. Silent and motionless he awaited the coming of the officer.

CHAPTER XX

THE ACCUSED

Not for a moment did Fred believe it possible Sam had done anything dishonest in regard to the money, and yet it seemed very singular that he could have been robbed without knowing when the deed was committed.

He had no opportunity to speak privately to the accused boy, because of the strict watch maintained by the cashier, but he remained very near him, as if eager to show confidence in his innocence. [Pg 166]

From the time the miner had been sent in search of an officer not a word was spoken. Now and then Sam glanced at his friend as if to ask that his story be credited, and the accuser kept a strict watch over every movement.

There was no parley when the officer arrived, his duty was to take the prisoner away, and he did so in a matter-of-fact manner which aroused all of Fred's anger.

"It wouldn't do him any harm to say he knows you ain't a thief," he whispered, "but never mind, old fellow, Bill an' Joe shall come to see you."

"Believe I've told the truth, an' that is enough for me," Sam replied, with a choking sob. "Tell the folks at home about it, but try to make 'em know I never stole a dollar."

Fred promised to do this, and would have accompanied his friend to the depot but for the cashier, who said, sternly:

"I insist on your remaining here. A large amount of money is missing; you boys have got a secret between you, and it may have some connection with the robbery. I will not allow you to talk with the prisoner."

"Do as he says, an' don't have any row," Sam added.

"I'll stay here," was the reply, "and when Mr. Wright gets back we'll see what he's got to say about it."

"It's time for the train," the constable interrupted. [Pg 167]

"Go on quickly, Sam, before a crowd gathers."

Fred gazed after the accused until he was lost to view in the distance, and then turned away with a heavy heart.

The cashier had nothing more to say about the robbery, but he found plenty of work for the boy to do, much as if wishing to keep him in sight until Mr. Wright came home.

It was half-past eight when the last train arrived and the superintendent was not on it.

Fred should have been home two hours before, and his mother, always in fear of an accident since the explosion, came in search of him.

To her the story of Sam's misfortune was told, and she at once demanded a private interview with the cashier.

"Don't tell him why we wanted to buy land," Fred whispered, and his mother promised to keep the secret for a short time at least.

Ten minutes' conversation with the angry official sufficed, and then the two went to Sam's home, where the sad news was told.

Not until ten o'clock did Fred and his mother reach the little cottage where Bill and Joe were impatiently awaiting their arrival.

"We've heard something about the trouble," the former said, "and want to know all the perticlars."

Fred repeated what has already been told, and added:

"What he said concerning the land we talked of buying has made the cashier more suspicious than he would have been. It's too bad to give the secret away, but it must be done unless the money can be found." [Pg 168]

"There's no reason why we can't wait a while," Joe said after some thought. "I'll go to Blacktown to-morrow, an' see him."

"You surely can't think he took it?"

"Of course not, an' yet I don't understand how it could 'a been stole."

"He must have lost the money."

"It wouldn't be a bad plan for us to walk to Blacktown over the same path he took," Bill said. "Fred can show us the way."

"I don't believe they'll let me leave. The cashier seems to think I'm concerned in the robbery."

"It won't take me long to tell him he don't run this place. I'll go to Mr. Wright's house, find out when he's likely to be back, an' then tend to the other matter. Joe, wait here."

The miner was not absent more than an hour, and when he returned the others had come to the conclusion that Sam had lost the money before reaching the coal vein.

"Mr. Wright has jest telegraphed that he's on his way to New York, so we may not see him for two or three days. I've told the folks at the store what's to be done, an' though there's some kickin' about Fred's leavin', they don't dare to say very much."

Then the sad visaged party separated to get as much rest as possible, and at early dawn the miners were at Mrs. Byram's again.

Believing Sam had traveled over nearly the same course as that taken by he and Fred, the latter did his best to guide the searchers correctly.

"There's no use to hunt round very much till we strike the vein, for there's where he missed the money, so we'd better travel at our best gait to that place," Joe said, as he led the way with Fred by his side. [Pg 169]

The sun had been above the horizon but a few moments when they reached the scene of the discovery, and despite Sam's dangerous position Bill insisted on viewing the out-cropping of coal.

"It's a true vein, there's no question of that," he said, after a careful examination, "an' we must hustle to get the cash what's needed to buy the property."

"I'd be willin' to give up my share if Sam was out of his scrape."

"You won't do any such foolish thing. We'll help the lad an' ourselves at the same time, for there's a chance to get rich here which mustn't be lost," and Bill covered the spur once more.

Now the search was begun. Fred led the way slowly, the others following a short distance behind, and all three scrutinized the ground carefully.

Not a word was spoken by either until they were on the highway near Blacktown, and then Bill said sadly:

"If it was lost somebody has found it, an' in case thieves run him down it ain't likely they're going to be so foolish as to give us a chance to get on their track."

"Where are we to go now?" Fred asked.

"We'll see a lawyer if there's one in the place, an' then have a talk with Sam."

There was no trouble about getting legal advice, and in the company of a kindly-faced gentleman the party were ushered into the jail where Sam, in the lowest depths of despair, was found. [Pg 170]

"Oh, I'm so glad you've come!" he cried, seizing Fred by both hands. "It has been terrible here."

"Don't be downhearted, lad," Bill said, with an attempt at cheerfulness. "We'll stick by you no matter what happens."

"I want you to tell me the whole story," the lawyer interrupted. "Describe every little particular of the journey."

"There isn't much to tell. I got the money, an' walked as fast as I could to a place on the mountain, where I laid down to rest, an' fell asleep. When I woke up the package was gone."

"Did you see anyone who might be following you?"

"No sir."

"Whom did you meet after leaving the town?"

"Not a single person."

"Are you certain the money was in your pocket when you laid down?"

"I felt of it a little while before that."

The lawyer continued to question Sam for a long while, but without gaining any new information, and even the boy's friends were forced to admit that the story was a strange one.

"I'd say it was thin if I didn't know Sam so well," Bill mused as the party left the jail after promising the prisoner they would return at the earliest opportunity.

"The boy couldn't 'a took the money, that's certain; but how he contrived to get rid of it beats me."

"It is possible we may learn something to our advantage before the trial can be held," the lawyer suggested in a tone which to Fred sounded the reverse of cheerful; "but I think it very important you should see Mr. Wright without delay." [Pg 171]

"Joe shall go to New York."

"How could I find him there?"

"Fred and me'll get right back to Farley's, ask for his address, an' send it to you by telegraph."

"That is a very good idea. A train leaves in less than an hour," the lawyer said approvingly. "Decide where the message shall be sent, and it will be there before he arrives."

Joe was unwilling to take so much responsibility upon himself, and urged that he did not look fit to visit the city; but Bill overruled all his objections.

"You're the one to go, so that settles it," the miner said as he pulled out his wallet. "Here's what money I've got, an' if more's needed let me know."

"What am I to say to the superintendent if I see him?"

"Urge that no further steps be taken against the boy. After what you say he did during the riot the officers of the company should be lenient."

"But that kind of talk sounds as if you believed he'd stole the money," Bill exclaimed in surprise.

"The case looks very bad for him, and if it should be called up before we found some evidence in his favor he would most certainly be convicted."

Sam's friends gazed at each other in astonishment. That the lawyer employed to defend him should thus intimate he was guilty almost shook their faith in the boy's innocence.

"You must go all the same," Bill said, after a long pause, "an' me an' Fred will toddle back home." [Pg 172]

The adieu consisted only of the words "good-bye," and then the miner and the boy turned their faces toward Farley's once more.

"It seems as if finding the coal was bad luck for us," Fred said when they were on the mountain. "If it hadn't been for that, poor Sam never would have thought of walking home."

"I don't go very much on what folks call luck, lad. The thing was bound to come whether you saw the vein or not, so we must buck agin it."

"The lawyer thinks Sam stole the money."

"An' more'n he'll believe the same if somethin' don't turn up."

"I can't fancy what could happen to help him unless the thief himself came forward to tell the whole story."

"It does look kinder black, but we mustn't lose heart."

"Of course this settles our chances of buying the land."

"Nothin' of the kind. My day is broke up now, an' I'll spend the rest of it lookin around a bit."

"Sam will need all the money we've got to spend."

"I've a little laid by for a rainy day, an' with what Joe can raise we oughter pull through on both jobs."

On arriving at the spur another search was made with the same result as before, and then the two hurried on, sending a telegram to Joe immediately after reaching the town.

CHAPTER XXI

AMATEUR DETECTIVES

[Pg 173]

Fred was forced to attend to his duties at the store immediately after the return from Black town, and while so engaged could not fail to hear the many comments upon the case.

The news of the alleged robbery had spread with wonderful rapidity, and the majority of the miners believed Sam to be guilty.

Twice during the afternoon the cashier questioned Fred closely as to what the prisoner meant when he spoke of their desire to buy land, but despite the coaxing and even threats he refused to divulge the secret.

"If it can't be helped I'll tell Mr. Wright, but nobody else," the boy repeated, and further than this he positively refused to speak.

"Then it's time you went home," the official finally said, in an angry tone. "You know so much about this thing that I don't believe it's safe to have you where there are many valuable things which might be stolen."

"If you think I'm a thief, why not send me to jail with Sam?"

"I shall suggest to Mr. Wright that you be arrested, and I fancy he'll follow my advice."

Fred walked out of the store knowing that several of the clerks had overheard the latter portion

of the conversation, and believing those whom he met on the street already looked upon him as a thief.

[Pg 174]

"It can't be helped, my boy," his mother said. "You have the satisfaction of knowing the accusation is false, and that must suffice until the time when the whole affair is brought to light."

"I'm afraid that never will be. Everybody thinks Sam is lying, and if we should tell of the coal we discovered the folks would say for sure he stole the money."

During the remainder of the day Fred staid in the house, not so much as showing his face at the window, and shortly after sunset Bill called.

"I've found out who owns the land," he cried triumphantly.

"I wish we'd never walked across the mountain."

"Now don't be foolish, lad."

"How can I help it when people call me a thief."

"I heard the cashier had kinder turned you out: but that don't 'mount to anything. Wait till the superintendent comes back."

"He'll believe as the others do."

"Then wait till I catch the real thief."

"You?"

"I'm going to try it."

"But you can't leave the mine."

"That's jest what I have done."

"What? Have you thrown up the job?"

"Me an' the cashier had a little tiff a few minutes ago, an' I've closed accounts with Farley's."

"I hope you didn't take up what he said to me."

"Well, I kinder had a row on my own account, but that ain't neither here nor there. We're both loafin' now, an' I want you to take a trip with me."

[Pg 175]

"Where?"

"I ain't jest sure, but we'll strike Blacktown first, an' then go wherever things look most promisin'."

"Have you heard anything?" Mrs. Byram asked, as she gazed at the man sharply.

"I can't say I have, an' I can't say I haven't. Skip give me a idee that's worth workin' up even if it comes to nothin', so we'll have a vacation."

"Tell me what you've heard?" Fred cried, excitedly.

"It ain't so very much, only jest enough to set me thinkin'. One of Skip's regulators was over here this noon, an' flashed up considerable money for a boy like him."

"And you think he stole the package from Sam?"

"I don't say anything of the kind, but Skip heard 'bout the trouble Sam was in, an' thought it wouldn't do a bit of harm if we found out where this feller got so much cash."

"When are you going?"

"In the mornin', but don't get your hopes up, for it may all end in smoke."

Regardless of this warning Fred did grow excited, and before Bill took his departure he felt quite confident that the thief would soon be discovered.

His spirits fell considerably next morning when Joe returned from New York, having come home on the night train.

"It's no use," he said sadly, as he entered Mrs. Byram's home just as Fred and Bill were making ready to set out for Blacktown.

"Won't Mr. Wright do anything to help Sam?"

[Pg 176]

"No; he says if the boy is innocent it will be much better to have the matter settled in court, when everybody will know he was wrongfully accused."

"Does he believe him guilty?"

"I'm afraid so, though he didn't say very much."

"When is he coming home?"

"Day after to-morrow. He got a long letter from the cashier yesterday, an' I reckon that made the case look pretty tough agin Sam."

"Well," Bill said, speaking for the first time since the arrival of his mate, "we've spent the money for nothin', but it can't be helped now. We thought it would be best to see him, an' since it's turned out wrong all we can do is to push the other plan for what it's worth."

"What's the other plan?" Joe asked.

Bill explained, and concluded by saying:

"It will be a good idee to have you here to post us on what happens while we're away. Keep your eyes peeled, an' if anything pertic'lar turns up come over."

Then, without waiting to hear whether Joe was pleased with the idea, Bill started, calling sharply to Fred as he left the house:

"It won't do to loaf, lad, if we've got to get Sam out of the scrape with all the officers of the company agin us."

A hurried good-bye to Joe, a kiss from his mother, and Fred followed, bent on proving his friend's innocence in order that the suspicion of crime might also be removed from him.

During the walk to Blacktown hardly a word was spoken, but Bill said when they were within sight of the village: [Pg 177]

"We'd best separate here an' to-night I'll meet you over by the hotel."

"Ain't we going to see Sam?"

"Not to-day."

"But what am I to do?"

"Walk 'round 'till you run across Skip, an' then make friends with the feller what's with him."

"Is Skip here?" Fred asked in surprise.

"Of course, else how could we find the boy? I gave him money last night, an' reckon he come over on the first train."

"Did he say where he'd be?"

"No, but you'll sure run across him. Then hang 'round till it's time to meet me. It don't stand to reason well find out anything to-day, but we'll get our pipes laid."

Bill turned away as if fearing to prolong the interview lest he be seen by the boy whom he fancied knew something about the case, and Fred walked aimlessly to and fro for nearly an hour, when he was accosted by Skip.

"When did you come?" the latter asked, as if in surprise as he glanced meaningly toward a rather disreputable looking boy at his side.

Fred told the exact truth, and added that he was "laying off" from work for a day or two because of an invitation of Bill Thomas' to see the sights in Blacktown.

Skip's friend at once proposed that Fred spend the day with them, and the two strangers in the village were soon pretending to enjoy the lavish hospitality of the fellow who was known by the name of Gus Dobson. [Pg 178]

Only once, before it was time to meet Bill did Skip have a chance to speak privately with Fred. Their host had left them while he talked in whispers for several moments with a friend of about the same age and general appearance, and Skip said:

"I'd like mighty well to help Sam out of his scrape, 'cause it would kinder square off what I did to hurt you an' him."

"Do you think this fellow knows anything about the money?"

"He ain't givin' himself away; but jest see how much cash he's got. As many as three dollars were spent yesterday at Farley's, and he's still slingin' it out."

"Perhaps this is some he's been saving."

"Gus Dobson hasn't worked any to speak of since the Regulators was started, an' I know he hadn't a cent at the time of the fuss over to Farley's."

"Has he said anything about Sam?"

"Yesterday he asked a good many questions."

"I don't see how we're going to find out where the money comes from unless he wants to tell us," Fred said, with a sigh, and then Gus, looking considerably disturbed, joined them.

"When are you fellers goin' home?" he asked, abruptly.

"I'll start pretty soon," Skip replied, "but Fred don't have to leave till Bill Thomas gives the word. What's up?"

[Pg 179]

"Nothin' much 'cept I won't see you agin."

"Why not?"

"I promised to take a trip with the feller what was jest here, an' it's time we was off."

"What's that for?"

"I don't know as it's any business of yours," and Gus looked at his guests suspiciously.

"Of course not," Skip replied quickly, "but we've had such a good time that a feller can't help feelin' sorry you've got to go."

This explanation did not appear to be entirely satisfactory.

The boy alternately gazed at one and then the other for several moments in silence, and finally said in a threatening tone:

"A good many fellers have tried to get the best of me, but I allers made 'em sick before the job was finished."

"Now what are you drivin' at?" Skip asked, in well simulated surprise.

"If you don't know I won't waste time talking," was the reply, as Gus walked hurriedly away, and the boys saw him join his friend a short distance off.

"He's tumbled to our game," Skip said sadly, "an' I'd like to knock the head off the feller what put him up to it."

"That shows he knows something about the money."

"He may think we're on another racket; but there's no use loafin' 'round here. I'll go to the depot an' you find Bill."

[Pg 180]

Fred had no difficulty in following this last suggestion. The miner was already at the rendezvous, and when the details of the apparent failure had been given, he exclaimed angrily:

"It's all my fault, an' instead of helpin' Sam I've done him a power of harm."

"What do you mean?"

"I was in too much of a hurry, and thought myself mighty smart, so told the lawyer what we suspicioned. He ain't much less of a fool than I am, for he sent out to find a friend of Gus', and asked him all kinds of questions. Now we've driven 'em away, an' may as well go ourselves."

"Are we to give up working?"

"There's no use in stayin' here any longer, an' we'll strike across the mountain. Come on, so's it'll be possible to get home before dark."

CHAPTER XXII

UNEXPECTED NEWS

Fred was opposed to leaving Blacktown without seeing Sam; but Bill, smarting under the sense of having brought about his own defeat, insisted upon an immediate departure.

"It ain't likely we could get into the jail now the day is so far spent, an' if we did, what would be the use? There's nothing that could be said to cheer the boy."

"I promised."

[Pg 181]

"You can keep it the next time we come," and Bill put an end to the discussion by starting toward the mountain.

Fred followed with a heavy heart, and the two trudged on in silence until they were within a short distance of the newly-discovered coal vein, when Bill exclaimed in surprise:

"I'm blest if there isn't Joe! What's up now, I wonder?"

This question was soon answered. The approaching miner cried while yet some distance away:

"What are you comin' back so soon for?"

"There was no reason why we should stay longer," and without sparing himself in the slightest, Bill explained what a blunder had been committed.

"Well, you'd better go to Blacktown agin, or else take the train for New York."

"Why?"

"The cashier has been swearin' out a warrant for Fred's arrest, an' it'll be served the minute he gets back."

"A warrant for me?" Fred cried in alarm. "What have I done?"

"The fool thinks you know where the money is, an' that you made the arrangements with Sam, before he left, to get away with it."

"Mr. Wright won't allow such a thing."

"The letter he wrote seems to have made the cashier's neck stiffer than it was yesterday, an' I don't reckon it would do much good to depend on any officer of the company."

[Pg 182]

"I'll give that feller a piece of my mind," Bill cried angrily, and Joe replied:

"Don't do it yet a while. He told Donovan this noon that you'd gone with Fred to put the cash in a safe place, so it may be that the constable would like to see you by this time."

"Why, where does he think it was?"

"Buried on the mountain somewhere, an' if he sends men out to see if any diggin' has been done lately, the vein will surely be found."

"I'll go back any way!" Bill cried after a short pause. "Such as him shan't call me a thief."

"Now, look here, matey, what will be the good of gettin' yourself in jail? I've told Fred's mother jest how the matter stands, an' she believes as I do, that it'll be better to hang off a while in the hope something will turn up."

"An' have the constables chasin' us all over the country."

"It ain't certain they'll do that."

"But it may never be known positively who took the money," Fred added.

"If you're both so anxious to go to jail, wait till it is proved Sam is a thief, an' then show up to the constable. Things can't be worse for holdin' on a few days."

"Cordin' to your own figgerin' there's a chance the coal will be found."

"I'll take care of that business while you an' Fred keep out of sight. With what I had, an' what could be borrowed, I've got two hundred an' twenty dollars. You shall take the odd money, an' the balance I'll plank down as a first payment on the land."

[Pg 183]

"Do you know who owns it?"

"A farmer who lived five or six miles the other side of Blacktown."

"That's correct, an' the sooner you see him the better."

"Will you agree to keep away from Farley's?"

"Yes," Bill said slowly, as if angry with himself for making the promise. "Fred an' me'll sneak 'round 'till the trade's made for this side the mountain, an' then figger up what it's best to do."

"Where can I see you to-morrow?"

"Right here. We'll stay in the woods a night or two."

"Have you got anything to eat?"

"No; but it's an easy matter to buy all we want."

"Take this money in case it is necessary to leave on the jump, an' I'll go on."

Handing his mate the twenty dollars, Joe went at a sharp gait toward Blacktown, and Bill said, with a shrug of the shoulders:

"So we're both thieves 'cordin' to the cashier's ideas; but wait 'till we get the land secured, an' I'll give that young man a lesson such as won't be very pleasant."

"Do you really mean to sleep in the woods?"

"Why not? It's warm weather, an' we'll be pretty nigh as well off there as at home."

"Then we'd better be looking for a good place. If mother hadn't sent word that I was to stay away, I'd go to Farley's this minute an' let them arrest me, for it seems as if we act guilty by running off."

[Pg 184]

"That's jest my idee, lad; but we'll obey orders a day or two."

A short distance to the right was a thickly-wooded grove, and here the two soon found what would serve very well as a camp.

A small cleared space, almost entirely screened from view by bushes, afforded all the protection

which might be needed, and Bill threw himself on the ground.

"I reckon we can go without supper," he said, with forced cheerfulness, "an' there'll be no bother about lockin' the doors."

"It won't be long before I'm asleep. Walking around so much has tired me more than a full day's work in the breaker."

"Don't keep awake on my account. The sooner your eyes are closed the sooner you'll forget that there's a chance of bein' sent to jail."

With his head pillowed on some dry leaves Fred had no difficulty in summoning slumber; but Bill tossed to and fro on the hard bed without the slightest desire for sleep.

The boy was dreaming of the frightful hours spent in the short slope after the explosion, when he was awakened by the pressure of a hand on his mouth.

It was dark, save for the twinkling stars, and silent, except when the leaves were swayed by the gentle wind.

"Don't speak," Bill whispered as he removed his hand. "I can see the light of a fire over there to the right, an' it's well for us to know who are campin' so near."

[Pg 185]

"What do you want me to do?"

"Follow me. We'll creep up far enough to see what's goin' on, an' then come back, unless there's reason for changin' our lodgings."

"I'll keep close behind you," and Fred rose to his feet, Bill parting the bushes with both hands to avoid the slightest noise.

The glow of flames could be seen a long distance away, evidently on the opposite edge of the grove, and the two approached it as rapidly as was consistent with silence.

Soon the hum of voices was heard, and after a short time Bill stopped suddenly, gripped Fred by the hand, and pointed ahead.

Around a camp-fire, over which pieces of meat were being cooked, sat Gus Dobson and the friend who had caused him to distrust Fred and Skip.

"There may be a chance for us to find out a good deal of what we want to know," Bill whispered, and once more he advanced, moving with the utmost caution.

It was possible for the spies to creep within five yards of the encampment, thanks to the bushes, and when this had been accomplished the boys were eating supper.

"I don't believe in stayin' here too long," Gus was saying when Fred and Bill were near enough to distinguish the conversation.

"Nobody 'd think of huntin' for us in this place," his companion replied, "an' it ain't safe to take the cars yet a while, for them boys from Farley's have got men to back 'em."

[Pg 186]

"S'pposen they have? How can anybody find us if we walk up the track to the next station?"

"It's easy enough to send word all around, an' then we'd be nabbed the minute we showed our noses in a town."

"It will be jest as bad if they come here huntin' for us."

"You're a reg'lar fool, Gus Dobson. So long as we can keep the stuff where it is, what'll be gained by arrestin' us? We've got to take it with us when we leave, an' then whoever catches us will have the thing down fine."

"But we can't stay here forever."

"A couple of weeks won't hurt us, an' by that time folks will give up lookin' so sharp. They'll think we got away."

"We're too near Farley's."

"Then make a move. We can keep on a dozen miles or so through the woods, an' bury the stuff agin."

"I wanter get to New York."

"There's plenty of time for that, an' it'll be nothing more'n fun to camp out two or three weeks."

Gus made no reply, and after supper had been eaten his companion lay down beside the fire, saying as he did so:

"I'm goin' to sleep; you can figger the thing out between now and mornin', and say what you're willin' to do."

"It'll have to be as you say, I s'pose," Gus replied, sulkily; "but we must leave here."

"All right, we'll start to-morrow, an' when a good place is found, put up a reg'lar camp."

[Pg 187]

As he said this the boy rolled over as if to end the conversation, and Gus laid down beside him.

Bill waited until the heavy breathing of both told that they were asleep, and then, with a motion to Fred, he began to retreat.

Not until he was an hundred yards from the camp-fire did the miner halt, and said in a low whisper:

"It was a mighty good thing for us that warrant had been sworn out for you. If the cashier had waited a day or so we'd gone home without an idee of where them young scoundrels were."

"It seems certain they've got the money."

"Not a doubt of it."

"Why don't we jump right in on them? Perhaps they'd tell where it was buried."

"If they didn't we'd be worse off than before, for either one is smart enough to know nothin' can be done to 'em while the cash is hid. The only way for us is to keep an eye on the little villains, 'till they get ready for a move. Then we'll do our work."

"It'll be pretty hard to watch in the daytime without being seen ourselves."

"We must manage to do it somehow, for this is, perhaps, our last chance to help Sam."

CHAPTER XXIII

A MISADVENTURE

Neither Fred nor Bill had any desire to sleep, now that the solution of the mystery seemed so near. They remained in the same place where the halt was made until the blackness of night gave way before the pale threads of light. [Pg 188]

"It's gettin' pretty nigh time to begin our work," Bill said, "an' this heat we mustn't make any mistake."

"I'm afraid we can't get near enough to see whether they take the money or not. Perhaps it isn't anywhere around here."

"Then we'll follow 'em, if it takes a week, to find out what we're after. My idee is that we'd better separate, so's to make sure of knowin' what's goin' on. You stay here, an' I'll creep over to the other side, then we shall be doublin' our chances."

"But what is to be done in case we don't see them dig up the money?"

"Foller, no matter how long a chase they lead us. We shall come together somewhere on the road; but it won't be a bad plan for you to take a little of this money. If we had only bought some grub last night things would be in better shape."

"I can get along without food for a week if there is any hope of helping Sam."

"The whole thing will be cleared up providin' we don't loose sight of them. Here's the money, an' now I'll be off. You'd best crawl nearer before the sun rises."

With a pressure of the hand Bill started, making a wide detour around the encampment, and Fred was alone, trying hard to repress a tremor of excitement which was causing him to tremble as if in an ague fit.

After waiting half an hour, and assuring himself that Bill was well off, Fred began an advance, working his way from bush to bush until convinced he could approach no nearer with safety. [Pg 189]

By this time the sun had risen, and his rays falling upon the faces of the sleepers, awakened them.

Both sprang to their feet, and Gus began building the fire while his companion was busily engaged at something among the bushes—preparing food for cooking, as Fred thought.

"Then you still think we oughter leave here?" Gus said, interrogatively.

"Yes, an' the sooner the better. There's no knowin' when that feller's friends may come sneakin' around agin. We'll hurry up with the breakfast, an' start when it's over."

The boys had quite an outfit, as Fred could now see. A frying-pan, coffee-pot, tin cups, plates, and a bag well filled with provisions.

Gus acted the part of cook, and soon the odor of hot coffee was wafted in the direction of the watcher, causing him to feel the need of something to eat.

But little conversation was indulged in during the preparations for the meal. Gus' companion did not show himself until everything was ready, and then he ate hurriedly as if time was too precious to admit of talking.

"Now let's divide the load," the boy said, as he leaped to his feet and began tying the cooking utensils together. "If you'll see to the grub, I'll take care of these."

Fred gazed intently, expecting to see the money exposed to view; but no mention was made of it.

Gus shouldered the bag; his companion swung the remainder of the baggage over his shoulder, and the two started, walking rapidly around the mountain on a course which would carry them to the eastward at right angles with the railroad track. [Pg 190]

Fred followed, remaining as far in the rear as was possible to keep them within view, and at such a distance that he could no longer overhear the conversation.

Beyond a doubt Bill was also in pursuit; but he did not show himself, and Fred fancied he was well over to the left travelling on a parallel line with the boys.

During an hour these relative positions were maintained, and then Gus threw down the bag as if to make a halt.

"Now they're going to dig up the money," Fred said to himself, and he pressed forward that he might see all which occurred.

In this he was mistaken, however. The two had simply stopped to rest, and such of the conversation as could be overheard only had reference to the location for a permanent camp, Gus insisting they were far enough away from the villages, while his companion urged that twice this distance should be covered.

"It's plain they have no idea of digging," Fred muttered. "It begins to look as if we had made a big mistake; but if that is so, what was the meaning of the talk they made last night?"

It was an enigma which he could not solve. Although believing they were on the wrong track, he did not feel at liberty to abandon the search until after consulting with Bill, and as yet no signs had been seen of that gentleman. [Pg 191]

The halt was continued for half an hour, and then the two boys pushed on again, walking at a leisurely pace until the forenoon was well nigh spent, when they came to a full stop at the bank of a small brook.

They were now, as nearly as Fred could judge, eight or nine miles from the starting point, and that this was the end of the journey could be told by the preparations made.

From the bag a new hatchet was produced, and both set about hewing small trees and bushes with which to build a camp.

Not until this shelter was put up did Fred dare to move near enough to hear what was said, and then he found a hiding-place in the thicket twenty paces in the rear of the rude dwelling.

Even though two hours had been spent in this work, Bill did not show himself. It was possible, however, that he believed it dangerous to move about in the daytime, but would join his companion after dark.

Such conversation as the boys indulged in had no especial interest to the listener, since it referred almost entirely to the length of time they would remain in the camp.

When the day came to an end Fred had not heard anything of importance, and he resolved to advise an immediate return to Farley's when Bill should join him.

During the evening Gus and his companion appeared to be very jolly; they told stories, sang, and laughed as if there was nothing in connection with this "camping out" to be concealed, and the watcher in the bushes wondered why the miner did not come. [Pg 192]

Half a dozen men might have walked around the encampment without being observed by the boys, and Bill's delay seemed very singular.

Fred did not dare to leave his place of concealment, and even if it had been perfectly safe to do so, he knew not in which direction to look for his friend, therefore nothing could be done save exercise patience.

The hours passed without any change in the condition of affairs. The camp-fire burned itself out. The supposed culprits retired to rest, and Fred, who had slept but a short time during the previous night, found it absolutely impossible to prevent his eyes from closing.

Lower and lower his head drooped upon his breast until slumber came, and he remained unconscious for many hours.

The glare of the sunlight aroused him after the occupants of the camp were astir, and he sprang to his feet in alarm.

The noise made by this sudden movement startled those whom he had been detailed to watch, and before Fred could collect his scattered senses both the boys were upon him.

For a single instant the three stood surveying each other, and then Gus and his companion seized the bewildered spy by the arms, rendering useless his frantic struggles to defend himself.

"Can you hold him, Tim, while I get something to tie his hands?" Gus cried, and Tim replied:

"I can take care of three or four jest like him. Get the rope out of the bag; that'll be strong enough."

With a quick movement the boy clasped Fred around the waist and held him firmly until Gus returned. [Pg 193]

When the prisoner's hands had been lashed to his side he was led to the camp, where his legs were also bound, and the captors seated themselves in front of him.

"Now tell us where that man is?" Tim said, sternly.

"What man?"

"You know who I mean; the feller what come over to Blacktown with you an' Skip."

"I wish I knew," Fred replied with a sigh.

"Don't lie to us," and Gus shook his fist in the helpless boy's face. "That miner went to a lawyer an' told him I had a hand in stealin' the money what Sam Thorpe lost. Then you an' Skip tried to pump me. Now give us the whole yarn, or things will be mighty hot."

Fred remained silent.

"He's been follerin' us ever since we left the town," Tim said after a moment's thought, "an' it stands us in hand to get out of this lively, or the rest of his gang will be on us."

"Have we got to do more trampin' jest on account of a sneak like this?" Gus asked fretfully.

"Do you want to stay an' run the chance of bein' carried back to Blacktown?"

"Of course not; but travelin' all the time when we might get on the cars in the first place is more'n I bargained for."

"If you'd had your way we'd been pulled in before this. Get the stuff in shape, an' I reckon we'll fix things right now. Let him carry the load, an' we'll take the tramp kinder easy." [Pg 194]

Gus obeyed with a very ill grace, and while he was getting the cooking utensils together Tim walked along the bank of the brook to where a flat stone lay half submerged in the water.

Fred watched his every movement as he overturned this, and dug with a pointed stick until a small, square package had been exposed to view.

There was no question in the prisoner's mind but that the wrappings of cloth covered the money Sam was accused of stealing, and now the secret had really been discovered, all else seemed trifling in comparison.

"I wonder how it happened that I didn't see that when they left the last camp?" he thought, as Tim put the bundle carefully in the inside pocket of his coat.

"So you've found out what you come for, eh?" the boy cried, angrily. "Well, it won't do any good, for when we get through with sneaks they can't do much harm. Pick up that load, an' if you don't walk lively I'll find a way to make you."

"How can I pick up anything while my legs are tied?"

Tim unfastened the ropes from Fred's ankles; loosened one of his arms, and threw the cooking utensils over his shoulder.

"Come on Gus," he said, impatiently. "We'll take turns carryin' the grub 'till we've given the slip to whoever may be follerin', and then he can tote the whole load." [Pg 195]

Fred was faint from lack of food; but he mentally braced himself to perform the task, and Gus cried as he struck him a blow full in the face:

"Step out now, an' when we make camp to-night you'll get a taste of how we serve spies. It'll be a worse dose than the regulators ever gave you, an' don't forget it."

"There's no time for foolishness," Tim said, impatiently. "His gang may be close behind, an' we can't afford to pay him off yet a while."

With this sage remark he took up the provision bag, and led the way across the base of the hill, at right angles with the course pursued on the previous day, while Gus remained in the rear to urge the prisoner on in case he faltered.

CHAPTER XXIV

BILL'S MISHAP

Joe Brace returned to Farley's on the morning after he warned Bill and Fred of what the cashier intended to do, and went directly to Mrs. Byram's.

"I've bought the land!" he cried, exultantly. "The farmer was mighty glad of a chance to sell for five hundred dollars, an' if I'd had more time the price could have been whittled down to four. There's a mortgage of three hundred to be paid in a year, an' that'll be jest the same as nothin' after we show up what's there."

"Did you see Fred?" the widow asked, anxiously, paying but little attention to the good news.

[Pg 196]

"Met him an' Bill last night; told 'em what was up, and they'll keep shady 'till things can be fixed."

"Then nothing was accomplished by their going to Blacktown?"

Joe explained why that excursion had been a failure, and added:

"They're on the right track, so we can count on everything comin' out right before long."

"Are you intending to stay here?"

"No; I only came to tell you what had been done, an' shall go back on the train to make sure my deed is recorded. I bought in the name of Byram, Thorpe, Thomas & Brace. How does that strike you for a firm?"

"Although you and Mr. Thomas are so sure the discovery will be a source of great wealth, I can't feel much interest in it while Fred is in danger. I wish they would go to some city, rather than remain so near home."

"I shall see 'em this afternoon an' now that the business of the land is settled, will advise them to take a little pleasure trip."

"Please see to it that they do not suffer for food."

"I'll tend to everything in great shape. Have you heard whether Mr. Wright has got back?"

"He sent word that he would be home to-night."

"Then, perhaps, I'd better wait an' have another talk with him."

"No, no; I will see him myself. It is more important you care for those who are hiding in the woods."

Joe had no further time for conversation. The train by which he intended to return to Blacktown was already due and he hurried away after repeating confidently:

[Pg 197]

"I'll see 'em to-night, ma'am, an' you can rest easy. They shall live on the fat of the land now we own a coal mine."

There was barely time for the miner to leap on board the cars, and as they were whirled away by the puffing engine, the constable who had arrested Sam accosted him.

"Where you bound, Joe?"

"To Blacktown," was the gruff reply. "What are you up to? Servin' warrants for that fool of a cashier?"

"Yes, I reckon that's about the size of it."

"Got one for me?"

"Of course not; what makes you talk such nonsense?"

"I heard that Bill was goin' to be 'rested, 'cause he'd tried to help Sam, an' seem's he's a mate of mine I didn't know but you'd planned to pull in the whole family."

"But now be honest, an' admit that the case looks pretty black for the two boys."

"That's all nonsense. Sam lost the money, an' it was the fault of the company, not his."

"How do you make that out?"

"Easy enough. They'd no business to send him with so much stuff. It was the cashier's duty, an' that's what makes him so sore, 'cause Mr. Wright's bound to blame such slip-shod ways of shirkin' work."

"Allowin' you're right, it don't help Sam Thorpe's case any."

[Pg 198]

"We'll see about it before the world's many days older. I ain't quite a fool, an' when I get through your precious cashier will feel sick."

After this threat Joe refused to indulge in further conversation, and the constable left him to seek more agreeable company.

The words of the officer had aroused a new train of thought in the miner's mind, he fancied the lawyer whom Bill had consulted should be informed of what had happened.

With this idea he visited the legal gentleman, immediately after the train arrived in Blacktown, and not only told him all which had happened relative to the robbery; but divulged the secret of the vein.

The knowledge that his clients were in a fair way to be rich, and, consequently, influential, caused a very decided change in the lawyer's manner, and he displayed more zeal than Joe had expected.

"We can easily get bail for your friends in case they are arrested," he said, "and in the meanwhile I will attend to the deeds. It is necessary the titles should be searched before the discovery is known by the public, and if you need any money I shall be glad to advance it."

"If the farmer can't back out of his trade, we've got all that'll be wanted yet awhile," Joe replied "but the most important thing jest now is to get Bill an' the boys out of their scrape."

"Can you find Mr. Thomas?"

"I reckon so."

"Then tell him to come here at once. Perhaps it will be well for the boy to remain in hiding a day or two longer, and I shall make it my business to ascertain what evidence there is against him."

[Pg 199]

"I'll go for Bill now," and Joe left the office, after having been again assured by the lawyer that the transfer of the property would be attended to without delay.

The miner prepared for his walk by buying a small stock of provisions, and then he set off in the direction of the mountain, believing it would be possible to find his mate with but little difficulty.

An hour's tramp brought him to the famous vein on which he had already built many air-castles; but neither Bill nor Fred could be seen.

Satisfying himself that there were no strangers in the vicinity he called them loudly by name; but without receiving any reply.

Then he trudged on around the mountain, shouting alternately for one and the other, until afar off in the distance it seemed as if an answering hail could be heard.

Now he ran with all speed in that direction, and soon he heard Bill's voice crying:

"Joe! Is it you, Joe?"

"Indeed it is, my hearty. Where are you?"

"Here in the bushes with what come mighty nigh bein' a broken leg."

Joe was soon by the side of his mate, whom he found lying on the ground apparently in the last stages of exhaustion.

"What's the matter, old man? Are you hurt?"

Bill told of what he and Fred had seen, and about the proposed chase, concluding by saying:

"When the little villains started around the mountain I follered, as the boy an' me had agreed on; but after a two-hour's tramp I fell into a hole, an' reckon my leg is broke."

[Pg 200]

"I don't see any hole," Joe said, as he looked about him.

"It happened a long bit back. I didn't want to break up the game by lettin' Fred know what was wrong, an' so tried to crawl toward the vein, thinkin' if folks were sent out to look for the money they'd find me; but this is as far as I could get. It would 'a been a case of starvin' if you hadn't come along."

"If you're hungry I can fix that part of it all right," and Joe produced the package of provisions. "Have a good time with this while I take a look at the leg."

Only the most superficial examination was necessary. The broken bones could be plainly felt, and the limb was so swollen that it seemed essential, that the boot and trousers should be cut from it.

"I don't see my way clear in this job," Joe exclaimed, as he removed the garments. "It ain't safe to leave you here alone, an' yet help must be had to carry you to Farley's."

"Now that I've got a mouthful I can lay here a few hours longer. Go on, I'll keep till you get back."

"If there was some water near by I could tie you up more comfortable like."

"Never mind that, but leave at once, so to be the sooner here."

Joe hesitated no longer, but set off across the mountain at a speed which brought him to Farley's in less than half an hour.

Here it was only necessary to state what had happened in order to find plenty of volunteers for the task of bringing Bill home, and as the party set out Mrs. Byram followed a short distance by Joe's side, in order to say:

[Pg 201]

"I've seen Mr. Wright, and he evidently believes both Sam and Fred are guilty."

"Won't he let up till we can run down them fellers what Bill was follerin'?"

"He says to me, as he did to you, that the law must take its course, and will not even do anything to prevent Bill's arrest."

"We're goin' to bring the poor feller home, an' this company what think they own Farley's an' every soul in it had better let him alone."

"Take him to my house, where he can have more care than at a boarding-place."

"All right, an' thank ye, ma'am."

"But what about Fred? Where is he?"

"There's no call to worry because of him. As soon as Bill is off my hands I'll hunt the boy up, an' p'rhaps the two of us will bring home the real thieves."

The widow could go no farther, and Joe took his place at the head of the party, walking at his best pace.

Bill was suffering a great deal of pain when his friends arrived, but not a word of complaint escaped his lips, and some pleasant word was exchanged for every greeting.

"It'll be a hard pull to get me over the mountain, but I'll not see Farley's for many a long day if you can't hold out."

"We'll have you there, old man, an' not spend any too much breath over the job," Joe said cheerily, as he began to build a litter. [Pg 202]

Several of the party were curious to learn why Bill had come into that out-of-the-way place, but he refused to make any explanations, and Joe pretended not to hear the many questions.

It was nearly dark before the injured man arrived at Mrs. Byram's home, and then nature had so far asserted her rights that he lay unconscious until after the physician arrived.

"I reckon I've done all that's possible," Joe said to the widow, "an' now I'll start back."

"You won't think of searching through the woods in the night."

"No; but I'll trudge over to where I found Bill, so's the hunt can be begun bright an' early. It ain't likely I'll bring Fred home till after I've seen the lawyer agin."

"If he isn't in trouble it will be better to remain away a few days longer."

"I'll answer for it that he's all right, ma'am, an it sha'n't be many hours now 'till he can hold his head up with the best of 'em."

With these cheering words Joe left the house, intending to go home for supper before continuing his task; but on arriving opposite the store Mr. Wright stopped him by saying sternly:

"I would like to have a few words with you, Mr. Brace."

"My time has come," Joe muttered to himself; "but I'll show these smart fellows that they can't haul up everybody in town jest because it pleases 'em." [Pg 203]

CHAPTER XXV

JOE'S INTERVIEW

Joe Brace had a very good idea of why the superintendent wished to see him, and he entered the office prepared to speak his mind plainly.

"I understand that you have not been working for the past day or two," Mr. Wright began.

"That's correct."

"Have you left our employ?"

"It amounts to pretty much that."

"Has Thomas quit also?"

"When a man knows that he's to be arrested, he ain't likely to hang 'round so's the warrant can be served without much trouble to the constable. But jest now Bill isn't in a condition to work for anybody."

"What's the matter?"

"He broke his leg, an' a lot of the boys have brought him to the Widder Byram's house."

"I hadn't heard of that."

"It'll come kinder rough on the constable."

"I understand to what you refer, Brace, and am not pleased to hear you speak in such a manner."

"It can't be helped, sir. When a feller sees them as risked everything to do the company a good

turn while Billings had full sway, run down an' chucked into jail for nothin', it makes him feel sore."

"There was good reason for the arrest of Sam Thorpe."

[Pg 204]

"Even admittin' that's so, which I don't, why should Fred Byram an' Bill be pulled into the fuss? There's nothin' to connect them with it."

"They have acted very suspiciously ever since the money was said to have been lost."

"That's where you are makin' a big mistake, Mr. Wright. I've had a hand in all their maneuvers, an' so has the widder, consequently if one is guilty the whole crowd are."

"What do you mean?"

"I can't explain yet awhile; but it'll come out before long, when you'll see everything was square an' above board."

"Look here, Brace," Mr. Wright said, in a friendly tone: "I called you in here to have a confidential chat upon the subject, and it is not right to keep from me anything which may have a bearing on the matter."

"What I know can't be told for a while; but I'll give you the particulars of what we've already found out," and without further questioning Joe related the events of the past three days, save so far as they were connected with the discovery of the vein.

"It surely looks suspicious," the superintendent said, musingly; "but I fail to understand how those boys could have gotten the money from Sam's pocket, unless he remained in town skylarking with them."

"That's somethin' I can't explain; but when I find Fred we'll know a good deal more about the matter."

"Do you think anything could be accomplished by my visitin' Sam?"

"I'm certain of it, for one talk with him is bound to convince you he isn't a thief."

[Pg 205]

The superintendent remained silent several moments, and it seemed very much as if this second conversation with Joe had caused a change of opinion.

"Very well," he said finally, "I will think the matter over. Shall you be here in the morning?"

"I'm goin' to leave Farley's as soon as I get a bite to eat, an' it ain't likely I'll be back 'till Fred can come with me."

Mr. Wright arose to intimate that the interview was at an end, and Joe left the store with a gesture of defiance and anger toward the cashier.

While all this was taking place Fred occupied anything rather than an enviable position.

When the march was begun he found it extremely difficult to make his way through the woods, loaded down as he was and with one arm tied to his side; but Gus had no mercy. At every opportunity he spurred the prisoner on, using a stout stick for the purpose, and more than once was Fred on the point of open rebellion.

He felt confident the boys would not dare do more than give him a cruel flogging, after which they must leave him behind; but this would be to lose sight of the thieves, and almost anything was preferable to being thus defeated in his purpose.

"I'll stick it out," he said to himself, "and wait for the time when I can tell the story to some one who will help make them prisoners."

During an hour the boys traveled straight ahead, and then Gus insisted upon a halt.

Tim agreed, because his breakfast had not been perfectly satisfactory, and he wanted a second meal now they were, as he believed, free from pursuit.

[Pg 206]

The provisions were brought out from the bag, and as the two boys began to eat Fred's hunger returned with such a force that he could not resist the impulse to ask for food.

"Say, if you'll give me some of that bread I'll carry all the load when we start again. I haven't had a mouthful since I left Blacktown."

"An' you'll go without two or three days longer," Gus replied with malicious pleasure. "You'll have the whole load, an' no trade about it either, so hold your tongue or I'll use the stick again."

Tim laughed as if he thought it great sport to hear the prisoner begging for food, and Fred threw himself upon the ground, resolving not to give them another opportunity for mirth.

"If there's a chance to get hold of the bag to-night I'll help myself," he thought. "It can't be stealing, for I'm surely entitled to a share when they force me to stay with them."

Gus amused himself for a while by thrusting food close to the prisoner's face and then withdrawing it, but he tired of this when Fred made no effort to take what he knew was not intended for him.

The halt continued about an hour, and then, as Gus had threatened, both packages were placed on Fred's shoulders.

"Now step out livelier than you did before, for we don't want to make another halt until we are ready to build a camp," Tim said, as he began the advance.

"Treat me decent an' I'll travel as fast as you can."

"You ain't gettin' it half as bad as you deserve, an' it'd be a good idea to keep your mouth shut." [Pg 207]

As during the first portion of the journey, Gus amused himself by prodding the prisoner with a stick, but as the day lengthened and Tim refused to halt, the boy grew too weary to indulge in such pleasantries.

In order that Fred might carry all the burden, it was necessary to unloosen both his hands, and, without being observed by his companions, he contrived to transfer several crackers from the bag to his pocket.

The second stage of the journey lasted nearly two hours, and then Tim decided the camp should be erected on the bank of a small stream.

They were now, according to Fred's belief, not more than twenty miles from Blacktown, and a trifle less than that distance from Farley's.

As far away as the eye could reach was a town, but no one knew its name.

"We might have stayed nearer home if the camp is to be made so close to a settlement," Gus said fretfully.

"While we keep out of sight nobody'll know we're here, an' in case we want to leave suddenly on the cars, it won't be far to walk. I'd like to get hold of a boat, an' then we could run down the stream without much trouble."

"Why not buy one?"

"After a day or two we'll find out if there is any near. Just now we must get the camp built, an' then take things comfortable for awhile."

Fred watched Tim's every movement in order to learn where the money would be hidden; but failed to see any attempt at burying it. The protuberance just over his breast served to show the treasure was yet in his possession, and Gus seemed well content it should remain there. [Pg 208]

The prisoner was ordered to hew the materials for the camp while the others put them together, and during this work he contrived to eat the stolen crackers.

The shelter was a rude affair, hardly more than sufficient to protect them from the rays of the sun, and when completed all hands lay down to rest, Fred being bound hand and foot again to prevent any attempt at escape.

Not until night was the prisoner given food, and then Gus doled out two crackers, an amount which would have been little more than an aggravation if he had not previously ministered to his own wants.

During the hours of darkness no watch was kept; but Fred remained awake nearly all the time, straining his ears in the vain hope that he might hear something of Bill.

The second and third days were but repetitions of the first, and then it became necessary to visit the village in order to procure food.

"I'll walk up the stream 'till a place to cross is found," Tim said, "an' if I don't see a boat before then, will strike out for the town. Keep your eye on the sneak, an' don't give him a chance to get away."

"Help me fix the ropes around his legs a little tighter, an' I'll answer for it that he won't go far."

Tim complied with this request, and when Fred was trussed up like a chicken, he took from his pocket the stolen money. [Pg 209]

"It won't do to carry all this, so you'd better take care of it a while. Ten dollars will be enough for me, even if I should happen to come across the boat."

Subtracting this amount from the total, he gave the remainder to Gus, who put it carelessly in his pocket as if accustomed to handling large sums of money.

Then he started along the bank of the stream, his companion accompanying him a short distance, and Fred realized that the time had come when he must make one desperate attempt to take his jailer prisoner.

"Gus has got nearly all the money," he said to himself, "and if I could manage to slip the ropes it would only be a question of a fight, in which I'm almost certain to get the upper hand."

He had been left seated with his back against the trunk of a tree, and the first move necessary was to release his arms.

To do this he struggled desperately, regardless of the pain; but the bonds remained firm until

Gus returned, when, as a matter of course, he did not dare to make any further movement.

"Now Tim is so far away that he can't interfere, I'm going to pay you off for playin' the sneak," Gus said, as he took up his station directly in front of the prisoner. "If I had my way you shouldn't have a bite to eat from now out, an' by the time we get ready to leave you couldn't do much mischief."

"If you're afraid, why not kill me? That's the safest plan."

"I'd like to," was the savage reply, "an' would if I was sure of not bein' pulled up for murder. I can give you a lively time for the next two or three hours, though." [Pg 210]

Gus began to fulfill his promise by tickling Fred's nose with a twig, and the prisoner was by no means averse to the cruel sport, since it gave him a good excuse to struggle.

He writhed and twisted as if to move beyond reach of his tormentor; but all the while his sole aim was to release his hands, and Gus was so deeply engrossed with the efforts to cause pain that he failed to understand what his victim might succeed in doing.

CHAPTER XXVI

TURNING THE TABLES

The constant straining caused Fred to perspire freely, and after many vain efforts he succeeded in catching the rope which was around his wrists, under the point of a projecting limb of the tree.

Now he had a purchase, and by a mighty effort at the moment when Gus made a more than usually vicious lunge, slipped one of his hands from the bonds, thanks to the perspiration which moistened the strands.

He did not take immediate advantage of his freedom. It was essential to await a favorable opportunity, and this came when Gus knelt before him for the purpose of pricking the apparently helpless boy with the blade of his knife.

Fred could not arise; but he flung both arms around his tormentor's neck, hugging him so close as to prevent the latter from using his hands. [Pg 211]

For an instant his surprise was so great that he remained motionless; but before Fred could take any advantage of his inactivity Gus recovered from the shock to exert all his strength, and began to free himself.

Under ordinary circumstances Fred would have been no match for his captor; but now the knowledge of what was to be gained lent him great energy, and he clung to him with desperation.

"Let go, or I'll stab you with this knife," Gus shouted; but Fred was too careful of his wind to make any reply.

Over and over they rolled, one trying to use his weapon, while the other did his best to prevent it, and but for an accident the battle might have been continued until the smaller boy was exhausted.

It was not possible to control the direction of their bodies, and suddenly both were precipitated into the stream.

Fred was a good swimmer, while his adversary knew but little of the art, and he succeeded in holding Gus' head under water until he was nearly strangled.

The tables were now turned.

It only remained for Fred to drag the half-unconscious boy to the shore, and there transfer the rope from one pair of legs to the other.

When Gus again had a clear idea of matters he was securely tied, and Fred had put into his own pocket the package of money which Sam was accused of stealing.

To pack in small compass the remaining store of provisions, cut a stout stick, and place the hatchet in a belt improvised from a piece of the rope, occupied but a few moments, and then Fred said, sternly: [Pg 212]

"I'm going to slacken up on your legs a bit, so's you can walk, and now it's your turn to step out lively."

"When Tim comes back you shall pay for this."

"I intend to be a long distance from here before that time arrives."

"He can catch you."

"To do it he'll have to be smarter than I think he is."

"Wait an' see."

"That's just what I don't propose doin'. I understand your purpose now; you're trying to keep me here as long as possible. Get up."

"I won't an' you can't make me."

Fred struck the prisoner several severe blows; but he did not so much as cry out.

"I'll beat you black and blue, if you don't stand up and walk."

"Pound away, I can bear a good deal of that rather than go to jail."

Again Fred used the stick; but in vain. Gus shut his teeth firmly, and took the punishment with a stoicism worthy a better cause.

It was important that no time should be lost. Tim might find a boat and return to the camp before going to the town.

Fred stood still in perplexity for an instant, and then throwing aside the stick raised Gus in his arms.

It was a heavy burden; but he staggered on with all possible speed.

As soon as Gus began to understand that he might be carried away despite his refusal to walk, he set up a series of the most terrific yells, and Fred was forced to come to a halt. [Pg 213]

"I'll soon put an end to that kind of fun," he said, angrily, while whittling a piece of soft wood. "With this in your mouth there won't be much screaming."

Now Gus began to fancy he might be finally beaten, and then tried new tactics.

"See here, all you want is the money, an' now you've got it I'll agree that neither Tim nor me'll chase or try in any way to catch you, if I'm left here. There's no need even to take off the ropes; but let me stay where he'll see me."

Fred shook his head.

"I need you quite as much as I do the money, and I am bound to take you along."

"What good will it do to have me put in jail?"

"It'll be the means of freeing a better fellow than you ever dared to be."

"I'll kill you some day."

"Possibly, but that don't let you out of this scrape."

By this time Fred had the gag ready, and a stout pressure on the prisoner's cheeks caused him to open his mouth.

The wood was thrust between Gus' teeth, and Fred tied his handkerchief over it to prevent it from slipping.

"Now when you're willing to walk I'll take that out," he said. "Once in every few minutes, when we have to stop to rest I'll look at your eyes. If you wink, it means you're ready to do as I say." [Pg 214]

Gus glared at him savagely; but was careful to keep his eyes wide open.

Again Fred shouldered his burden, realizing, meanwhile that he could never reach Farley's if his prisoner remained obstinate.

When an hundred yards had been traversed he was forced to rest.

Gus' eyes stared at him.

A second and a third time was this repeated. At each interval the distance was shorter, and Fred knew he could not travel much farther.

"If he don't give in pretty soon I shall," he muttered to himself as he threw his burden to the ground for the third time.

To his great relief Gus winked violently when Fred pulled the handkerchief down to gain a view of his eyes and the gag was removed without loss of time.

"Will you agree to walk now?" he asked.

"Yes, yes; it wouldn't take a feller long to stifle with that thing in his mouth."

"I don't care what happens so long as I get you to Farley's."

Once more Gus tried to beg off; but Fred would not listen.

"Walk fast," he said, "and if you don't do your best, in goes the gag again."

There was no necessity of emphasizing the demand. The prisoner moved with alacrity; but his captor was by no means certain as to which was the proper course.

Tim had made so many turns in his flight that Fred's ideas regarding the points of the compass were very hazy.

[Pg 215]

Both the boys were suffering from lack of water, and no halt was made until two or three hours past noon, when they were at the edge of a swamp.

Quenching their thirst with the ill-tasting liquid, they lay down on the ground to rest, and did not continue their journey for some time.

"Why not stay here all night?" Gus asked.

"Because we haven't traveled far enough yet."

"But I can't hold out much longer, no matter how hard I try."

"You'll have to go as far as I do."

"Wait till mornin', an' then I'll walk twice as fast to make up for the time spent now."

"We must get in another hour's tramp before sunset," Fred replied, determinedly, and although Gus pleaded very hard the decision was not changed.

But little was accomplished during the last portion of the traveling. Both were thoroughly tired, and when the shadows of night shrouded the recesses of the forest in gloom the welcome word was given.

"Here's a little stream, and we'd better stop here, there's a chance for a drink."

"It's about time," Gus added, sulkily as he threw himself on the ground.

Fred divided half of the food into two portions; but did not dare to loosen the prisoner's arms sufficiently to admit of his eating unaided.

"I'll feed you first, and then take my share," he said, and Gus devoured the food ravenously, after which he quenched his thirst, when Fred bound him securely to a tree.

The prisoner slept soundly; but to his captor the night was the longest he had ever known. He did not dare give himself wholly up to slumber lest Tim should be on their track, and attempt to effect a rescue, while the fear that the money might be lost, this time beyond recovery, rendered him very nervous.

[Pg 216]

"It's going to be tough lines before we get to Farley's," he said to himself; "but I ought to hold out if for no other reason than to clear Sam beyond a doubt."

When the morning finally came Fred fed Gus again; both took large drinks of water, and their journey was resumed.

Now Gus neither begged nor made comments. He marched just ahead of his captor in a sullen manner, as if having decided upon a certain course of action, and Fred remained continually on the alert, fearing lest he meditated an attack.

At noon the two halted, and while eating the last of the provisions, knowing that after this they must go hungry until arriving at a settlement, Fred fancied he heard a noise as of someone approaching.

His first thought was that Tim had succeeded in following their trail, and he hurriedly made ready a gag to prevent an alarm from being given.

Gus heard the same noise, and before Fred could prevent him he began to shout loudly for help.

It was several seconds before the outcries could be checked, and then the mischief had been done.

The noise of a heavy body forcing its way through the underbrush sounded more clearly, and Fred sprang to his feet, hatchet in hand, ready to defend himself to the utmost.

[Pg 217]

Gus looked triumphant, and again shouted loudly; but the expression of his eye was changed to despair as the stranger burst through the foliage.

"Why Joe! Joe!" Fred cried, as he leaped forward and caught Brace by the hands. "How did you happen to get here just when you were most needed?"

"I reckon I'd gone right past without knowin' you was anywhere near, if it hadn't been for your wild yells."

"It was Gus who did that," Fred replied, glancing with a smile toward the discomfited prisoner. "He thought as I did, that it was Tim."

"Do you mean his partner?"

"Yes."

"Have you got the best of both?"

In the fewest words possible Fred explained how the capture had been made, and Joe actually leaped for joy when the stolen money was displayed.

CHAPTER XXVII

AN UNLOOKED-FOR DENIAL

"You've done a big thing, my boy," Brace said, approvingly, when Fred's story was concluded, "an' it won't be long before we can bring Sam back to Farley's with not so much as a suspicion against him. Besides that, we own the land that'll make all hands rich."

"How did you do it?"

Joe gave him all the details, and concluding with the interview between himself and Mr. Wright, said:

[Pg 218]

"I didn't leave that night as I decided on; but went back to see poor Bill, an' your mother insisted I stay till mornin'. The sun wasn't up when I started out, an' a mighty blind hunt it proved to be till the first camp was struck. That kinder livened me a bit; but I couldn't get onto the trail, an' from then till Gus yelled I hadn't any idea which way to go."

"How far do you suppose we are from Farley's?"

"I reckon it'll take smart walkin' for the rest of this day, an' the best part of to-morrow before we see the works."

"And the provisions I took from Tim and Gus are all gone."

"I've got enough for supper, if we don't eat too hearty, and the balance of the time we can suck our thumbs."

"Then we'd better make another start. It must be three o'clock."

"Do you know the straight cut?"

"I'm not even certain we're heading right."

"By keeping on the high land we are bound to come out somewhere near Farley's or Blacktown."

When the journey was continued Gus took good care to give his captors no trouble, for he understood that Joe would show but little mercy, if there was any attempt to cause delay.

At a reasonably rapid pace the three marched until darkness forced a halt, and then the small amount of provisions Brace had brought was consumed without satisfying the hunger of either member of the party.

Gus was tied between his captors, where he could stretch himself at full length, and the night passed quietly. There was no longer any fear Tim could effect a rescue, even though he might be near at hand, and Fred enjoyed a most refreshing rest.

[Pg 219]

What all hoped would prove to be the last day's journey was begun without breakfast, and the advance was by no means rapid.

At ten o'clock Fred declared he could go no farther without a rest, and the party sought shelter from the sun under a wide spreading tree, where a view could be had of a depression in the land for some distance ahead.

Joe and Fred were facing this open stretch, and had but just begun to discuss the subject which was ever uppermost in their minds—the coal vein—when a figure carrying a heavy burden emerged from the thicket on the lower side, evidently bent on ascending the mountain.

"Now, what can that fellow be doing?" Joe asked, as he arose to his feet. "It's a boy, an' we'd be in big luck if it should turn out to be that precious Tim."

"But it isn't; he wears a cap, and this one has a hat. It looks something like—Why it is! It's Skip!"

"Skip?" Joe repeated in amazement. "What's he doin' out here, an' with such a load?"

"In order to answer that question I shall have to ask him," and Fred shouted the boy's name.

Skip started as if alarmed at being summoned, and then, waving his hat in triumph, he came toward the party at his best pace.

"I knew I'd find you if I hunted long enough," he exclaimed as he came within speaking distance, and added when he finally reached the tree and threw down the burden. "It's mighty heavy, an' I thought one spell yesterday I'd have to give up the job. Reckon you're glad to get it, eh?"

[Pg 220]

"What have you there?"

"Grub, of course. When Joe didn't turn up, an' there was no sign of Fred, I figured that you'd both want somethin' to eat, so took out my wages in what was handiest to eat. Mrs. Byram said I'd never find you, but it wouldn't do any harm to try, so here we are."

"Did you spend your money to buy us food?" Fred asked.

"Why not? It'll take a good deal more'n that to straighten things between us, an' I'd like to get the 'count squared some time."

"You've done it already, Skip. It was you who first put us on the track of the thieves, and now you've helped the cause along wonderfully, for it has been a good while since I had all I could eat."

"Well, fill yourself up right now. There's no need to hurry, for you can't get to Farley's to-night, an'—Hello, Gus! Got through with your trip so soon?"

"You'll wish I hadn't before this thing is ended," was the surly reply, and then the prisoner turned his back on the ex-chief of the regulators.

Quite naturally Skip was eager to hear the result of the chase, and while Joe and Fred were eating they gave him the full particulars.

"Do you know the way home?" Brace asked when the story was told.

[Pg 221]

"Of course. I've been out here half a dozen times. Was you calculatin' to keep straight ahead?"

"Yes."

"Then you'd gone six miles the other side of Farley's."

"If that is the case, it's lucky you found us. Let's make another start; now I've filled up it seems possible to travel without stopping again until we are at mother's door."

With a guide and provisions in plenty, the long tramp yet to be endured seemed but a trifling affair, and the party, with the single exception of Gus, were in the best of spirits.

The night was spent near a small water course in the valley, and at three o'clock all hands entered the company's store at Farley's.

Both Mr. Wright and the cashier were in the building, and they listened in undisguised astonishment as Joe told the story of the capture.

"Here is the money, except what they have spent," Fred said when Joe concluded the recital, and he handed the package to the superintendent.

An examination showed that but fifty-three dollars were missing, and then Mr. Wright turned to Gus, who was wearing a look of mingled indignation and innocence.

"How did you get this money from Thorpe?"

"Who is he, sir?"

"The boy who was bringing it from the bank."

"I never saw him."

"Then how did you get these notes?"

"I never had 'em sir."

[Pg 222]

"Why, I took them out of his pocket," Fred cried, in surprise.

"Explain yourself," Mr. Wright said to the prisoner.

"Me an' Tim Sanger was goin' to camp out on the mountains while work was slack," Gus began with an air of truthfulness. "We had a shanty built, an' Tim went off fishin' when this feller," here he pointed to the astonished Fred, "jumped in on me. I'd seen him in Blacktown, so didn't think anything was out of the way till he knocked me down."

"Why did he strike you?"

"That's jest what I don't know. He tied me all up like this, an' I had to do as he said till we met Joe Brace. Then I heard one of 'em say to the other: 'This will get Sam out of the scrape, for we can say Gus Dobson had the money what was stole, in his pocket.' That's all I know about it, an' I never saw them bills till this very minute."

"It was a good scheme for Sam to give up the money in this way when he found the case was so dead against him," the cashier said in a low tone, as if speaking to himself; but he took care that Mr. Wright should hear distinctly.

"What do you mean?" Joe cried fiercely.

"Nothing, nothing, I must have been thinking aloud."

"You intended we should hear every word," the miner added, excitedly.

"Be quiet, Brace, while we get the facts of this strange story," Mr. Wright said, sharply.

"You have got the facts already sir. I told you before I left town that this fellow was one of the thieves."

[Pg 223]

"That doesn't prove anything," the cashier replied, with a malicious smile.

"I'll prove more than that to you, if you dare show your nose out doors."

"Either leave the office, Brace, or hold your tongue," and now the superintendent spoke in an angry tone.

"Fred, what have you got to say in answer to this boy's story?"

"Not a word, sir. What Joe has told you is true, and if it ain't believed you can serve the warrant which was issued for me, as soon as you please."

"He can't say anything," Gus added, triumphantly. "If Tim was here he could tell you jest why we left Blacktown; but, of course, he don't know about the job this feller is try in' to put up on me."

"Where is Tim?"

"I dunno. He'll likely come home when he can't find me."

"Are you willing to stay here until he returns?"

"Sure; there ain't any reason why I'd want to run off, if you tell my folks where I am."

Joe could contain himself no longer.

"Do you mean to put his word agin ours?" he cried fiercely.

"Why not?" the cashier asked, softly. "It looks to me very much as if his having been brought here was an outrage."

"If you speak to me agin I'll spoil the whole of your face, you cur! After arestin' a boy for meetin' with an accident in doin' what you oughter done, an' gettin' out warrants for others what couldn't have had a hand in the matter, it's easy to see why you want to believe this little villain's story. When the truth is known you understand blessed well that the town will be too hot to hold you."

[Pg 224]

"That will do," Mr. Wright cried, sternly. "I shall have no such language used here. Leave this moment, Brace, and when you are more calm we'll discuss the matter."

Joe looked in silence first at the cashier, and then at the superintendent, after which he said to Fred and Skip:

"Come, lads, this is no place for us. We've saved the company's money, an' now are likely to be treated as we were for standin' by 'em at the time of the riot."

With this reminder he walked out of the building followed by both the boys.

CHAPTER XXVIII

OPINIONS

The three who had entered the store in such high spirits left it in a maze of bewilderment and anger.

That Gus could concoct so plausible a story was none the less astonishing than that Mr. Wright should give it credence, so far as to refrain from ordering the boy's immediate arrest.

Joe was so enraged that during the walk to Fred's home he did nothing but inveigh in the strongest terms against the company, and more especially these two of its servants who had insulted both himself and Fred by refusing to believe their united statements.

[Pg 225]

"I'll pound that cashier 'till he can't say beans," he cried, shaking his fist in impotent rage.

"What good will that do? People won't believe our story any quicker because of it."

"I'll be satisfied, an' that's enough."

"Don't make such threats," Fred said, imploringly. "If he hears of them it will only give him a chance to make trouble for you."

"I'll not only make 'em; but carry out every one. It won't take much more talk to coax me into servin' Wright the same way."

Several of the miner's acquaintances hailed him as he passed; but his heart was so full of anger that he paid not the slightest attention, and Fred felt a sense of most profound relief when they were inside the house, where the wild threats could not be heard by those who might report them at the store.

After the greetings with Mrs. Byram the travelers went to the chamber where Bill lay helpless, his fractured limb bound in splints and bandages.

Here the different stories were told again, and the invalid's astonishment was not less than that of his companions.

"It don't hardly seem reasonable," he muttered, after a long pause. "I reckon the best thing would be for you an' Fred to see the lawyer right away. There's no knowin' what kind of a scrape may grow out of this."

"It'll do jest as well if we go in the mornin' on the first train," Joe replied. "After the tramp we've had it comes kinder natural to hanker for a bed."

[Pg 226]

"I s'pose it would be tough; but don't waste any time to-morrow."

"Wright can't do much between now an' then, so rest easy, mate. They won't be able to take the land from us, an' in another year we'll be among the big-bugs ourselves."

"Are you sure the trade can't be backed out of?"

"I've left everything with the lawyer, and he'll fix matters about right."

Bill closed his eyes as if in thought; Fred went down stairs to talk with his mother, and Skip took his departure, Joe saying as he accompanied him to the door:

"We won't forget what you've done, lad, an' before long us four—that's countin' Sam—will be in condition to pay off our scores."

"I'll have all I want when the fellers I buried in the mine promise to forget what's been done."

"Then you can rest easy, for the matter was settled yesterday when you brought the grub."

After Skip left Joe went out to see his friends, and an hour later he returned in a perfect rage.

"That villain of a cashier has taken good care to tell his side of the story," he exclaimed, bursting into the invalid's room, "an' more'n half the men I've seen believe we got the money from Sam to stick the robbery on that thievin' Gus. Mr. Wright has taken the boy up to his house, an' is pettin' him like a prince, I s'pose, to square off for what we did to him. Why, even Donovan says old man Dobson oughter prosecute us for the outrage, as he calls it."

[Pg 227]

"I can't believe it!" Bill cried, trying in vain to rise to a sitting posture.

"I'm tellin' the truth, all the same. There's a big excitement in town, an' I wouldn't be surprised if Fred was arrested in the mornin', spite of what he's done."

"Don't the folks know what kind of a boy that Dobson feller is?"

"I reckon they do; but the cashier keeps talkin' about destroyin' one feller's character to help another, an' the blind fools here swallow all he says."

"What makes him so down on our crowd?"

"'Cause he had no business to make the arrests, an' if it was proved Gus an' Tim stole it, he'd be in a bad mess with all hands."

"Look here, Joe"—and Bill spoke very earnestly—"it don't make any difference how tired you an' Fred are, you must go to Blacktown this very night. That lawyer will tell us jest what oughter be done, an' we've got to fight this thing tooth an' nail, now all hands are agin us."

Joe realized that this was good advice, and went at once to confer with Mrs. Byram and Fred.

The result of this last interview was that an hour after midnight the miner and the boy left the house quietly, and walked at a rapid pace directly across the mountain.

"This is pretty tough, lad," Joe said, when they were some distance from the town. "It seems as if I'd done nothin' but tramp for the last month."

"I won't grumble if this matter is straightened out finally, but just now it looks as though all hands would have been better off to let things go as they might."

[Pg 228]

"Don't get downhearted. When our mine is open you can afford to laugh at this little fracas."

Although Joe spoke so cheerily he was far from feeling comfortable in mind, as was apparent when they visited the lawyer's house at a very early hour next morning.

The mental anxiety could be plainly read on his face as he waited to receive the legal opinion after telling his story.

"I don't think you need fear any serious trouble, although matters may be very disagreeable for a while," that gentleman said. "It will be well for us to make complaint against the Dobson boy, and by causing his arrest be certain of having him here when he is wanted. I will attend to it at once."

"How much money do you want?"

"We won't speak of that now. When I do business for a firm as rich as yours, I am not afraid of losing my fees."

"It would be hard to find any poorer concern."

"There's where you make a mistake, Mr. Brace. Your title is clear; an expert, whom I sent, reports that there can be no question as to the presence of coal in large quantities, and I shall be only too glad to purchase stock when the company is formed."

"Do you mean the whole of that?" Joe asked, his eyes glistening with delight.

"To prove it I will advance on your joint note any reasonable amount of money which may be needed. In fact, I think it would be a good idea to give Mr. Wright a hint of your discovery, when I'm quite sure he'd view this whole affair in a different light."

[Pg 229]

"We'll keep the secret a while longer. I'd rather get out of the scrape before folks know what we've found, an' then settle old scores. Now, Fred, s'pose we go to see Sam?"

"I'll walk to the jail with you, and you can wait until I have despatched an officer to Farley's for the Dobson boy."

The fact that Lawyer Hunter had come with the visitors insured them every facility for seeing their friend, and the three met in the turnkey's room with the knowledge that they might be together the entire day.

Poor Sam looked forlorn, indeed, when he entered the apartment. It had been so long since his friend's last visit that he fancied they were deserting him.

His appearance changed decidedly when they explained the reason for their absence, and two hours were spent in giving a detailed account of all that had happened since his departure from Farley's.

Then, forgetting the present troubles, the three talked of the day when they would be mine owners instead of laborers, and built so many air castles that neither heeded the passage of time until Mr. Hunter returned with the information that an officer had visited Farley's only to find the superintendent looking anxiously for Gus.

"It seems that Mr. Wright took the boy home last night, and, believing in his protestations of innocence despite your testimony, left him unguarded. As might have been expected, he took advantage of this credulity to make his escape, and now I fancy it will be many days before he re-visits this part of the country."

[Pg 230]

"Then all we have done goes for nothing," Fred said, mournfully.

"In that you are very greatly mistaken. Thorpe will be acquitted beyond a doubt, and it is not likely Mr. Wright dare press any charge against you at present. I shall go with you to Farley's, after Sam is released on bail, and guarantee matters will be set right."

"Am I to go out?" Sam asked in surprise.

"As soon as it can be arranged. Your friends are to accompany me, and the matter can be accomplished very quickly."

Fred was amazed at the ease with which all this was done. He and Joe went before a magistrate, and repeated under oath the story they had told so often; two friends of Mr. Hunter's signed a paper to which the other's names had already been affixed, and, ten minutes later, Sam was with them, looking radiantly happy at being in the open air once more.

It was too late to return home, unless Joe and Fred were willing to take another tramp across the mountain, and all three went to the hotel, where they formed a very jolly party.

On the first train next morning the partners, accompanied by Mr. Hunter, arrived at Farley's, and found public sentiment greatly changed. The flight of Gus had caused very many to believe he really was the guilty party, although no one could guess how he gained possession of the money, and the walk to Mrs. Byram's was something like an ovation.

CHAPTER XXIX

[Pg 231]

A QUESTION OF TITLE

It was as if each person who had doubted Sam's honesty felt it necessary to call at Mrs. Byram's and congratulate him upon what now appeared to be good proof of his innocence.

Fred and the miners also came in for their share of attention, and even Bill, whose limb was paining him severely, joined his partners in celebrating their victory, which now seemed certain.

Before returning home Mr. Hunter called to consult with his clients relative to making a stock company of the new mine, and, when he left, it was with full authority to do whatever he believed their interests demanded.

Among the visitors in the evening was Donovan, and he had no hesitation in calling himself very severe names for having been so stupid as to think it possible his old friends could have been engaged in any questionable transaction.

"The cashier is about as sore a man as can be found in town," he said, "an' if I ain't way off in my reckonin' he'll be lookin' for another job mighty soon."

"Does he say anything against us?" Bill asked.

"He's glum as a fish. Every feller who goes in wants to know where Gus is, an' he keeps out of sight all that's possible."

"Have you seen Mr. Wright to-day?"

"No; but I heard he an' that lawyer of yours had a long chin about the business. Say, Bill, by the time you get out of this scrape you'll owe a pretty penny for law, I reckon. Why don't you try to make the company pay it?"

[Pg 232]

"We can stand the racket, an' won't ask a soul to help us."

"Somebody must have died an' left you a pile, for men that work at Farley's don't often have enough to pay big lawyers for runnin' around."

"It'll be all right, Donovan, so don't worry about that."

But the mine boss did worry. He failed to understand how Bill and Joe could incur such expense with any prospect of paying it, and when he left the house it was to discuss the matter in all its bearings with a select few of his particular friends.

The superintendent did not consider it worth his while to call; but on the following morning Joe received a note to the effect that if he intended to return to the mine, it would be to his advantage to resume his work at once.

"Tell Mr. Wright that I've got through with his company, an' he can put a man in my place whenever it suits him," the miner said to the messenger, and the latter had hardly reached the store before a workman from Blacktown arrived with the startling intelligence that the four who had been accused of the robbery had purchased a large tract of land on the mountain, and were about to open a mine.

This news was so wonderful that one of the loungers volunteered to walk to the town for the sole and only purpose of learning if it was really true.

[Pg 233]

An hour later it was rumored that Fred received the following telegram from Blacktown:

"Have opened books for subscriptions, and already received pledges to the full amount necessary for beginning the work.

ARTHUR HUNTER."

The lounge returned in hot haste with information that the people there were in the highest state of excitement regarding the new company which was being formed by some of the most influential men in the county, and related with many embellishments of his own, the story of how the vein had been discovered by Sam and Fred.

This was sufficient to cause another stream of callers to Mrs. Byram's house, and, learning that the secret had been made known, the four owners had no hesitation in giving all the particulars.

Now the cashier was more unpopular than ever. Even those who refrained from censuring him on the day previous, had nothing but hard words for the man who could make such an error as to charge with theft those who were wealthy in the possession of such a rich vein as the new one was reported to be.

Fully one-third of all those in the company's works took a half holiday to see the new mine, and some of the most sanguine started out to prospect for other evidences of coal.

In six hours land in the immediate vicinity of the mountain increased in price, until it would hardly have paid to buy it, unless gold could be found in large quantities, and the entire county was in a ferment of excitement.

It is needless to say that the four partners were very happy; but even in the midst of the great joy they found time to wonder why Skip had not called to congratulate them.

[Pg 234]

Nearly every other one of their friends and acquaintances visited the house at some time during the day and evening; but the ex-chief of the regulators was conspicuous by his absence.

"I wonder what the matter is with him?" Fred asked, when, at a late hour, the partners were alone. "Do you suppose he thinks we don't want to see him just because we have been fortunate?"

"If he does it's the biggest mistake of his life. I like the little rascal, although he did play us a bad trick, an' if he don't show up before noon to-morrow, I'll hunt him out," Joe said, laughingly.

But Skip did not put in an appearance before the time set, and, true to his word, Joe went in search of him.

The information he brought back to his partners was mystifying.

Skip had not been at home since the day on which Sam was liberated, and his father fancied he was absent on some work for the firm.

This singular disappearance troubled Fred greatly, and during the remainder of the day he spoke more often of the boy than regarding the mine.

"He'll turn up before long," Joe said, after all had tried in vain to conjecture where he might be;

but Fred fancied that the miner did not speak very confidently.

Nothing was heard personally from Mr. Wright; but it was common gossip about town that he had visited the newly-discovered vein several times, and spent one entire day at Blacktown.

[Pg 235]

Another twenty-four hours passed, and Skip had not returned home. His parents were now beginning to feel alarmed; but the majority of the townspeople, not trusting in the sincerity of his repentance, intimated that he had joined Gus, preferring to run away rather than lead an industrious life.

"I won't believe anything of the kind," Fred replied, hotly, when Donovan reported the general feeling regarding the disappearance. "He never would have done so much to help us, unless meaning exactly what he said."

"I reckon hard work didn't agree with him," the breaker boss answered, with a laugh.

"When Bill gets a little better Joe and I will go after him."

"Where?"

"I don't know; but it won't do any harm to look around, and I am——"

Fred was interrupted by a knock at the door, and on answering it was handed a telegram.

"Somebody is beggin' to be let in to the new company, I reckon," Donovan said, laughingly; but his smile vanished very quickly as he saw the look which came over the boy's face.

"What's the matter, lad?" Joe cried, and instead of replying Fred handed him the telegram, which read as follows:

"MR. FRED BYRAM:—Superintendent Wright has served an injunction restraining our company from taking further steps, on the plea that the land purchased belongs to him. His case, so far as I can learn, is very strong. It is advisable that you and Brace come here at once."

"ARTHUR HUNTER."

"Wha—wha—what does it mean?" Joe stammered.

[Pg 236]

"I should say things were gettin' serious," Donovan replied, as he read the message over Joe's shoulder, "Mr. Wright is a hard man to fight, an' the chances are he'll get the best of you."

Then he left the house as if in great haste to spread this additional news, and the partners looked at each other in dismay.

"That is why we've heard nothin' from the superintendent since our secret leaked out," Bill said, grimly. "You two had better tramp across to save time. You can get there three hours ahead of the next train."

"Come on," Fred cried, as he aroused from the daze caused by the startling intelligence. "Let's learn the worst quickly."

"It's pretty tough to lose the thing after swellin' as we have for the last couple of days," Joe added, gloomily, but without rising from his seat.

"Don't whine 'till we're sure it's gone," and Bill tried very hard to speak cheerily.

At this point Mrs. Byram entered the invalid's room to say:

"Mr. Wright has sent over to ask Fred and Mr. Brace to call at his office."

"Matters are beginning to look brighter already," Bill cried, and Joe asked gruffly:

"How do you make that out?"

"If he was so sure of provin' we had no claim to the land, he wouldn't have a word to say. Now he's tryin' to make a trade."

[Pg 237]

"He can't with me. Unless you, Fred an' Sam insist, it'll be the whole or nothing."

"Now that's the way to talk," Bill replied. "If we can raise the money to fight there won't be any bargain made."

"Don't you intend to call upon the superintendent?" Mrs. Byram asked.

"Not a bit of it, ma'am. Tell whoever he sends that Fred an' Joe are too busy just now, but if he wants to make a 'pointment some time next week, they'll try to see him."

"But it can't do any harm to talk with Mr. Wright."

"It won't do any good, an' they'd better see the lawyer first."

Mrs. Byram left the room to deliver the message, and Bill delayed his partners that they might know exactly how he felt regarding the matter before starting on the journey.

CHAPTER XXX

A SUIT AT LAW

"Don't give in an inch," Bill said, in conclusion to his remarks concerning the validity of the title. "Get over there as quick as you can, and don't let the lawyer weaken."

"It'll take big money to carry on a fight in law."

"We'll try to raise it somehow."

After promising to send him word as to the progress of affairs before night, in case they were detained more than one day, Joe and Fred went down stairs, and at that moment Mrs. Byram opened the door to admit Mr. Wright. [Pg 238]

He was particularly pleasant in his greetings, and asked, as he observed that they were on the point of going out:

"Did you finally conclude to come to the office?"

"We were on our way to Blacktown," Joe replied gruffly.

"But we have plenty of time for a chat, since the train does not leave for two hours of more."

"We are going to walk," Fred explained.

"Then you can surely spare me half an hour."

"What for?" Joe asked sharply.

"I wish to see if we can't arrive at some amicable settlement of the suit which I have been forced to bring."

"Wouldn't it been better to have talked first, an' then begun the law business?"

"In regard to that I had no alternative. The company ordered me to proceed exactly as I did."

"I'd like to hear what's goin' on down there," Bill shouted from above, and Fred said:

"It's no more than fair that we should go upstairs. He's got the right to know what Mr. Wright proposes."

"Yes, I prefer to speak with all the partners, though perhaps there is no necessity of sending for Thorpe."

"We haven't got the time to do that," Joe replied. "Come on, an' let's get through with the business as soon as we can, for we're due in Blacktown mighty soon." [Pg 239]

The miner led the way to the invalid's chamber, and Bill greeted his former superintendent with the curtest of nods.

"I have come in the hope that we can arrange matters without having recourse to the law," Mr. Wright began. "If, immediately after discovering the vein, you had advised me, I could have told you that our company owns the entire mountain, by purchase from the heirs of the original owner."

"But Mr. Hunter told us the title was perfect," Fred interrupted.

"Lawyers cannot always be depended upon. There is no question as to the truth of what I say, and here is a true copy of our deed."

He handed Bill a legal looking document; but the miner motioned it away.

"I don't want to see it," he said. "Neither of us could understand it in a week's study. The only thing for us to do is listen to what you propose."

"In view of the services you all have rendered in the past, I should be sorry to see you lose the money already paid on this property, and more so to have you involved in an expensive lawsuit. Now I am empowered to make this offer: The company will return the money paid, settle with your attorney, and allow you a reasonable compensation for the labour performed. In addition, it may be that we can give you a few shares in case it is decided to open new works."

As Mr. Wright paused Bill raised his head, and looking fixedly at the visitor, asked:

"If the property is yours beyond a question, what makes you offer to give us anything?" [Pg 240]

"Because you have acted in such a friendly manner toward us. I am not one who forgets a friend."

"You came mighty near doin' so when Sam was arrested, an' warrants sworn out for Fred an' me."

"That was a matter in which it was to your interest that the law should take its course. A large majority of the people believed you knew something about the robbery, and the only way to settle it absolutely was to have the case decided in court."

"Then we ought to thank you, I s'pose," and Bill leaned forward, despite the pain caused by the movement. "If we conclude to take the offer we'll let you know to-morrow."

"I am sorry to say that we can agree to no delay. If the terms are accepted at once, well and good; but they will not be held open for a lawyer to interfere."

"Then I'll speak for myself, an' say no," Bill cried, angrily. "The others can act as they please; but if all this is to be done jest on account of your friendship, then where's the harm of waitin' till next week, if we want to?"

"I have only repeated the stipulations made by the company."

"Well, we don't want anything to do with 'em," Joe added. "What Bill says goes with me, an' I reckon Fred'll stick by us."

"I believe as they do, Mr. Wright."

"Then you refuse the generous proposition?"

"We do, but have our own idea as to how generous it is," Bill replied, grimly.

"Do you think it will be possible to fight successfully a company as rich as ours?"

[Pg 241]

"We'll try it for a while, anyhow, an' won't give in till we're whipped."

"I don't like to make any threats; but feel it my duty to warn you of the consequences, if we press the charge of theft. The evidence is strongly against you, and more particularly so since you returned the money."

"I reckon that about winds up this 'ere interview," and Joe arose to his feet with a menacing air. "Go ahead with the suit; but there's such a thing as collectin' damages, an', rich as your company is, I don't believe they can get out of payin' 'em."

"That is child's talk. If you refuse what is little less than a present, I will go."

"An' it's pretty nigh time." Joe added, as he opened the door. "Don't try to make us any more such presents, or we may not keep our temper."

It could be plainly told that the superintendent had already lost his temper, for he went down stairs rapidly, slamming the street door behind him with a force which literally caused the cottage to tremble.

"He ain't so sure of his case, as he would have us believe," Bill said, when they were alone. "It's jest possible he may try to make things hotter for us by servin' the warrant on Fred, so you'd better not come back from Blacktown, till the widder sends word. Get over as quick as you can, an' don't forget to tell the lawyer about the generous proposition."

The two started without further delay, and the reception met with by those whom they passed on the street told how rapidly the bad news had travelled.

[Pg 242]

On the day previous every person was very cordial, as if trying to establish his or her position as friend; but now they were greeted even less pleasantly than before the riot, and Joe said, savagely:

"They're a set of curs. I did believe some of the things we heard yesterday; but now soft words won't go down with me, no matter how the property turns out."

"It can't make any difference what is done or said, all I ask is that we get Sam out of his troubles."

"You an' me are about as deep in the mire as he is if the case goes agin us. We'll try not to borryer trouble till there's better reason. Where do you s'pose Skip is keepin' himself all this time?"

"I wish I knew. Nobody can make me believe he went off with Gus."

"He's got a different game than that, an' I'm thinkin' we'll hear from him mighty soon."

"Why?"

"No partic'lar reason, I only jest think so."

Having changed the topic of conversation, which was the sole cause of his mentioning Skip's name, Joe relapsed into a silence which was not broken until the two arrived at the newly-discovered vein.

Here a party of surveyors were running imaginary lines and measuring distances, as they referred from time to time to several formidable looking documents, and Joe said, bitterly:

"Wright is gettin' ready for the fight. If we had plenty of money I wouldn't feel so bad; but unless the lawyer can borrow some for us, we're likely to come out the little end of the horn."

[Pg 243]

"We shall soon know all about it," and Fred continued the journey at a swift pace.

Mr. Hunter was in his office when the partners arrived, and the expression on his face was not such as to inspire courage.

"I didn't expected you so soon," he said, motioning them to be seated.

"We walked over rather than wait for the cars," Fred replied.

"I was sorry to summon you on such sorry business but Superintendent Wright has begun a fight for the possession of the land, and some of our prospective stockholders are alarmed by the attack."

"Has he really got any hold on the property?"

"He claims that the company's deeds give them title to the entire mountain."

"Then how did it happen that the farmer could sell?"

"It all hinges upon the question of survey. If the lines run twenty years ago are incorrect, as he claims, then the land you bought is located in the valley, and in that event not worth half you paid for it."

"What does the farmer say?" Joe asked.

"I fancy Mr. Wright has bribed him to forget where his property was. Two days ago he had a very clear idea of the location, but this morning he thinks Mr. Wright is correct. In fact, he is almost ready to swear he owned land only in the valley."

"He told me exactly where it was situated, an' we bought with the positive understandin' that he was sellin' a tract on the mountain," Joe said.

[Pg 244]

"That is one of the questions I wanted to decide. If he made those representations, we may force him to tell the truth rather than stand a suit for obtaining money under false representations."

Fred thought it was time to tell of Mr. Wright's proposition, and when he had finished the story the lawyer said with a look of positive relief:

"I'm glad to hear that. We will force them to show their hands by asking an immediate trial for Thorpe."

"But suppose he should be convicted?" Fred cried. "Skip is not at home, and we need his evidence."

"We must take that risk, rather than allow them time to work up a worse plot."

CHAPTER XXXI

SKIP

It seemed to Fred as if they were about to sacrifice Sam in order to aid in confirming the title of the land, and it required no slight amount of Mr. Hunter's eloquence to persuade him differently.

"By pressing for trial we have a better chance of proving his innocence. Under ordinary circumstances I would be certain of the result; but where so much property is a stake I do not like to trust the superintendent too implicitly."

"But what effect can his innocence or guilt have on the other question?"

[Pg 245]

"It might prejudice our case if he went before a jury. Every point must be guarded against, and this is the first to be settled."

"Can we raise money enough to carry the thing through?" Joe asked.

"I think so; but will tell you better to-morrow after I have had time to see some of the subscribers with whom I have not yet spoken."

"Do you think we've got any chance of winning?"

"I wish it were possible to say yes; but under the circumstances it seems to me that the odds are in the favor of the company represented by Mr. Wright."

"Yet you don't advise us to accept his proposition," Fred said.

"Certainly not. Even if I was in favor of making a compromise, the amount offered would be no temptation. I should advise you to refuse ten thousand dollars, for it will cost the company much more than that if we can raise sufficient to carry on the suit."

"Is there anything for us to do?" Fred asked.

"Very much. It is necessary to remain here, and send for Thorpe. I will first attend to pressing for trial, and then have an interview with the farmer for the purpose of frightening him into telling nothing but the truth. I fancy we can restore his memory by threatening him with a criminal suit."

"I'll run over for Sam," Joe said, as if a walk of five miles across the mountain was nothing more than a pleasure trip.

"It won't do for you to come," he added, as Fred was about to speak, "because I'm afraid Wright might use that warrant."

[Pg 246]

"Yes, it is much better you should remain here," Mr. Hunter said quickly. "Isn't it possible to find the boy who first suggested Dobson was the thief?"

"I'm afraid not; it looks very much as if he'd run away."

"It won't do any harm to walk around town while I'm gone," Joe suggested. "You may come across some feller who has seen him."

"I shall expect to meet all three this afternoon," the lawyer said, as his clients rose to go.

"Do not talk with any one regarding either case, and, above all, make no promises without first consulting me."

Joe and Fred left the office, the former saying when they were out of doors:

"Keep a stiff upper lip, lad, an' if the company gets the best of us, remember that Farley's isn't the only colliery in the middle field. When Bill is on his pins again we can pull up stakes an' look for another job."

"I am worrying about Sam rather than ourselves. It would be terrible if he was convicted of a crime he never committed."

"Better that than to be guilty; but we won't look at it in such a bad light yet awhile. I'm off now; when it's time for me to be back, hang around the hotel."

Then Joe started at a brisk pace, and with a heavy heart Fred walked aimlessly through the town.

The idea that by so doing he might learn something regarding Skip seem preposterous, and he hardly gave it a thought after Joe made the suggestion, therefore he was startled by hearing a familiar voice crying:

"Hi! Fred! Hold on a minute!"

[Pg 247]

Turning quickly he saw Skip coming toward him at full speed, and looking as if he had been on a long, rough journey.

"Where have you been?" he asked, in surprise.

"Trying' to find that feller Tim."

"Tim? What did you want of him?"

"Nothing'; but I thought you might. When things turned out at Farley's as they did it seemed to me that by gettin' hold of him the truth would come out."

"Have you been at that work all this time?"

"Yes."

"Of course you couldn't find him."

"Of course I could, an' if you want him I'll go straight to where he's hiding."

Fred looked at his friend in astonishment for an instant, and he cried:

"Come to the lawyer's with me this minute. You're the very fellow he's been wanting to see."

Five minutes later the two were closeted with Mr. Hunter, who appeared very well pleased with the news brought by Skip.

"How did you chance to find the boy?" he asked.

"It was a good deal like luck. Fred told about he an' Gus campin' by the river, an' I snooped up that way. A lot of us fellers stayed a week in the same place, so it was handy to get around. It was two days before I saw any signs of him, an' then I come mighty nigh tumblin' over his camp."

"How long since you left him?"

"Yesterday noon."

"Have you been traveling all this time?"

[Pg 248]

"Pretty much; but it don't make any difference if you want to send after him."

"That is exactly what I want to do, and as soon as possible."

"I'm ready now," and Skip started toward the door.

"I didn't mean quite as soon as this. Go for something to eat, while I make the necessary arrangements. Come back here when you've had dinner."

"It'll be two or three dinners in one," Skip muttered, as he followed Fred down stairs.

"Didn't you take any provisions?"

"Some; but not enough to last a great while. It don't make any difference, though, so long as I found Tim."

Skip was not so excited but that he could eat a hearty meal, and when it was finished the two boys returned to Mr. Hunter's office just as that gentleman entered, accompanied by a constable.

The official questioned Skip very minutely as to Tim's whereabouts, and when the boy had explained the situation to the best of his ability, the former said:

"I reckon we won't have to walk all the way. By riding up the valley road eight or ten miles it is possible to cut off a good bit of the distance."

"Very well, adopt any method which will insure your return to-morrow noon, for the trial is to come off at twelve o'clock. Go with him, Skip, and see to it that there is no loitering by the way."

"Are you intending to hire a team?" Fred asked the constable.

"Yes."

[Pg 249]

"Then I'll go with you to the stables."

The constable walked rapidly ahead leaving the boys to follow more leisurely, and Fred had time for a brief conversation.

"You've been a good friend, Skip, and none of us will ever forget what you've done."

"I don't want you to remember what happened while I was boss of the regulators."

"We never think of it. Now do you believe it is possible to go to the camp and back by noon?"

"It'll be a tight squeeze, even allowin' that we ride a good part of the way; but we'll pull through somehow."

"Then if Tim has run off, all your work will have been for nothing."

"It can't be helped if things turn that way; but I think he's too much frightened by the disappearance of Gus to leave a good hiding-place."

At this moment the officer emerged from the stable in an open wagon drawn by a powerful-looking horse, and Skip shouted, as he clambered in:

"We'll be back by noon."

Then the two were whirled rapidly away, and Fred walked slowly to Mr. Hunter's office depressed by a sense of impending evil.

The lawyer was absent, and, not caring to stroll around the town where he might meet acquaintances from Farley's, the boy remained alone until late in the afternoon, when Joe and Sam arrived.

"The trial is to come off to-morrow," he cried, mentioning first that subject which was nearest his heart.

[Pg 250]

"And you couldn't find Skip," Joe added, mournfully; but his face lighted up wonderfully on being told of what had occurred during his absence.

"We'll come out of the scrape all right, if one of the young scoundrels can be produced, so you an' Sam may as well look cheerful."

"Is there anything new at Farley's?" Fred asked.

"Wright is goin' around like a bear with a sore head; but I didn't hear anything about his servin' the warrant on you. I reckon neither him nor that blessed cashier fancy havin' the trial come off so soon."

"How is Bill?"

"Chipper as a chicken. Your mother has sent some clean clothes, an' we'd better mosey over to the hotel to make ourselves comfortable like."

Before any objection could be offered to this plan Mr. Hunter entered; but he did not delay the partners very long. After asking a few questions and jotting down the answers, he dismissed them with the caution to be at the office by eleven o'clock next morning.

During the evening Joe tried very hard to appear jolly and perfectly at ease; but the boys could not simulate cheerfulness, and the hours passed wearily despite their companion's efforts.

At an early hour Fred and Sam were on the road down which Skip had driven, waiting for his return; but when the appointed time for them to go to Mr. Hunter's office arrived, they had watched in vain.

Now the suspense was positively painful. The lawyer exhibited the utmost impatience, because the constable did not come, while his clients were on the verge of despair.

[Pg 251]

At half-past eleven when the train from Farley's arrived, the boys saw Mr. Wright and the cashier pass on their way to the court-room, and a few moments later Mr. Hunter said:

"We can't wait any longer. Very likely Tim had left his hiding-place when the officer got there, and the latter is so foolish as to try to find him. I should have warned them that Skip must return at all hazards, for by sending him away we lose a most important witness."

The boys arose to their feet in silence, and Joe was positively despondent in the face of what seemed very like defeat.

On arriving at the court the partners were given seats within the enclosure reserved for attorneys, and very near the superintendent; but he paid no attention to them.

The cashier glared fiercely at Sam for an instant, and then turned to look steadily in another direction.

The court was occupied with another case, and in answer to Sam's question Mr. Hunter said that his trial would not begin until it was finished.

"If it'll hold on 'till to-morrow so's to give Skip a fair chance of gettin' here, I'll be willin' to sit in this chair all night," Joe whispered to Fred.

"It can't be delayed very long, or Mr. Hunter would tell us," was the mournful reply.

"S'pose I slip out an' watch for him? He won't know where to come if there's nobody in the office."

This Fred thought was a very good idea, and he suggested it to the lawyer, who said:

"The constable knows that he is needed here, therefore they will put in an appearance immediately after arriving." [Pg 252]

Five minutes later Sam was called upon to plead, and he answered firmly:

"Not guilty."

Then the cashier was summoned to the stand, and told his story correctly, except as to the latter portion, when he said that Fred appeared very nervous during the time his friend was absent. He also declared that the two boys made mysterious signs to each other, and in a variety of ways appeared guilty.

The teller of the bank, Mr. Wright, the constable who made the arrest, and one or two others gave evidence, and when the prosecution closed matters looked very black for the prisoner.

Then Sam himself was called to the stand, and for half an hour underwent a most searching examination. He described very minutely the journey to Blacktown; related every particular connected with his receiving the money, and explained why he chose to walk home, when, by waiting a short time, it would have been possible to ride on the cars.

That he had the money two or three moments before reaching the newly-discovered vein he was very positive. He had not intended to go to sleep when he laid down to rest. On awakening it was several moments before the loss was discovered, and then he searched in every direction.

Over and over again he told what is already known, and when the testimony was finished, it could be seen from the faces of those around, that the story was not generally believed. [Pg 253]

Then Fred was called upon to tell of the chase and capture, after which Joe took the stand.

Had Skip been there the prisoner's case would have been strengthened just so much; but he yet remained absent, and even Mr. Hunter looked disheartened.

The miner was kept on the stand as long as possible, in the hope the missing one might come, and then the defense had been exhausted.

Unless Skip appeared within a few seconds Sam would be deprived of his liberty.

CHAPTER XXXII

ACQUITTED

If Skip had been an actor in a pantomime, and rehearsed the scene every day for a week, he could not have arrived more precisely, than when he made his appearance at the very moment Mr. Hunter was about to declare the defense closed.

Sam and Fred sprang to their feet as he entered the door, and Joe actually shouted, so great was his joy and relief; but he was speedily made to understand by the officers that another breach of decorum as flagrant would result in his expulsion from the court-room.

Following Skip came the constable leading Tim, who looked frightened and pale. Mr. Hunter at once called the prisoner to the witness stand.

Not knowing that Gus had denied having seen the money, Tim soon said enough to convict himself, and in a few moments was ready to confess his share in the matter. [Pg 254]

"I didn't take it," he said, whiningly. "Gus showed me the money here in town an' told as how he'd sneaked it out of the pocket of a feller what he found asleep on the mountain. He agreed that I could have half if I'd go off somewhere with him."

"Where is he now?" Mr. Hunter asked.

"I don't know. When I went for some grub he was watchin' Fred Byram what we caught followin' us."

"What had been done with the money?"

"He had all that was left but ten dollars, an' I was goin' to spend that."

"What had Fred Byram done to you?"

"Tried to get the stuff, so's his chum wouldn't be sent to jail."

"How did he know you had the bills?"

"That's what puzzles me, 'less Gus give himself away to Skip Miller."

"Have you seen your friend since you left him to go in search of provisions?"

"If I had he'd been used up pretty bad for runnin' off with the cash after coaxin' me to leave town with him."

Very little more in the way of evidence was needed, and in a short time Sam was told by the judge that there was nothing to show he was at fault in the matter, except so far as being careless in lying down to sleep, while having such an amount of money in his pocket.

With this slight reprimand he was discharged from custody, and Tim sent to jail.

[Pg 255]

When the partners were in the street once more Joe found it almost impossible to keep his joy within bounds. He acted in the most extravagant manner until Fred reminded him that the people might think he was intoxicated.

"We'll telegraph to Bill, anyhow," he cried, and straightway the following message was sent:

"WILLIAM THOMAS, Farley's, Pa.:

"Skip Miller has fixed everything. Sam is free. Hurrah for Skip.

JOE."

"There," he said, after writing the telegram, a task of no mean magnitude for him, "that puts the credit jest where it belongs. I ain't sayin' the lawyer didn't do his share; but he'd been snowed under if Tim hadn't been brought in the nick of time."

Skip was radiant with delight, as he had every reason to be, since now he felt certain his past misdeeds were atoned for, and the partners repeated over and over again that they owed him a debt which could never be repaid.

Mr. Hunter insisted that the owners of the mine should remain in Blacktown until he learned whether sufficient money could be raised with which to defend the suit brought against them; but Joe was bent on going to the depot for the purpose of witnessing Mr. Wright's departure.

"I want to see how he an' and his precious cashier look after failin' in convictin' an innocent boy of stealin' what never oughter been put in his charge."

Fred did not care to indulge in such questionable triumph; but the miner was so persistent that he could not well refuse, and the three stood on the platform when their accusers boarded the cars.

[Pg 256]

Neither of the men glanced toward the little group; but a bystander who had been present at the trial, said loud enough to be heard by both:

"It looks like pretty poor business for a big corporation to try to send a boy to jail in order that he may be robbed of his property."

"You're a sensible man," Joe cried, approvingly, as he insisted on shaking hands with the stranger, "an' if the time ever comes when me or my mate can do you a good turn we'll be glad."

After this the four walked to the hotel, for Skip was sadly in need of food, and Joe said, in a tone of satisfaction:

"I'm willin' to bet considerable that when we get back to Farley's we'll find as how Wright has gone somewhere on business, an' the cashier is takin' a vacation. Bill will show my telegram to everybody what comes in, and the whole town will be agin 'em."

"If the company wins the suit, Mr. Wright won't care very much about what is said, for with two mines he will be the boss of this section," Sam replied. "I don't bother with anything at Farley's jest now; the company can run matters to please themselves, if they fail to cheat us out of our property."

Now that one cause for anxiety was removed the partners devoted more time to discussing the

question of title, and before night-fall had succeeded in making themselves feel decidedly uncomfortable.

During the evening Mr. Hunter called with cheering news.

[Pg 257]

"Among the subscribers I have found four gentlemen of means, who will advance the funds necessary for defending the suit, provided they are allowed a certain additional amount of stock in case of success. The four owners of the property must sign an agreement to that effect, and the business is settled."

"How will that affect our interest?" Fred asked.

"I think an equitable arrangement would be to give you jointly one-half the amount of stock issued, and with the remainder there will be no difficulty in raising sufficient to open and operate the mine."

"Is that a fair division? We know very little about such things."

"If there had been no trouble your share would be larger; but, under the circumstances, I think the proposition a generous one."

"Then we are satisfied," Joe replied. "Bring on your documents so we can sign 'em, for I want to get back to-morrow."

"I will write the agreement, and go to Farley's with you on the first train. Money for your personal expenses is to be advanced, and here is an installment. When it is gone come to me for more."

"A hundred dollars!" Joe exclaimed, as he counted the bills. "We can't complain but that your subscribers are doing the thing in good style."

"So they should since a large amount of money is to be made, if we are successful with the suit."

Then Mr. Hunter left the partners, and Skip, who was already looked upon as a member of the new company, and they found ample material for conversation until it was time to retire.

[Pg 258]

Next morning the party started for Farley's in company with the lawyer and one of the gentlemen who proposed to advance the capital.

There were only a few people at the depot; but from them Sam received a most cordial welcome. Men whom he had never spoken to before congratulated him upon the happy result of the trial, and many were the harsh words spoken against the superintendent and cashier.

After he ran home to see his mother for a moment the four partners assembled in Bill's chamber, and there the necessary documents were drawn up.

"I have already applied for a charter," Mr. Hunter said, when all had signed, "and it only remains to win the case before opening the mine."

"You'll keep us posted about what is goin' on?" Bill asked, and the lawyer replied in the affirmative, when he and the prospective stockholder took their departure, leaving the boys and Joe to gratify the invalid's curiosity concerning the happenings at Blacktown.

On this day Fred saw Chunky for the first time since the discovery of the vein, and the breaker boy expressed his satisfaction at the result of the trial.

"I knowed Sam wouldn't steal money," he said, emphatically; "but it looked one spell as if they'd prove it on him."

"If it hadn't been for Skip matters never would have been made so plain, and even if he was acquitted, some folks might have thought him guilty."

"Yes, Skip did a good job there," Chunky said, reflectively. "It's funny he made such great friends with you fellers after bein' so wild to serve you out. He's left the regulators, too, an' now I can be captain, if I want to."

[Pg 259]

"Why, I thought that foolish business had all been done away with."

"Not much it ain't. We can get along without Skip, an' not half try."

"Don't have anything to do with such fellows, Chunky. You'll only get into trouble, and the time is sure to come when, like Skip, you'll be sorry for ever having had any connection with them."

"He didn't run the concern same's I'm goin' to do, if I get to be captain," Chunky replied, with a mysterious gesture, and then he hurried away in the direction of the breaker.

During the week which followed Sam's acquittal nothing of especial interest occurred. Bill was getting along as well as could have been expected; but both he and his partners were decidedly dejected as to the result of Mr. Wright's claim.

As the days passed they grew more despondent, until Mrs. Byram insisted that nothing more be said about the suit in the presence of the invalid, because his extreme nervousness tended to excite fever.

Then came the day on which a telegram was received from Mr. Hunter, requesting one or more

of the partners to call at his office, and Joe and Fred made ready to answer the summons.

"Don't keep me waiting for the news," Bill said sharply. "I can't help thinkin' Wright will spring some kind of a game on us, if he thinks there's any chance this scheme might fail."

[Pg 260]

"If we're wanted on that business you shall hear the minute we know about it," Joe replied, and then he and Fred started, preferring to walk rather than wait for the train.

Contrary to Brace's belief, both Mr. Wright and the cashier had remained at Farley's after the trial. It is possible they heard a few unwelcome truths; but, as a rule, those who were forced to work under them did not dare to speak too plainly.

Neither Joe nor Fred had seen the gentlemen since they stepped on board the cars at Blacktown, but now they were met face to face when the travelers arrived at the out-cropping vein.

The superintendent nodded carelessly, much as he would have done toward a stranger, while his companion deliberately turned his back upon the new-comers.

Joe whistled as he passed on, to show how little concern he felt at meeting the two whom he considered enemies, but he whispered to Fred when they were farther down the mountain:

"I want to know what them fellers are doin' out here. It looks as if some crooked work was goin' on."

"They can't run away with the vein," Fred replied laughingly, "and I don't see how their being in this vicinity can hurt us."

"Nor I; but it won't do any harm to watch 'em. They're none too honest to play any kind of a mean trick."

"It's too late to turn now, for they'd surely know what we were up to."

"We can keep on a little farther, an' then double back under cover of the trees."

[Pg 261]

"All right. I don't suppose it will make much difference if we loaf a bit."

Joe walked straight ahead until they were within shelter of a line of foliage, and then turning sharply to the left, circled around the side of the mountain to a point just above the vein, where the two men could be plainly seen, while the watchers were hidden among the bushes.

Mr. Wright and the cashier at first sight appeared to be walking aimlessly to and fro, as if calculating the width of the coal mine, and now and then the former stooped to pull up a stake, which he placed in another position.

"It looks as if they was figgerin' how wide the slope would have to be," Joe whispered. "I reckon we've wasted our time sneakin' over here."

"They are moving the stakes driven by the surveyors!" Fred exclaimed, after a brief pause.

"But what good will that do 'em?"

"I don't know; of course, the lines can be run again by any one; but there must be a scheme in it, for Mr. Wright wouldn't be out here unless something could be gained by it."

"They've got no right on our land, an' I'll warn them off," Joe said, as he arose excitedly to his feet.

"Don't so much as show yourself. We'll hurry on to see Mr. Hunter; he'll know what is up."

"Come on, then, an' be quick about it, for there's no tellin' when these tricks are dangerous."

The miner and the boy literally ran down the hill, slackening not the pace until forced to do so, and both were nearly breathless when they neared the lawyer's office.

[Pg 262]

Before Mr. Hunter could speak Joe told what had been seen, and that gentleman grew quite as excited as were the others.

"I learned yesterday that Wright had bought a strip of land near yours, regardless of the fact that he claims to own this side of the mountain, and has ordered a force of workmen there immediately. We now know he is changing the surveyor's stakes in order to erect buildings on our tract, and thus force us to become plaintiffs instead of defendants.

"How would that benefit him?"

"In several ways which I have not time to explain. Wait here until I return."

Then Mr. Hunter left the office in great haste, and Fred and Joe looked at each other in dismay.

CHAPTER XXXIII

VICTORIOUS

The lawyer did not return for several hours, and then he said:

"I have sent for surveyors, and we will run our own lines early to-morrow morning, after which an officer shall be stationed there to warn him from encroaching. You must be on the spot as early as possible to attend to matters."

"He'll find us when the sun comes up. Was this why you sent the telegram?"

[Pg 263]

"I wanted to discover what he meant by the hiring of carpenters and the ordering of lumber; but that you have already done."

"When will the case be tried?"

"Next week I think; but that is of minor importance just now. The supposed location of the purchase is to be pointed out to the surveyors, therefore one of you must remain here until they arrive."

"When do you expect them?"

"On the first train to-morrow."

"Fred can wait for 'em, an' I'll leave in time to get there by daylight."

"Very well; make your preparations to stay until I send word that it is no longer necessary."

Joe and Fred left the office to purchase such provisions as might be needed while holding possession of the disputed property, and when this had been done the question arose as to how word could be sent to Bill.

"The story is too long for a telegram," Fred said, "so suppose we say by wire that there is nothing particularly new, and write a letter?"

"Go ahead. I ain't much of a fist with a pen, so while you're tellin' the yarn I'll send the message."

Joe retired early in order to be in readiness for the journey, and Fred was not awake when, shortly after midnight, he slipped out of the house.

It was not an easy matter to find his way in the darkness; but he finally succeeded after straying from the right course several times, and was thoroughly astonished at finding half a dozen men already in possession.

[Pg 264]

A small amount of lumber was scattered here and there, as if placed in readiness to be used, and a temporary camp had been erected close beside the coal vein.

The men had but just awakened when he arrived, and in reply to his angry question of why they were there, one of them asked impudently:

"What business is it of yours?"

"I happen to own a quarter of this land, an' it'll be hot for all hands if there's any attempt at puttin' up a building."

"It'll take us about two minutes to clean you out, an' we'll do it, if you so much as yip again."

Joe was literally trembling with rage. He fancied a portion of his title to the tract would be lost, if he did not drive the intruders away, and before the spokesman had time to defend himself against an attack, the miner knocked him headlong with one well-directed blow. Then, picking up an axe which lay near by, he made such a furious onslaught upon the remainder of the party that they scattered in every direction.

Instead of following, he chopped and tore at the camp until it was demolished, and then destroyed all the provisions it had contained, in addition to pounding into shapeless masses the tin cooking utensils.

By this time the carpenters got their scattered forces together and were marching in a body against the man who had put them to flight.

In the immediate vicinity of the camp were stored nearly all the tools, and, standing over these, Joe shouted:

"As true as my name's Brace I'll kill the first man who comes here," and he brandished the axe above his head.

[Pg 265]

"Don't be a fool!" some one cried. "What can you do against the crowd?"

"Split open the head of the first who comes within strikin' distance. After that has been done you may manage to get the best of me; but one is sure to go down—which shall it be?"

None of the party cared to prove the truth of Joe's threat, and they fell back a short distance, giving him an opportunity to intrench himself behind the fragments of the camp.

The miner took care to gather the tools around him so they could not be seized in case a sudden rush was made, and then, as he afterward said, "read the riot act" to the trespassers.

Matters were in this condition when Fred and the surveyors arrived.

The carpenters were seated on the ground a short distance away, while Joe remained perched on the ruins of the hut calmly smoking his pipe; but prepared for any attack, however sudden.

"Go back to Blacktown and tell the lawyer to send some officers," the miner cried, "These beauties are countin' on buildin' a house right here, I'll hold 'em off till they can be arrested."

"Oh, yes you will," one of the party shouted. "Wait till the crowd get here from Farley's, an' then we'll see who runs this place."

Joe brandished his axe, as an intimation of what he was prepared to do, and cried to Fred who stood in silent astonishment a few paces away:

"Hurry on, lad, there's no time to be lost!"

This roused Fred to a sense of the necessity for immediate action, and he started off at full speed.

The surveyors thinking quite naturally that they were not included in the hostilities, made ready to perform the work for which they had been engaged; but no sooner were the instruments set up than the carpenters made a dash at them, crying:

"If we have to lay still you shall do the same. Stand back an' wait till Mr. Wright comes."

"Stick to your job, an' if one will help me, I'll get rid of the whole boiling," Joe cried as he advanced.

"Look here, my friend," the elder of the surveying party said in a low tone, "I understand something about this fight, and don't propose to get mixed up in what isn't really any of my business. We'll run the lines, if nobody molests us; but won't put ourselves out to do it."

"Then I can't count on you?"

"Not at all; this is too serious business for us to be involved in. If you want to buy a good revolver, though, I'll sell one cheap, and take my pay when we meet in Blacktown.

"You're a brick," Joe cried, enthusiastically. "Give me the shooter, an' I'll guarantee to pay any price for it."

The weapon was delivered, and the miner left his fortification, marching directly toward the enemy.

"I give you a fair warnin' to clear out," he said, leveling the revolver. "This is my land, an' I order every one to leave. These surveyors are here to run the lines for my partners an' me. The first who interferes with em' will get a ball. I ain't talkin' foolish, for you know the law will uphold me in defendin' my own. Now begin the job," he added, to the surveying party, "an' we'll see who wants to have trouble."

This argument was understood by Mr. Wright's adherents, and they kept at a respectful distance, while the others did their work.

New stakes were set up without any regard to those already in position, and the labor had but just been completed when the superintendent and two members of his company arrived.

"Why are you not at work?" he asked one of the carpenters.

For reply the man pointed toward Joe, who was pacing to and fro on what he believed to be the boundary line of his property.

"Get those timbers up," Mr. Wright cried angrily.

"You may drag them off; but the first one who dares so much as raise a joist for any other purpose, shall suffer!" Joe shouted.

"Knock that fellow down! What business has he here?" and the superintendent's voice trembled with suppressed fury.

"I'm where I belong, an' seein's how your men don't dare do the knockin' down, s'pose you take a hand at it."

Mr. Wright advanced as if to act upon the suggestion; but before he reached the imaginary line the miner shouted:

"If you put a foot on this land I'll shoot. Send your crowd home, and then if you want to tackle me I'll throw the revolver down, an' meet you half way."

The superintendent paid no attention to this remark, save to halt on the safe side of the danger line, where he whispered a few words to one of his men, and the latter started at full speed for Farley's.

"I reckon my jig is about up," Joe muttered to himself. "He's sent for help, an' they're bound to bring what'll be of more service than this revolver."

The surveyors, evidently believing there was no especial reason why they should stay, now matters were nearing a crisis, took their departure, and the miner was once more left alone to defend his rights. Ten minutes later Fred appeared from among the trees, followed by five determined looking men, and Joe's cheers were not ended when Mr. Hunter came in view.

The lawyer shook hands with the miner as he said:

"You've saved us what might have been a bad mess. Now we have a reasonably large force, and can hold out until an injunction is procured."

"Are you likely to get one soon?"

"A clerk will bring it in a short time. The application has been granted, and the only delay is while the papers can be made out."

"I'm glad of that, for Wright has sent after more help, an' when it comes things are likely to be hot."

Mr. Hunter now advanced and held a long conversation with the superintendent and his friends, at the conclusion of which he ordered Joe to have the lumber dragged from the tract staked out by the surveyors.

In this work Fred assisted, while the miner stood guard with his revolver to prevent any interference, and when the task was finished the former whispered to his partner:

[Pg 269]

"Did they scare you, Joe?"

"Well, I don't mind ownin' to you that they did; but not one in the gang knew it. I was bound to stick as long as I could, an' a big lot of bluff helped me through."

"Mr. Hunter says that if the injunction can be served on Mr. Wright before the men begin work, it will be all right."

"Is that the only thing he knows of to stop matters?"

"It will be enough."

"I'd rather trust to my fist than any paper that was ever written."

After a time Fred succeeded in making the miner understand what kind of a document it was they depended upon to prevent the superintendent from trespassing, and the explanation had but just been made as Mr. Hunter's clerk arrived with the important document.

When this had been served on Mr. Wright the matter was settled temporarily, and the lawyer said to Fred and Joe:

"You can return home, and the next summons will be for the trial. This move of Wright's has been a foolish one, and will, I think, prejudice his case."

CHAPTER XXXIV

[Pg 270]

THE NEW MINE

It is unnecessary to give the details of the long trial to establish the title of that certain tract of land known as "Louder's Slope."

Suffice it to say that all the claimants were there with the exception of Bill Thomas, and the case was finally settled in favor of the defendants.

The farmer who sold the property to Joe was literally frightened into telling the truth, and although the company showed a deed for the land, no record could be found for the same.

The general opinion of those who understood the case was that Mr. Wright had attempted to play a desperate game, and failed because it was impossible to corrupt certain parties in the Recorder of Deeds' office. In fact, a very ugly rumor gained circulation immediately after the trial, to the effect that a large sum of money had been offered a clerk, if he would change a number of figures on the books to correspond with the deed which was exhibited in court.

When Joe, Fred, and Sam returned home absolute owners of the valuable tract, the walk from the depot to Mrs. Byram's house was a regular ovation.

Those who rejoiced when it seemed certain the boys would not benefit by the discovery, were apparently as well pleased as the partners' warmest friends, and during the evening following the announcement of the verdict, Farley's was in a high state of excitement.

[Pg 271]

Among the last who called to offer congratulations was Skip, and he said emphatically as he and Fred stood by the side of Bill's bed:

"I'm as glad as if some of the luck was mine. You say I've squared accounts, an' that's enough to make me feel mighty good. Of course, you'll have to hire breaker boys, an' I'd like a job at the new mine, 'cause it ain't likely things here'll be very pleasant for me."

"Fred an' me have figgered out a place for you, lad," the old miner replied, as he took Skip's hand in his. "Our mine won't be open for two or three months, an' durin' that time the firm are goin' to

send you to school. When the store is opened—for, of course, we'll need one—you're to go into it, an' the day Skip Miller can take hold of the accounts he's goin' to have full charge."

The ex-captain of the regulators looked from one to the other in silence several seconds, and then he asked, in a hesitating way:

"You ain't makin' fun of a feller, eh?"

"Not a bit of it, lad, an' if you run over to Blacktown to-morrow an' ask Mr. Hunter he'll show that the money has been paid for your schooling."

Skip did not trust himself to reply, but after shaking each of his friends by the hand he hurriedly left the house, and Chunky, who entered a few moments later, said to Fred:

"I reckon Skip wishes he was you. I met him jest now, an' he was cryin' reg'lar tears, an' wouldn't stop to listen when I told him the fellers had chose me for captain."

[Pg 272]

Nothing was seen of either Mr. Wright or his cashier until nearly two weeks after the case had been ended, and then the former called at Mrs. Byram's cottage to offer his "congratulations."

"It is not well that there should be any hard feelings between us since we are to be neighbors," he said. "What I did was in the interests of the company which I represent, and any other course would have been impossible."

To this remark Fred made no reply; but he was willing to be on apparently friendly terms with the superintendent, which was more than can be said of the elder partners.

Bill bluntly told Mr. Wright what he thought of his conduct, and expressed the hope in very plain words, that it would not be necessary for the new firm to have any business relations with the old company.

Four months later the Byram-Thorpe works were formally opened, with Bill as mine boss, Fred and Sam as superintendents, and Joe in charge of the shipments.

It must not be understood that the two boys were fully qualified for their responsible positions; Bill and Joe acted as advisers, and if one year's work is any criterion the quartette have administered the affairs most wisely, for in all the middle field there are no better or more contented miners than can be found at the Byram-Thorpe works.

In one year Skip was pronounced competent to take full charge of the store, and to-day it would be difficult to select a fellow better liked than he. On the Blacktown side of the mountain every one speaks of him in the most flattering terms, and at Farley's he is held up to breaker boys as an example of how one may live down a bad reputation.

[Pg 273]

Chunky still works under Donovan; he could not make up his mind to resign from the regulators, and to-day his record is by no means as good as it should be. Neither Fred nor Sam cared to take him with them, for both knew by bitter experience the aim of his association, and did not wish to introduce anything of the kind at the new mine.

Gus Dobson was arrested about a month after Sam had been pronounced innocent. On running away from Mr. Wright's house he hid in the woods near where Tim was found; but four weeks of this kind of a life was sufficient.

He presented a most deplorable appearance when he returned home one morning. His clothes were in tatters, the shoes literally hanging from his feet, and the pangs of hunger printed on his face. Imprisonment was a far less severe punishment than starvation, and as he said, "the judge couldn't give him any sentence worse than sneaking around the mountains without food or shelter."

The new mine has only been in operation about a year; but that is time enough to show that the vein is much richer than the one at Farley's. Instead of being forced to spend money making a shaft or slope, coal of good quality has been taken out from the first, and already do the original owners consider themselves wealthy. It is true the united amount in bank would not be thought large by many; but their income is considerably in excess of all necessary expenses and, what is better yet, perfect content dwells with them.

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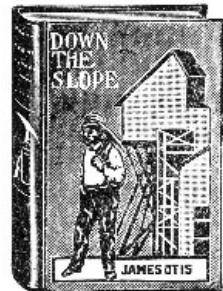
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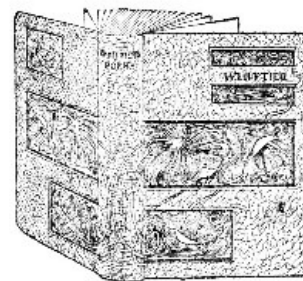
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